

IRS Disability Equality Scheme

Results from 2006 Customer Survey

Background

The Disability Discrimination Act was amended in 2005 so that it now places a ‘general duty’ on public authorities, when carrying out their functions, to promote disability equality. Most public authorities are also subject to certain ‘specific’ duties. These include an obligation to publish a Disability Equality Scheme by a specified date. The IRS falls into the category of public authorities that must publish their Schemes no later than 4 December 2006.

One of the essential elements is the involvement of disabled people in helping to develop the Scheme. As part of this we recently issued a survey to all of our customers over a specified period (draft included at appendix one). We have now collated the feedback and this will feed into the development of our inaugural Disability Equality Scheme.

The rest of this report includes details of some of the key issues arising from customer feedback.

Methodology

We decided not to limit the survey to those customers with disabilities. This would have been logistically difficult; but we also felt it was important to gather as much data as possible from a wide cross-section of our customers to help provide a rich pool of comparative data. We were also mindful of the possibility that some customers might have helped or represented people with disabilities and as such may be in a position to offer useful feedback on issues facing disabled clients.

The survey included an explanation of what is meant by ‘disability’ before asking customers if they considered themselves to be disabled. Subsequent questions asked customers to comment on their experiences in dealing with the IRS and to offer feedback on how we might improve our existing services – including how we might help ensure disabled people can fully access our full range of services. To help with the latter we included details of the range of services currently available. The survey also asked about issues such as raising awareness of issues facing people with different disabilities. The survey concluded with a more general section, to allow customers the opportunity to offer any other thoughts on how we could ensure we treat disabled people equally.

Given that we already issue customer survey forms with our statement, and that any disability survey needed to ask about people's experiences throughout the review process, we decided to issue the disability questionnaire with our decision letters – including those from CST. We also issued the questionnaire to other service users including those attending internal and external workshops.

We issued the survey for a two week period during September.

Results & Action Taken

Response rate

We issued a total of 684 questionnaires and received 42 responses (a response rate of 6.1%). 78% of respondents considered themselves to suffer from one or more disability. Key issues arising follow:

Accessing IRS Services

93% of respondents did not encounter any specific barriers or difficulties when dealing with the IRS/accessing our services. However, three respondents felt that it took too long to get through to our Customer Service Team (both of these customers indicated that they suffered from physical and mental health issues). Another disabled customer also felt that we should extend answer phone facilities to help reduce waiting times.

It fair to say that we have recently experienced higher call volumes on our Customer Service Team; this is partly in response to increased workloads but also our promotion of the telephone response option via a free phone number. We are regularly assessing the overall staffing situation and as part of this will continue to temporarily move other staff as necessary to address higher call volumes.

Some respondents also commented on the time taken to clear initial decisions at Jobcentre Plus and the impact of this on the overall application process. We share these concerns and recognise that many of our customers are vulnerable people who may urgently need the help requested. We are actively working with the Department of Work and Pensions at various levels to help secure improvements. For example we regularly feedback to different districts on their performance and are currently looking at the time taken to register cases at different Jobcentre Plus sites. We were also instrumental in securing recent revisions to the law, allowing customers to apply directly to the IRS for an Independent Review - previously, all applications needed to go through Jobcentre Plus in the first instance and this often led to significant delay. Evidence thus far suggests that this has not only helped reduce the time taken from 'end to end' but has also helped substantially increase the number of requests for an Independent Review.

To help further reduce waiting times for our customers we are also currently accepting 'special procedure' cases from those districts with significant backlogs of work. We are accepting these cases on the basis the Jobcentre Plus need not offer an interview and our Inspectors are then addressing any gaps in evidence through our normal review process. We shall continue to vigorously promote direct applications and, in appropriate circumstances, will offer Jobcentre Plus districts the option of special procedure reviews.

Written Communications

Some respondents felt that face to face or telephone contact was sometimes preferable to written replies and that we should try and extend this aspect of our service whenever practicable. We agree with this point and will continue to promote the use of the telephone in appropriate cases. We are actively encouraging our customers to respond to our statements by phone and to help with this now offer a free-phone number for most callers. We have also reminded Inspectors of the need to gather evidence by phone in appropriate cases, to help reduce written correspondence. We shall also remind staff to remain alive to customer's health issues when deciding how best to gather evidence.

Three respondents felt that some of the language used in our letters, including some of the questions asked, was difficult to understand. In a similar vein, another respondent felt that we sent out too much paperwork with the statement of issues. We have fed these comments into our other research around the way we explain and present information to our customers. We have just launched an office-wide initiative that includes some fundamental changes to the way Inspectors draft decision letters. This includes greater use of plain language. Our decision letters now offer a concise first page summary sheet - again written in plain language - to help customers better understand the main reasons for the outcome. And the main body of the decision letter includes headings to help customers more easily navigate through the document. We plan to continue developing this work and as part of this will continue to look at customer feedback. We also plan to develop the statement and will again factor in plain language principles including the way we phrase and set out questions.

In terms of the amount of paperwork accompanying our letter we already send out a 'reduced bundle' with the proviso that customers can see the full papers if they wish. But we acknowledge there is scope for cutting this back further. One of the options we will look is combining elements of existing cover letters, the statement and accompanying information leaflets. We will also revisit the volume of other documentation including the reduced bundle copy papers and customer survey forms.

Raising Awareness of Disability

Four customers suggested that more disabled people should be made aware of our services and that this could be achieved through speaking to organizations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau or other advice centres. These customers were particularly concerned that many people – especially those facing difficult social issues – might merely accept the first decision from Job Centre Plus when in fact a further IRS review may have resulted in a payment. Another customer suggested that Jobcentre Plus could do more to raise awareness of the IRS. We agree that these are important issues hence the abovementioned ‘direct applications’ and ‘special procedure’ cases. Over the last five years we have also actively promoted IRS workshops for external organizations and Department of Work of Pensions. This has included workshops for organizations representing people with disabilities. We issue a minimum of 9000 marketing packs each year to a range of organisations across the country (including those organisations listed below).

The Social Fund Commissioner has also met with:

- MENCAP
- MACA
- MIND
- RNID – SCOTLAND/ENGLAND/CYMRU
- RNIB – SCOTLAND/ENGLAND/CYMRU
- DISABILITY ALLIANCE
- SCOTTISH ASSOCIATION OF MENTAL HEALTH
- THE ACTION GROUP
- FAMILY FUND
- FAMILY WELFARE ASSOCIATION
- BUTTERFLY TRUST

Some of these meetings have led to awareness sessions for IRS staff and additional workshops. Overall, this work is aimed at raising awareness of customers’ entitlement to an Independent Review but also to help our staff better understand issues facing disabled people.

The majority of customers particularly welcomed the fact that we run regular awareness sessions for staff on issues facing various client groups - including those with disabilities. But some respondents suggested that our staff might benefit from meeting face to face with disabled clients. We agree that this is a useful way to properly raise awareness and is something we have already used in some sessions. For example early this year we arranged awareness sessions delivered by carers but also arranged for some of the people receiving care to attend and talk to staff about their experiences. Also, in 2004 we arranged sessions from The Royal Society for the Blind. Feedback was extremely positive and staff generally found the sessions very informative. We also recently ran session to raise awareness of HIV and AIDS.

One respondent also wanted to see increased awareness of the issues facing people suffering from substance misuse. This is another important area and is something

we have already tried to address. In 2002 we ran a series of awareness sessions on the impact and affects of different drugs – including the issues facing recovering addicts – and our Commissioner’s Advice also addresses this area to help ensure staff remain alive to the likely difficulties facing those suffering or recovering from addiction. However we have recruited new staff since the last sessions and this is a topic we will look at revisiting at some point.

We shall continue to arrange awareness sessions for staff on appropriate topics and whenever possible will invite contributions from people with first-hand experiences.

Two respondents suggested that Inspectors would benefit from undertaking more research into the affects of certain disabilities and that this might help ensure we reach the right outcomes. The above sessions are aimed at helping with this. We have now also issued all Inspectors with information packs on issues such as the affects of various disabilities.

During the last two years we have also undertaken face to face interviews with a cross section of customers in their own homes. Many of these people have a disability. This work has fed, and will continue to feed, into various business improvement initiatives including our work on decision letters.

This completes the report. Over the coming year we shall ensure that the results from this survey are considered as part of any business initiatives.



Disability and Equality

An opportunity to have your say...

New law on Disability Discrimination requires organizations like the IRS to write a Disability Equality Scheme. We are asking all of our customers to answer the enclosed questions to help us with this. We are interested in your views whether or not you are disabled. (Please ignore this letter if you have already sent us your answers).

Completing the survey should only take a few minutes. We will look at your opinions and suggestions and consider how we can put these into our Scheme. Your answers will be treated in strict confidence.

We will publish the IRS Scheme on our website in December 2006.

What do we mean by disability?

The law says that you are disabled if:

- You have a physical or mental impairment
- This substantially effects your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities
- This has lasted for 12 months, or is likely to last for more than 12 months

This can include people with:

- Physical impairment, such as difficulty using arms, or mobility issues which means using a wheelchair or walking aid
- Mental health conditions, such as clinical depression or schizophrenia
- Blindness / serious visual impairment / deafness / serious hearing impairment
- Long-standing serious health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, epilepsy, or MS.
- Learning disability (such as Down's syndrome or dyslexia) or other impairment such as autism

The Survey Questions

Question 1

Do you consider yourself to be disabled?

Yes / No

(Please circle as appropriate)

Question 2

If you are disabled please tell us about this. Please tick more than one option if you suffer from more than one disability:

- Physical impairment such as mobility problems
- Mental health condition
- Blindness / serious visual problem / deafness / serious hearing problem
- Long-standing serious health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, epilepsy, or MS.
- Learning disability
- Other (please specify)

Question 3

In which ways have you communicated with the IRS? (Please tick or circle all the options that apply)

In writing

Phone / Minicom

In person at the IRS

A home visit

Meeting / Workshop

Question 4

Did you encounter any barriers or difficulties when dealing with us (this could include, for example, problems using our services)? If so please tell us about this:

Question 5

Is there anything we could do to improve our service, including the way we communicate with our customers? If so please give details:

Question 6

We already offer a number of services for people with health difficulties to help them access our full range of services. These include:

- Language line
- Text Phone
- Leaflets in large print
- Leaflets in Braille and the option to have letters translated
- Large print on the IRS website

In your view, is there anything else we should be doing to help ensure people can access our services? If so, please give details:

Question 7

We run awareness sessions for our staff on issues facing disabled people. We also publish advice to raise awareness on these issues. Are there any other ways we could help our staff understand issues facing disabled people? If yes, please give us your thoughts:

Question 8

Would you use the IRS again? If not, would you mind sharing with us why?

Question 9

If you have any other ideas that might help ensure we treat disabled people equally, please feel free to share these with us:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please return your completed form in the envelope provided.

