

Thurrock Coalition



Submission of evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into the future of Jobcentre Plus (JCP).

22nd April 2016

About Thurrock Coalition

1. Thurrock Coalition is the User-Led Organisation for Thurrock. We are a company that has been set up to ensure that people who live in Thurrock have access to all the information they may require to get the support and care that they need.
2. Thurrock Coalition is an 'umbrella' company that consists of 4 organisations, all of which follow the Social Model of Disability and aim to improve the lives of disabled and older people living in Thurrock by seeking to remove environmental, attitudinal and physical barriers that exist in society. We connect to over 1500 individuals and organisations with an interest in disability issues. Thus, we have a direct interest in the work of the Work and Pensions Committee and welcome the opportunity to provide input and evidence in the context of the future of JCP.

Summary

3. A meeting of our Consultation and Campaigning Partner Organisation – Thurrock Diversity Network Limited, a registered Community Benefit Society, was called, and our members consulted and views were gathered around:
 - (i) The likely effects of the planned changes on claimants, including on the quality of services offered to them and the implications in relation to digital inclusion.
 - (ii) The potential implications for JCP, including in relation to JCP's capability to provide new, tailored services for particular groups of people, including people with mental health conditions.
 - (iii) Opportunities afforded by coordination with other local services, including the NHS and schools.

(iv) The extent to which reforms will require cultural change within JCP, and the DWP's capability successfully to foster this change.

(v) The opportunities and challenges for JCP presented by greater devolution of employment services to regional and national governments.

The feedback appears below.

The likely effects of the planned changes on claimants, including on the quality of services offered to them and the implications in relation to digital inclusion

4. In terms of the likely effects upon disabled people in particular members of Thurrock Diversity Network Limited (TDN) raised concerns about the need to have regard to reasonable adjustments and the implementation thereof to ensure complete and equal access to the claim process.
5. The focus upon delivery of a complete digital service needs to be aware of the fact that the Disability Digital Divide presents a barrier to disabled people accessing the Internet, and in turn limiting the ability of accessing relevant entitlements.
6. The potential for the Internet and mainstream technology to have a positive impact upon Disabled people (of whom there are 11 million nationwide) is yet to be realised. A recent report from Scope and the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design highlights the following issues that need to be addressed:
7. Disabled people still face a huge digital divide – and that many still have to choose between expensive specialist equipment, or inaccessible mainstream gadgets. Technology built for disabled people is expensive, has low functionality, and often requires specialist knowledge to adapt. Mainstream technology, like iPads and Windows Tablets, is cheaper and can do much more, but is rarely customised to meet Disabled people's needs.
8. It is suggested that emphasis needs to be placed upon improving the information available to disabled people about enabling technology. Disabled people are amongst the groups least likely to use the internet, and are 20% less likely to be online than their peers. This is despite the huge potential of services...to transform the lives of Disabled people.¹
9. Therefore, we suggest that the DWP should look at ways of supporting Disabled people to access the Internet and accessible technology as a way of accessing entitlements in an efficient and effective manner. This could be achieved by funding a number of form filling, advice and guidance schemes through the resourcing of existing Centres for Independent Living across the country to ensure longer term sustainability.

¹ Scope "Enabling Technology" – January 2015. Available at: <http://www.hhc.rca.ac.uk/CMS/files/1.Enabling%20technology%20report%202013%20digital%20technology%20disabled%20people%20Scope%20Helen%20Hamlyn.pdf>

10. Concerns were also raised at the meeting about the vulnerability of the DWP I.T. system to loss of data and the potential adverse implications for individual claimants, such as loss of personal data, financial data as well as the monies from the claim itself.
11. Several key vulnerable groups may also be adversely affected by the changes via the effects of libraries closing (with a loss of public internet access), including people who may not be literate or I.T. literate and Disabled people (including people with mental health conditions) who may not be able to cope with the new process or in answering the specific questions contained on the claim forms and throughout the claim “journey” without ongoing, specific and specialist support. Failure to provide, resource or signpost to relevant support risks excluding many people from the new service.
12. The ease of use of the system will also be key to the people we represent as well as the integrity and robustness of the system itself, including compatibility with a range of platforms, operating systems and browsers. Our members expressed the importance of having access to technical support when online forms fail to function and to ensure that individuals are not penalised for system crashes etc. through no fault of their own.
13. Our members also discussed the potential impacts upon Disabled people if required to attend JCP interviews more frequently in the early stages of benefit claims. It was felt that this would be particularly costly for claimants and would adversely affect Disabled people, people with mental health conditions, particularly where they may have trouble or difficulty using or accessing transport (both public and private). Our members were of the view that it would be useful to know the rationale for the increased frequency of interviews, particularly where this could potentially reinforce a negative public perception of JCP around the punitive approach to sanctions and what exemptions or reasonable adjustments could be made for Disabled people in such situations.
14. In terms of any implementation of the delayed referral of long-term unemployed claimants to externally-contracted employment services (welfare-to-work) providers, meaning that JCP will support people who remain out of work for two years, several of our members provided lived experience examples of being referred to externally contracted employment services providers who appeared disinterested in supporting ‘hard to place’ clients. Therefore, longer more proactive and tailored support from the JCP would be welcome.

The potential implications for JCP, including in relation to JCP’s capability to provide new, tailored services for particular groups of people, including people with mental health conditions.

15. It was felt that, in order to be effective and meaningful for claimants, the new tailored services would have to be resourced by the DWP and co-produced in partnership with existing specialist third sector organisations and charities. It

would require a specific and broader skill set from staff who alternatively could signpost to relevant third sector partners.

16. Any tailored services for Disabled people and people with mental health conditions would need to be holistic, person-centred, joined up with statutory and third sector partners and be local and accessible. The services must also be anticipatory and flexible – Disabled people may need longer to convey their needs and requirements throughout any interaction with DWP or JCP.
17. Any measurements and Key Performance Indicators for such new services must be outcome-based and not simply based upon what is easily measurable.

Opportunities afforded by coordination with other local services, including the NHS and schools

18. Opportunities for co-ordination and co-location with other services would need to involve partners from the point of inception, through to design and delivery in order to be beneficial. The effects of co-ordination would be to recognise specialist organisations in a particular local area, e.g. IAPT services or independent living and advice services, who would be better placed and more able to respond to support individuals due to better local and market knowledge and their wider links to local services.
19. However, if not co-ordinated correctly, these opportunities could lead to variability of service (a postcode lottery) between urban and more rural areas, as well as a duplication of cost.
20. Confidentiality and data protection is also a concern in this area. Co-ordination and co-location must not lead to a compromise in confidentiality and an increase in monitoring between services.

The extent to which reforms will require cultural change within JCP, and the DWP's capability successfully to foster this change

21. These reforms require a huge culture change so as to be accessible for all Disabled people, and extensive and ongoing consultation and engagement on local ideas and local solutions would be required.
22. There would also be an enormous training load upon JCP staff. There needs to be investment in order to get the right quality of service.

The opportunities and challenges for JCP presented by greater devolution of employment services to regional and national governments

23. The challenge will be balancing national standards with local tailoring of services.
24. More work needs to be done to determine how much latitude regional and local authorities would get in order to tailor services to local areas. For

example, whether there would be enough flexibility to enable regional and local authorities to target resources to support more deprived areas.

Conclusion – including recommendations for action by the Government or others which you would like the committee to consider.

25. It is evident that a number of key areas must be addressed in order for the proposed changes to be meaningful and effective for Disabled people and people with mental health conditions.
26. These areas include the importance of reasonable adjustments, the implications of the Digital Divide and developing ways of overcoming barriers to inclusion, alongside preserving confidentiality and personal data as well as ensuring that the new I.T. system is robust, responsive and has sufficient capacity. The provision of longer, more proactive, holistic and tailored support from the JCP is also vital for the changes to be realised.
27. The Coproduction, co-operation and co-location of services must be resourced and supported. Existing specialist local organisations who are better placed and more able to support individuals, due to better local and market knowledge, should be supported. These relationships of co-operation must be fostered so as to increase capacity and sustainability going forward.
28. The opportunity to contribute to the Call for Evidence from the Committee is welcome. We look forward to the reading the recommendations and conclusions of the Committee in due course.

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