

Group Finance

Equality Impact Assessment
Automated Benefit Deduction Project

Equality Impact Assessment for Automated Benefit Deduction Project

Introduction

1. DWP has carried out an equality impact assessment (EIA) on the automated benefit deduction project to meet the requirements of the:
 - Race Equality Duty.
 - Disability Equality Duty.
 - Gender Equality Duty.
2. This process helps to make sure:
 - The Department's strategies, policies and services are free from discrimination.
 - Due regard is given to equality (specifically disability, gender and race) in decision making and subsequent processes.
 - Opportunities for promoting equality are identified.

Purpose and aim(s) of the proposal or change

The Automated Benefit Deduction project explores the potential of automating the deduction process (for those customers in receipt of benefits) and centralising the administration of the end to end Third Party Deduction / Third Party Payment process within Shared Services.

Third Party Payments is a service provided by DWP to support our customers. The scheme works by withholding a prescribed amount from weekly benefit and redirecting it to a third party creditor until the debt is cleared. Items for which the scheme makes provision are:

- housing costs;
- rent arrears (including service charges);
- fuel costs;
- water charges;
- council tax; and court fines.

Recoveries from benefit can be split into three distinct areas:

- Deductions made on behalf of third party creditors, for example a utility company recovering arrears.

- Deductions made by DWP to recover overpayments of benefit.
- Deductions made by DWP to recover Social Fund loans.

The key objectives of the project are to:

- **Automate the deduction process**, using predetermined and agreed business rules to perform validation checks and allocate benefit deductions where the qualifying criteria has been met (as per existing rules). We will then automatically notify third party creditors when deductions cannot be made and the reason why. These functions are currently performed clerically using a tear off remittance from the application.
- **Centralise the processing of Third Party Creditor deduction requests within Shared Services.** Centralising the service will streamline the deduction process and improve customer service, by providing one point of contact for third party creditors. Creditors can produce one Deduction from Benefit file instead of producing separate requests for each Benefit Delivery Centre, which is the current requirement.
- **Introduce a standard electronic means of capturing deduction requests** from third party creditors and business units. This will reduce postage delays, improve the accuracy of information, and facilitate automatic input of data, thus replacing the current requirement to clerically input data.

Benefits of the change

The Automated Benefit Deduction solution will lead to the following benefits:

- Generating reductions in processing time and therefore costs, by making business process improvements.
- Speeding up the customer service – deduction enquiries answered and requests processed more timely and effectively.
- Improving accuracy – automation will provide information to consider deductions eligibility in a single activity.
- Standardising and simplifying the deduction processes.
- Reduce transcription and keying errors.

Information, evidence and consultation

We are currently awaiting High Level Technical Options Report (proposal) from the chosen supplier, which will provide more information. It is expected that the solution will be a fully automated process to replace many complex clerical processes and therefore further analysis will be done when the Solution is identified. However, no new data will be collected in the new process that is not already collected in the existing processes.

In addition we will gather workforce data, consultation will take place with HR, the TU Side and Telereal Trillium prior to implementation of the change to ensure that staff needs are met and no members of staff are disadvantaged through the change.

Equality impact

Customers

There will be no negative impact on customers as the process will remain the same for customers and how they access services and are informed of decisions from DWP. Customers will receive an improved level of service, in terms of those processes within DWP which were previously performed manually, will be automated to speed up the decisions and deduction service. Customers who require third party support, or a face-to-face service, will still have access to this through their local Jobcentre Plus office.

All customers will have continued access to the same level of service.

Staff

There will be no impact on the majority staff across the department. However, a small number of those currently performing the existing clerical processes around the benefit deductions in scope may be affected. It is expected that most of these staff will be redeployed into other areas of work. This will be dealt with under work force planning.

Each area of diversity is discussed in more detail below.

Ethnicity

There is no evidence to suggest that work discriminates unlawfully, directly or indirectly, against staff or customers of different ethnic groups.

Gender

There will be no disadvantage to individuals of either gender from undertaking the new process.

Disability

The Automated Benefit Deduction Project realised the importance early on in providing a system that was accessible to all users. In line with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 it was regarded as an essential High Level Business Requirement that the Automated Benefit Deduction system be compliant with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) IT accessibility standards.

DWP employs staff with disabilities. To ensure that they are not disadvantaged in the workplace, DWP is committed to providing an environment that will allow disabled colleagues to continue in work, including the provision of individual training and alternative or additional equipment as reasonable adjustments. Testing requirements will be specifically included to ensure that there will be no disadvantage to individuals who have a disability.

Age

There is no disadvantage to individuals of any age.

Positive impacts

The change brings general benefits to customers in terms of the support they will receive and it will be a quicker and more effective service due to deduction processes being automated and standardised. This general benefit will be for only those customers who require it. Most customers never experience a deduction from their benefit payments.

Conclusion

The Automated Benefit Deductions process is simpler and quicker for both staff and customers. From the information and data collected to date, it is judged that the change is not likely to discriminate unlawfully (directly or indirectly) or have an unfair effect on particular groups of people.

The impact of introducing the Automated Benefit Deductions will be monitored during the Learning and Development period and post go live and should be reviewed following go live. This will include monitoring of both existing information sources and the new management information recorded by the project.

The Staff Survey due to be conducted in September 2011 will be used to monitor the impact of the change on the diverse groups mentioned in Section 6 above. This shouldn't be an afterthought that is reviewed later down the line – should address the issues now and review at a later date to check for any changes or unexpected impact.

The dates set for reviews are 21st March 2010 and again in December 2010, to ensure that any impacts are being monitored and addressed if required.

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