Building a coherent strategy for engagement: Deliberative research with employers

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A report of research carried out by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions
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## Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>BERR</td>
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<td>CBI</td>
<td>Confederation of British Industry</td>
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<td>CIPD</td>
<td>Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development</td>
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<td>CSA</td>
<td>Child Support Agency</td>
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<td>DCS</td>
<td>Disability and Carers Service</td>
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<td>DDA</td>
<td>Disability Discrimination Act</td>
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<td>DH</td>
<td>Department of Health</td>
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<td>DHSS</td>
<td>Department of Health and Social Security</td>
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<td>DIUS</td>
<td>Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills</td>
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<td>DSS</td>
<td>Department of Social Security</td>
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<td>DWP</td>
<td>Department for Work and Pensions</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>FSB</td>
<td>Federation of Small Businesses</td>
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<td>HMRC</td>
<td>Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs</td>
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<td>HR</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
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<td>HSE</td>
<td>Health and Safety Executive</td>
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<td>IB</td>
<td>Incapacity Benefit</td>
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<td>ITB</td>
<td>Industrial Training Board</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSA</td>
<td>Jobseeker's Allowance</td>
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<td>LEPs</td>
<td>Local Employment Partnerships</td>
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<td>LSC</td>
<td>Learning and Skills Council</td>
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<td>MSC</td>
<td>Manpower Services Commission</td>
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<td>NICs</td>
<td>National Insurance Contributions</td>
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<td>NTCs</td>
<td>National Training Councils</td>
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<td>SA</td>
<td>Self assessment</td>
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<td>SMEs</td>
<td>Small and Medium Enterprises</td>
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<td>SSP</td>
<td>Statutory Sick Pay</td>
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<td>TECs</td>
<td>Training and Enterprise Councils</td>
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Summary

Background and methodology

- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is considering its future approach to engaging with employers to help it work towards its key objectives. As part of this, DWP commissioned Ipsos MORI to run two deliberative workshops which were held in London and Manchester. Each workshop lasted for a day and comprised around 60 participants drawn from a broad range of business size and sector. The regional workshops were designed to understand employers’ spontaneous views on the work of DWP and their reactions to its new strategic objectives while also establishing how these views changed after deliberation.

- So as to ensure that responses were considered, employers were presented with key data to inform them of DWP’s strategic objectives along with a series of hypothetical scenarios to highlight how working towards these might impact on their business.

A tradition of collaboration

- The last five decades have seen an evolving relationship between employers and Government, with employer engagement a key theme in work-related policy. Indicative of this, the Leitch Review, published in 2006, emphasised the importance of shared responsibility with, for example, recommendations that the cost of training be divided between employers, Government and providers. Similarly, the launch of Local Employment Partnerships (LEPs), as announced in the 2007 Budget, sought to encourage large employers to demonstrate their commitment to helping the long-term unemployed into work.

- However, the primary role of employers is to produce goods and services to meet the needs of the market and Government needs to work with them in order to ensure that, where possible, they can contribute to the achievement of its social and economic objectives. It is with this in mind that DWP is examining how it can work better with employers in the future.
Attitudes towards welfare provision

• All employers strongly supported the principle of welfare provision, recognising that help should be available for those who need it. Beyond this, employers felt that DWP was right to place work at the centre of welfare, as they spoke of the benefits that employment can bring. These benefits were not only thought to be economic, but social and psychological as well.

• Some employers believed that DWP’s role was undervalued in comparison with other Government departments. They believed that this was a result of other issues, such as education, rising up the political agenda at the expense of DWP’s work. This caused some concern as employers felt that this may affect the Department’s ability to access the resources it needs.

• Despite a strong sense of the importance of DWP’s work, knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of the Department was limited. Overall, employers saw the Department as tackling the two issues cited in its brand name; employment and the provision of a state pension. Some, however, still referred to the Department as the Department for Social Security (DSS) or Department for Health and Social Security (DHSS).

• Beyond this, however, there was much confusion regarding what it was and was not responsible for and how the work of DWP fits in with that of other departments. This blurring of responsibilities also caused reputational issues; for example when employers had a negative experience with one department, the impact of this affected all their dealings with Government, rather than it being seen as an isolated incident.

• Employers were unsure as to the extent to which an organisation of DWP’s size could be managed effectively. Furthermore, they thought its size would prevent the sharing of knowledge between its different agencies and businesses, which could impact on the quality of service offered.

Current ways of working with DWP

• We also explored the different touchpoints that employers had with DWP. In the first instance, employers, particularly those in smaller organisations, did not think that written communications were especially effective. This is because they were thought to be easy to ignore due to the other demands that they had on their time. Furthermore, there were criticisms about the content and style of DWP’s written communications, as well as the time they can sometimes take to arrive. Some employers were also sceptical about the accuracy of information; it was thought that the remit of the Department changed so frequently that written materials could quickly become outdated.
• Many employers had experience in ringing DWP for help and advice. However, employers often found it difficult to determine which number they should ring and spoke of difficulties actually getting through to someone. In contrast, DWP’s website was often viewed positively. Advantages included the depth of information and the ability to access it at any time. However, some employers did find the website hard to navigate, as they did not feel they knew the precise search terms needed.

• Some larger employers spoke of having received information from DWP on a face-to-face basis at seminars, which they found to be very helpful. However, there was some disagreement as to the appropriateness of this channel, as many employers did not feel they had time to devote to interacting with the Department in this way.

• More generally, there was a sense among employers that DWP does not understand them as businesses. This was largely driven by the perception that communications were not seen to be in tune with business needs. Employers also thought that DWP’s communications were too reactive; for example, informing employers about changes to legislation after they were made, rather than before to allow them time to absorb and digest new material.

• Of all DWP’s main businesses, employers had the most experience of working with Jobcentre Plus. However, there was much dissatisfaction with the services offered by it, especially when compared to the more personalised approach used by private recruitment agencies. Jobcentre Plus was also felt to concentrate on individuals with a low skills base, who were not suitable to today’s service economy. Its staff were also thought to be under pressure to send as many people as possible, whether suitable or not, for interviews to achieve their targets. Employers also thought that Jobcentre Plus could make better use of technology, such as displaying CVs on its website.

• In contrast, employers’ experiences of working with The Pension Service were comparatively positive. Information provided by The Pension Service was comprehensive and detailed but, at the same time, easy to understand, as well as tailored to employers’ needs. Awareness of the Disability and Carers Service was limited. In the main, employers often only tended to contact it when trying to get answers to a query on the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Employers’ only contact with the Child Support Agency (CSA) had been in their personal, rather than professional, lives.
Attitudes towards DWP’s priorities

• After understanding employers’ spontaneous perceptions of DWP, they were presented with detailed information about the Department’s priorities for moving forward. On the whole, employers were impressed with the principles underpinning these key strategic objectives and believed these aims to be admirable ideals to work towards. However, many employers wondered whether these aims would simply be too far-reaching for the Department to achieve. Similarly, many believed that it would be better off tackling one at a time given the scale of the issues. Consequently, to facilitate buy-in, many employers wanted to see evidence from DWP which would clearly set out how its performance on the objectives could be judged.

• Some employers were also unsure why DWP assumed that they would be part of the solution in realising these objectives. They felt that the issues were so great that they were beyond their remit as employers. Additionally, they did not immediately perceive that there was anything they could do to drive these policies forward given their limited time, expertise and resources.

• Looking at each of the objectives in turn, regarding maximising employment opportunity for all, while employers recognised the importance and value of employment, they did not automatically agree with this objective. Firstly, they felt there will always be people with social issues that as employers, they do not feel responsible for tackling. Secondly, employers stated they were no longer limited to searching within the UK for potential employees, as they could employ staff from European Union (EU) countries who were more cost effective, possessed more relevant skills and, crucially, were perceived to want to work. Thirdly, some said that while they would be willing to work towards this objective, the lack of economic growth in their area prevented them from doing so.

• To counter this, employers suggested that DWP should ascertain what skills are needed to succeed in the modern economy and where there are gaps. It was believed that with this knowledge, it could then target training schemes and job opportunities more effectively. Employers also thought that DWP needed to systematically reform the workings of the welfare state to make unemployment ‘less attractive’ and encourage people back into work.

• When examining the objective ‘promoting independence and wellbeing in later life’ employers recognised that, as the workforce increases in age, they will need to be flexible about the opportunities they can offer. Some employers also acknowledged the benefits that an older workforce could bring in terms of added skills and experience. However, there was a concern that older workers could be more prone to ill health and would be unable to do the physical work involved in some industries.
• Looking more generally at this objective brought the discussion onto pension provision. Many employers believed that beyond providing a pension scheme which employees could join, they had few other responsibilities towards their employees regarding their independence and wellbeing in later life. Employers believed that their duty of care towards their employees was only relevant within working hours. Beyond this, they felt strongly that their employees’ lives were their own and should be lived how they wanted them to be.

• Regarding the objective of ‘keeping workplaces healthy and safe’, some employers spoke freely of the need to ensure that their workplaces were kept this way, because of their duty of care towards their employees and to make sure that they were following employment laws. Doing this was also seen to bring significant cost and operational benefits to employers as it led to staff taking less time off as a result of a work-related illness. However, the wider definition of the term ‘healthy’ caused much discussion – again, employers were opposed to interfering in their employees’ private lives, believing this went beyond the scope of their responsibilities as employers.

• On discussions around ‘promoting equality of opportunity for all’, employers did see the need to keep an open mind about the skills and capabilities of different groups of people – particularly those with a long-term illness or disability. It was thought that if they failed to do this they may, potentially, miss out on a skilled pool of people. Beyond this, among the larger employers there was a belief that being seen as an equal opportunities employer could enhance their brand and reputation. However, smaller employers felt they lacked the resources needed to drive this objective forward properly.

• The objective of ‘reducing child poverty’ was seen to be of least relevance to employers. Few had any conception as to how they might be able to work towards this objective and the only suggestions that were made were with regard to flexible working or subsidised child care. Again, it was thought that the burden of doing this would fall disproportionately on small businesses that may lack the resources to implement such a policy. Employers also felt that the responsibility for children lies with their parents who should ensure that they have sufficient means to fund their family.

• The final objective discussed with employers was that of ‘making DWP an exemplar of effective service delivery’. While employers welcomed any initiatives that might improve the services offered to them, they did not believe this objective to be an immediate priority, especially when set against some of the others that had been discussed. Furthermore, given some employers’ negative experiences of working with DWP previously, there were those who did not think that such a transformation of service delivery was possible for DWP.
Overall, employers were not averse to working in conjunction with DWP. They could see that they were, essentially, working towards the same goal: that of increasing the skills of the population and contributing towards a successful and thriving economy. However, employers had strong views on what it was reasonable of DWP to expect them to do. To illustrate, while they were willing to provide training to help increase the skills of their employees, they did want to secure a commitment from DWP to ensure that, generally, the standard of training across the country would be improved.

Building engagement

As mentioned previously, many employers were keen to foster a closer working relationship with DWP due to the shared goals they identified. Furthermore, employers were able to mention a number of ways in which this could be achieved. However, employers felt that before this could be done, the Department needed to work at removing some of the barriers to engagement. Employers felt strongly that, in the past, the relationship between themselves and the Department had been hampered by the lack of understanding as to what its responsibilities are and how it relates to the rest of Government. Many employers also mentioned that a barrier to building a working relationship has been a lack of accessibility; for example, difficulties getting through on the telephone.

Beyond this though, employers were also of the opinion that DWP needs to build a better understanding of the issues facing, and pressures on, employers. It was thought that this could be achieved through appropriate consultations, where businesses could put their point across. Some employers were amenable to participating in such consultations, but were keen to be reassured by the Department that their views were being listened to, and acted on, where possible. However, smaller employers did not perceive that they would have the time to spare to attend such events and thought that the Department could foster relations with industry and trade bodies instead which would represent their views.

Additionally, employers thought that DWP could make a number of improvements to how it communicates with them. Many believed that DWP’s website should be the linchpin in its communications strategy and that, ideally, employers could use this as a central point for all information. Some employers suggested there should be an e-mail facility whereby employers can submit questions, thus adding an interactive element to the website.

Employers often thought that DWP could build a greater local presence; by doing this employers would not only have a sense of what DWP could offer them but, furthermore, could relate to it more effectively. Employers also stated that the issues facing the different regions of the country were markedly different and that DWP should tailor its approach according to the area it is in. Linked in with this, many suggested that DWP could build a presence with employers by attending events and conferences hosted by industry organisations.
Considerations for DWP

- This report presents mixed messages for the Department. While employers broadly agreed with the objectives DWP is working towards and were happy working more collaboratively with the Department, there were also some issues that need addressing to aid successful working in the future.

- Many employers could not immediately see how some of DWP’s aims, such as reducing child poverty, were relevant to them. Therefore, future communications may need to emphasise the benefits to employers in working towards them if DWP is to secure buy-in. Furthermore, there was an appetite for learning more about what DWP itself is planning on doing to help realise its objectives. It was thought that this would foster the sense that the relationship is based on partnership and that employers alone are not expected to be entirely responsible for achieving the Department’s aims.

- Improving channels of communication may also be a step which needs to be taken in order to foster better working relations. Many expressed a preference for electronic communications due to the convenience and accessible nature of the Internet. Furthermore, many employers felt that information communicated in this way could be easily kept up-to-date.

- Employers also wanted to be reassured that their views were being listened to by the Department and, consequently, it may also be worthwhile considering how to encourage this. Developing an interactive website was one suggestion made by employers while others urged DWP to build closer links with industry bodies which were trusted to represent their views fairly.

- Broadly though, the fact that employers were receptive to working collaboratively with DWP should be taken positively and may mean that the foundations are in place for a successful working relationship going forward.
1 Methodological approach

1.1 Background

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is currently developing an Employer Strategy which will establish how the Department can work better with employers to achieve its priorities. The strategy will outline the roles and responsibilities of employers in relation to these priorities and establish a system of shared responsibility in which employers will play an important role. As part of this strategic development, DWP needs to assess, and take account of, employers’ views towards DWP and, in particular, the current relationship they have with the Department. It will also be important to ascertain the level of agreement with DWP’s priorities and how well these are aligned with employers’ individual objectives.

To help DWP achieve this, and as one part of its evidence-gathering exercise, the Department commissioned Ipsos MORI to carry out deliberative research with a cross-section of employers, in both the private and public sectors and across a broad range of industry sectors.

1.2 Study objectives

The research aimed to explore employers’ perceptions of DWP and their current level of interaction with the Department and its businesses. In addition the research intended to assess the extent to which employers agreed with DWP’s priorities and whether they were prepared to accept shared responsibility in achieving these.

The detailed objectives of the study were to:

• establish what matters to employers, and how this can be aligned with what matters to DWP;

• discover what DWP currently does well with employers and employer networks and what the drivers for success are;

• find out whether employers recognise the DWP brand and the importance of this;
• establish what the best tools and levers are to better engage with employers and to motivate them to contribute to DWP’s objectives and targets;

• understand which of DWP’s priorities are the most important to which types of employers, and how the Department can best engage employers in this; and

• ascertain what the DWP ‘offer’ to employers should be and how the Department should define this.

1.3 Methodology

To meet these research objectives, a qualitative methodology, using deliberative techniques, was felt to be the most appropriate approach. Using deliberative techniques allows researchers to go beyond knee-jerk reactions or responses based on word-of-mouth or media portrayal of an issue in order to have a balanced and considered debate. This is carried out by introducing information to participants (through presentations, stimulus material and case studies), which helps them to develop their thinking more broadly and consider new ideas. Furthermore, the extended time period of a workshop (in this case over six hours) allows researchers to spend more time with participants, debating and deliberating on the topics and working with them to ensure they understand, in depth, the issues at stake.

Of course, to enable us to do this, it was crucial that the deliberative stimulus materials were independent, accessible and comprehensive in order to allow employers to fully engage in the debate and make informed decisions and choices. Some of the stimulus presented to participants comprised factual data and was relayed to them in plenary sessions by expert witnesses from the Department. Other stimuli comprised hypothetical scenarios centred on employment legislation and policy and were discussed in the break-out groups as a means of prompting debate. The stimulus materials were developed in close consultation with DWP and can be found in the appendices.

Deliberative research also allows us to track how views change (and what influences this change) as part of the research process. In our analysis stage we were able to compare responses given to specific questions in the morning sessions with those given to the same questions asked in the afternoon and towards the end of the workshops.

1.4 Research design

The research comprised of two deliberative workshops, conducted in London on 18 September 2007 and in Manchester on 20 September 2007. Table 1.1 shows the geographical areas covered at each event.
Table 1.1 Geographical areas covered at each event

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<th>Workshop</th>
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1.5 Definitions, presentation and interpretation of the data

While qualitative research was the most appropriate methodological approach for this study (as it seeks to identify the range of views, opinions and experiences of people), it is important to bear in mind that it utilises smaller samples that are chosen purposively, to ensure representation of a full range of views within the sample. Qualitative research is designed to be illustrative and cannot only tell us what people think but why they do so. It is also a generative process and, therefore, ideally placed to help understand future scenarios. However, qualitative research is reflective of the views of any given population rather than being representative and does not look to produce statistics. This needs to be taken into account when interpreting the research findings. In addition, it is important to bear in mind that the research deals with perceptions rather than facts (though perceptions are facts to those that hold them).

Throughout the report we have made use of verbatim comments to exemplify a particular viewpoint. It is important to be aware that these views do not necessarily represent the views of all participants. Where verbatim comments have been used, some of the respondent’s attributes are given (location and social grade).

In addition, we have illustrated views by showing data collected from the interactive voting sessions that were held at regular intervals throughout both events. Please treat these figures with some caution, given the relatively small base sizes and purposive method of recruitment. They have not been weighted to the UK employer profile and are indicative only. However, they are extremely useful in highlighting shifts in attitudes throughout the day and differences between employers by geographic location, and are also supported by what was said in the workshops. The sample size for the London workshop is 58 participants and the sample size for the Manchester workshop is 57 participants. Where percentages do not sum to 100 per cent, this is due to computer rounding.
1.6 Report structure

Following this introduction, this report is divided into six sections:
- a tradition of collaboration;
- attitudes towards welfare provision;
- current ways of working with DWP;
- attitudes towards DWP's priorities;
- building engagement; and
- considerations for DWP.
2 A tradition of collaboration?

This chapter provides a brief overview of the historical relationship between the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP, (and its predecessors)) and employers, assesses the changing role and responsibilities that each undertakes and discusses the implementation of recent initiatives.

The last five decades has seen an evolving relationship between employers and Government, with employer engagement a key theme in employment policy. The focus of this engagement has shifted in recent years towards employer-led initiatives and voluntary involvement.

The Leitch Review, published in 2006, highlighted the importance of shared responsibility and suggested that the cost of training should be shared by Government, employers and individuals. In line with this, Local Employment Partnerships (LEPs), announced in the 2007 Budget, aim to encourage major employers to demonstrate their commitment to helping the long-term unemployed. It is hoped that employers across the private and public sectors will voluntarily commit to providing a quarter of a million job opportunities for people who are disadvantaged in the labour market.

However, the primary role of employers is to produce goods and services to meet the needs of the market and Government needs to work with them in order to ensure that, where possible, they can contribute to the achievement of its social and economic objectives. For example, DWP can support employers through the provision of job applicants with the right attitude and aptitude for work. DWP is examining how it can improve relationships between employers and the Department.

Over the last five decades the relationship between employers and Government has evolved considerably. Employer engagement has been a key theme in employment policy and the emphasis has subtly shifted from Government-driven and regulated activities to employer-led initiatives and voluntary involvement.
The introduction of Industrial Training Boards (ITBs) in 1964 started a period of compulsory training activity for employers and training and skills initiatives were essentially Government driven, with limited input from employers. In 1973, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) was established to involve employers in planning workforce skills but training remained supply-led and was often based on poorly articulated and UK-wide skills needs. This proved to be ineffective and by the 1980s most ITBs had been abolished and were being replaced by employer-led bodies, such as Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and National Training Organisations (NTOs), which focused on specific sector and local training needs. A more demand-led approach proved to be successful and set in motion a series of Government initiatives that aimed to engage employers in employment policy, rather than dictate it to them. More recently, Sector Skills Councils have been set up to allow employers to collectively articulate their qualification needs through these organisations, which provide public funding for vocational and economically valuable courses.

Since the establishment of the DWP in 2001, the focus of employment policy has been on shared responsibilities, between Government, employers and individuals. The Leitch Review¹, published in 2006, highlights the importance of shared responsibility and, for example, suggests that the cost of training should be shared by Government, employers and individuals, with employers paying for employee training where they will derive the most benefit from it. It also recommends the launch of a new ‘Pledge’, whereby employers voluntarily commit to train all eligible employees to Level 2.

In line with this, LEPs, announced in the 2007 Budget, aim to encourage major employers to demonstrate their commitment to helping the long-term unemployed. Many major retailers have already voluntarily accepted this responsibility afforded to them in LEPs, recognising the wider economic advantages of employing a diverse workforce and the benefits of reducing worklessness in the local community. The introduction of ‘Jobs Pledges’ will build on this success and it is hoped that employers across the private and public sectors will voluntarily commit to providing a quarter of a million job opportunities for people who are disadvantaged in the labour market.

However, the primary role of employers is to produce goods and services to meet the needs of the market and Government needs to work with them in order to ensure that, where possible, they can contribute to the achievement of its social and economic objectives. For example, DWP will provide employers with job applicants that have the right attitude and aptitude for work. Since its creation in 2002, Jobcentre Plus has concentrated on providing a high quality, cost-free service to employers and the Department is currently examining how to improve its relationship with employers.

¹ Leitch, S. (2006), Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills.
This research sought to examine ways as to how this tradition of collaboration could be strengthened further still. This was achieved by seeing where there was correlation between employers’ priorities and those of DWP and where there was dissonance. These issues are explored in detail throughout the rest of this report.
3 Attitudes towards welfare provision

This chapter explores employers’ attitudes toward the principle of welfare provision and whether work should be at the centre of welfare policies. It goes on to explore views about the work of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), awareness of its roles and responsibilities and how the Department’s work fits in with that of other Government departments.

All employers strongly supported the principle of welfare provision, recognising that help should be available for individuals at every stage of their life. Employers thought that DWP was right in its approach of putting work at the centre of welfare, as they spoke of the benefits that employment can bring; such as social, psychological and economic ones.

Some employers believed that DWP’s role was undervalued in comparison with other Government departments as they thought that other issues, such as education, had risen up the political agenda at the expense of DWP’s work. This caused some concern as employers felt that if DWP was not getting the attention it deserved, it may subsequently struggle to access the resources it needs.

Despite this, knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of the Department was limited. Overall, employers saw the Department as tackling the two issues named in its brand name; employment and the provision of a state pension. But beyond this, there was much confusion regarding what it was and was not responsible for.

Employers were unsure as to the extent which an organisation of DWP’s size could be managed effectively. Furthermore, they thought its size would prevent the sharing of knowledge between its different agencies and businesses, which could impact on the quality of service offered.
There was also confusion about how the work of DWP fits in with that of other departments, especially Her Majesty’s Revenue & Customs (HMRC), Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). Employers did not know who to contact when they had a query and felt that the division of responsibility between the different departments did not make ‘business sense’. This blurring of responsibilities also caused reputational issues; for example, when employers had a negative experience with one department, the impact of this affected all their dealings with Government, rather than it being seen as an isolated incident.

Many employers still referred to the Department for Social Security (DSS) or Department for Health and Social Security (DHSS) and remained unaware of the DWP branding and what it actually meant. They felt that these changes in the Department’s identity did little to help them understand what the Department is there to do and how it might be able to help.

3.1 Understanding attitudes to welfare

All employers strongly supported the principle of welfare provision. Their reasoning for this was that they recognised that there will always be people within society that cannot provide for themselves, through no fault of their own. They also agreed that state assistance should be there for whenever it was needed; employers spoke of the principles behind the welfare state and fully supported the idea that help is available for individuals at every stage of their life. In this sense, participants very much fell into ‘Big Tent’ model of welfare, as put forward by academics at the London School of Economics\(^2\), which maintains that the welfare state should be all-encompassing.

‘It’s got to be cradle to grave support – it’s there to help people whenever they need it.’

(London, large business)

Consequently, they believed that it was the responsibility of those in work to pay a proportion of their wages to the public purse to ensure the funding of these public services and that, moreover, it was the Government’s responsibility to ensure that the money raised via taxation was distributed fairly to those that need it. Thus, it became apparent that right from the start of these discussions, employers very much saw their relationship with government as a symbiotic one and that neither party could fulfil its roles and responsibilities effectively without working in conjunction with the other.

Employers were also firmly agreed that the DWP is right in its approach of putting work at the centre of welfare. Many employers spoke of the benefits that employment can bring; and this included social and psychological benefits

as well as economic ones. Some employers stated that when people go into employment, it can give them confidence in that they achieve something tangible and are rewarded for doing so. Furthermore, it was felt that work can give people structure and a purpose in life. Indeed, some went so far as to say that work, and an individual’s chosen employment path can actually ‘define’ people. In this sense, employers, therefore, viewed the work of DWP and, in particular that of Jobcentre Plus, as essential for the successful functioning of society as a whole.

‘Putting people into work gives structure to society.’

(London, small business)

Employers’ views on the importance of work were clearly highlighted in the electronic voting sessions. When asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with whether ‘work is good for everyone, including those with a disability and those with a long-term health condition’, the overwhelming majority (95 per cent) agreed. This is highlighted in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 The importance of employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work is good for everyone, including those with a disability and a long-term health condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All respondents.

3.2 Attitudes towards DWP

Spontaneously, employers recognised that the Department has the potential to make a real contribution to the wellbeing of society. Many held the view that the Department could have a transformative effect on people in that it could
provide a springboard from which people can rebuild their lives and make a real contribution to society. Therefore, many employers were positive about the principles underpinning the work of the Department and its overall aims and objectives.

‘It ensures a minimum quality of life but, more importantly, gives people a second chance.’

(London, small business)

Furthermore, given their perceptions regarding the importance of employment, some employers believed that DWP’s role was undervalued when compared to the other departments such as the Department of Health (DH) and the DIUS. These two departments were perceived by some employers to receive the majority of attention and also budgetary spend. It was thought by some that this was driven by the fact that in the last ten years the UK has sustained high levels of employment and, furthermore, there is much economic optimism among the public. To illustrate, only two per cent of the public now mention inflation/prices as being among one of the most important issues facing the country compared to around a quarter in 1993 and four in five in 1974 (23 per cent and 81 per cent respectively)\(^3\) thus, reflecting the relatively high levels of economic growth and economic optimism. Consequently, it was thought that other issues, such as education, have risen up the political agenda at the expense of DWP. While they did not, of course, disagree with the need for good levels of education, there was some disagreement as to whether people were being taught the right skills for success in the workplace.

‘I don’t think the work agenda is seen as particularly high profile in government policy. Concern about unemployment was very high in the 1980s, but you never see articles about people not working now. Education is seen as being much more sexy.’

(Manchester, medium business)

While some thought that this changing priorities was symptomatic of the ebb and flow of changing political fortunes, it did worry some employers. In the first instance, they were concerned that if the attention is not on DWP, then it may struggle to access the resources and lack the impetus it needs to achieve its perceived objectives of helping people into work and providing State assistance to those that need it. Beyond this though, some employers were concerned about what effect this perception of not being a priority in Government would have on DWP’s staff. They thought there may be a tendency for staff to view their work as unimportant, to suffer from low morale as they would not think that their contribution is valued and, ultimately, that the Department may lose its most talented individuals as they seek to find work elsewhere.

\(^3\) Data taken from Ipsos MORI’s Political Monitor: Interviews conducted face-to-face with 2,000 adults aged 15+. Data are weighted to reflect the population profile.
‘Who would want to be in a department where the policy is not seen as important by the media?’

(Manchester, small business)

However, even though many employers believed DWP had a central role within Government and society as a whole, knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities of the Department was actually rather limited. This was highlighted by the fact that, when asked about their interactions with the Department, some employers spoke on a personal level rather than a professional one as this was their main frame of reference. This lack of awareness was also illustrated in the voting sessions that were held throughout the day. At the start of the workshops, participants were asked how much they knew about DWP and its duties and, as shown in Figure 3.2, while three in five claimed to know a fair amount about the Department, around a third of all participants knew not very much or nothing at all (58 per cent compared to 34 per cent).

‘The CSA are quite tough – I was scared to use it because I was afraid of my partner.’

(London, small business)

**Figure 3.2** Awareness of DWP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How much do you know about DWP and its duties?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fair amount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All respondents.
In many instances, it was thought that this lack of awareness as to the work of the Department was driven by its size; it was believed to be so large so as to prohibit people from getting to grips easily with its work. Many, on being presented with information about the work of DWP, expressed surprise as to the scope of its remit. In the main, employers saw the Department as tackling the two issues named in its brand: employment and the provision of a state pension. Beyond this, there was much confusion regarding what it was and was not responsible for. A few employers, particularly those engaged in a Human Resources (HR) function, spoke of how DWP provided them with advice regarding the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) but beyond this, there was little awareness of its other work. In particular, many employers were unaware of DWP’s role in combating child poverty. Furthermore, some employers questioned how this work fits in with its other responsibilities.

The size of the Department also caused employers some concerns. They were unsure as to the extent to which an organisation of this scale could be managed effectively. Because of this, they questioned whether one leader would be able to take charge and be able to understand, in detail, how the different elements of the Department were working. They also thought that its size would prevent the sharing of knowledge between the different agencies and businesses that make up the Department. There was a perception that this may negatively affect the quality of service offered, as lessons of best practice would not be shared or learnt. Linked in with this, some employers could not understand why these different businesses fell under the umbrella of the Department, for example, some could see few links between the work of the Child Support Agency (CSA) and that of The Pension Service and, therefore, failed to understand why the two businesses were classed as the same Department. Instead, it was seen as a rather disparate group of businesses which some employers found it hard to identify with.

‘It’s so big that, frankly, how any one Secretary of State can run it is beyond me.’

(Manchester, medium business)

‘There’s just lots of different bits and you can’t identify with it. It doesn’t seem to be linked together.’

(Manchester, small business)

Additionally, there was confusion about how the work of DWP fits in with that of other departments. In particular, many employers were uncertain as to how the Department worked in relation to HMRC, BERR and DIUS. This meant that businesses did not know who to contact when they had a specific query and, therefore, sometimes chose to access the advice of a third party such as Business Link. There were also some employers who believed that the division of responsibility between the different departments did not make ‘business sense’. For example, they stated that the issue of skills was directly related to that of employment and, therefore, did not understand why DWP did not have more involvement in this.
'It's all rather muddled and not joined up with the other departments – especially the skills sector. They don’t treat skills and jobs as the same issue.'

(Manchester, medium business)

This blurring of responsibilities also caused reputational issues. Given that employers often did not know which department is responsible for any given particular issue they tended to conflate Government and view it as a whole, rather than its individual component part. Consequently, if they had a negative experience with one department, then the impact of this affected all their dealings with Government, rather than it being seen as an isolated incident.

‘Other departments have struggled and so, by association, DWP is struggling. The reputation of DWP is linked to the rest of Government.’

(London, large business)

The complexities of the benefits system was also an issue here. As we have found in much of our other research, employers assumed that DWP was responsible for the payment of Tax Credits. Given the high profile media reporting around issues such as overpayments and delays in processing claims, this too has impacted negatively on the reputation of the Department.

‘My employee’s Working Tax Credit wasn’t processed on time. DWP messed up their claim.’

(Manchester, medium business)

Many employers also believed that their lack of awareness was, in part, driven by the changes that DWP has itself gone through in recent years. To illustrate, many employers still referred to the Department as the DSS or the DHSS and remained unaware of the new branding and what it actually meant. They felt that these changes in the Department’s identity did little to help employers understand what the Department is there to do and how it might be able to help them.

‘Its constant change of identity and role is confusing.’

(London, small business)

There was also some evidence to suggest that a few employers, to an extent, stigmatised the work of the Department. On this issue, some employers spoke from personal experience; they mentioned how, when unemployed, they did not turn to Jobcentre Plus for help and advice as they did not want to be seen as claiming benefits from the State. This echoes some of the findings from the deliberative research we recently conducted with the general public where it was felt that ‘asking for help – particularly financial assistance – was not something that people in the UK did readily’.

‘I’ve never signed on because I don’t feel comfortable with it – I don’t want to be associated with the Department in that way.’

(London, small business)

Linked in with this, there was a general sense that DWP, and Jobcentre Plus in particular, dealt with low-skilled individuals who, employers felt, would not be suited to the needs of the modern, global economy. They felt that there is a great deal of competition for jobs in the UK now, especially as a result of the freer movement of labour across the European Union (EU). Furthermore, they spoke of how the nature of employment itself is changing with fewer opportunities in low-skilled manual work and, instead, a rise in the demand for skilled service sector employment. Consequently, the perception among some was that DWP no longer works in a way which is appropriate for the economic development of the UK. These issues are explored in more detail in Section 4.3.1.

‘Jobcentre is a dirty word.’

(Manchester, small business)
4 Current ways of working with DWP

This chapter explores the touchpoints that employers had with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), including views on printed communications, telephone contact, electronic communication and face-to-face contact. It goes on to examine whether businesses think DWP understands the needs of businesses before concluding with a discussion on employers’ views and experiences of DWP’s four key businesses: Jobcentre Plus, the Child Support Agency (CSA), The Pension Service and the Disability and Carers Service (DCS).

Employers, particularly those in smaller organisations, did not think that written communications were especially effective; they often spoke of the demands on their time, which meant that printed materials were easy to ignore. There were criticisms about the content and style of DWP’s written communications, as well as the time it took to arrive. Some employers were also sceptical about the accuracy of information; it was thought that the remit of the Department changed so frequently that written materials could quickly become outdated.

Many employers had experience in ringing DWP for help and advice. However, employers often found it difficult to determine which number they should ring and spoke of difficulties actually getting through to someone. In contrast, DWP’s website was often viewed positively. Advantages included, the depth of information and the ability to access it at any time. However, some employers did find the website hard to navigate, as they did not feel they knew the precise search terms needed.

Some larger employers spoke of having received information from DWP on a face-to-face basis at seminars, which they found to be very helpful. However, there was some disagreement as to the appropriateness of this channel, as many employers did not feel they had time to devote to interacting with the Department in this way.
Employers did not feel that DWP understood them as businesses. This was largely driven by the perception that communications were not seen to be in tune with business needs. Employers also thought that DWP’s communications were too reactive; for example informing employers about changes to legislation after they were made, rather than before.

Employers had the most experience of working with Jobcentre Plus, but there was much dissatisfaction with Jobcentre Plus’ services, especially when compared with the more personalised service offered by recruitment agencies. Jobcentre Plus was felt to concentrate on individuals with a low skills base, who were not suitable to today’s service economy. Jobcentre Plus staff were also thought to be under pressure to send as many people as possible, whether suitable or not, for interviews to achieve their targets. Employers also thought that Jobcentre Plus could make better use of technology, such as displaying CVs on its website. In contrast, employers’ experiences of working with The Pension Service were comparatively positive. Information provided by The Pension Service was comprehensive and detailed but, at the same time, easy to understand, as well as tailored to employers’ needs.

4.1 Making contact

Employers had a number of touchpoints with DWP. Often, in the first instance, employers’ awareness regarding the work of DWP was raised as a result of receiving a leaflet about a specific area of its work. Following on from this, employers either sought further information on the website or rang the relevant helpline number to find out more. Very few employers sought information face-to-face but this was often due to a perceived inability to be able to do this, rather than a preference for other channels of communication. Each of these methods of making contact with DWP are discussed in more detail throughout the remainder of this section.

4.1.1 Printed communications

There was disagreement within the workshops as to whether sending information to employers via a leaflet was an appropriate way to communicate. On the one hand, some employers recognised that this is a cost effective means of communicating information with a large and disparate audience. There were, however, others who believed that, given the importance of the content which is communicated by DWP, this medium simply fails to catch their attention. Employers, and particularly those in smaller organisations, spoke of how they have a number of demands on their time and, therefore, find it hard to keep up-to-date with new guidelines that come through from the Department and how printed materials are often ‘easier to ignore’ than information that comes via a more personal route.

‘There are mail shots, but I just bin them. I don’t read them.’

(Manchester, small business)
More commonly, many employers stated that printed materials from DWP are too general to really add to their knowledge about the work of the Department and what they, as employers, should be doing in order to meet their responsibilities to it. While employers understood the cost benefit to the Department of sending a standardised letter or leaflet, they did not think that this approach derived any real benefits.

‘The letters you receive are too standardised. They don’t answer any specific query you might have.’

(London, large business)

There were also criticisms about the content and style of the written communications received from DWP. Many employers spoke of how, when dealing with a situation at their place of work, they needed to be able to react promptly to ensure they maintain the confidence of their employees. Consequently, they not only needed to receive relevant information from DWP as quickly as possible, but needed this to be easily digestible so they can pass it on with minimum delay. However, currently, employers perceived that the information received from DWP was sent out too slowly. It was perceived that this is a result of the size of the Department with employers feeling that it is too large to respond quickly enough to meet their needs.

More saliently though, employers mentioned how the information received from DWP was too lengthy and too detailed for them to digest quickly and then cascade to their staff. They stated that, regarding employment issues, they needed to take action quickly; in the interests of both the wellbeing of their staff and the effective functioning of their business. However, many mentioned that they simply receive too much information from DWP to enable them to do this. Indeed, this issue was raised recently in our work for the Cabinet Office regarding regulations on business which found that the information sent to employers was often perceived to be ‘too long and too full of jargon for businesses to easily understand what changes they need to make to their working and operational practices’.\(^5\)

‘We’ve got a redundancy situation at work and I called DWP and got hundreds and hundreds of pages back from them and just thought “I can’t deal with this”.’

(London, Large business)

Moreover, employers wanted to make sure that they were acting in accordance of the law and were meeting their responsibilities to DWP. Consequently, they needed to trust the information received from DWP. There was, however, a certain amount of scepticism regarding the accuracy of the information contained in DWP’s written communications. It was thought that the objectives and remit of the Department change so frequently that written materials can quickly become outdated. This placed employers in a difficult situation as they were unsure as

to whether the information received from the Department still applied or not. Consequently, many called the helplines to double-check the information before acting on or communicating it to their staff. Although this provided reassurance, it was also seen by employers as a drain on their resources.

‘You just can’t guarantee that the information you get from DWP is 100 per cent right. I sometimes call back to verify it.’

(London, large business)

Employers also found that completing forms sent to them by DWP took a great deal of time. This was due to the fact that they required employers to impart too much information and the process of collating the relevant details imposed a burden on them. Additionally, some employers stated that the forms are written using ‘jargon’ and ‘government speak’ so, for them, the real issue was translating the materials from DWP so they could work out what they were actually required to send back to the Department. Linked in with this, some employers also said that the way the forms were designed and the routing through them was illogical. Therefore, they had to spend time working out which sections of the form they were required to fill in and which they could leave blank. It should be noted, at this point, that these criticisms were not limited to DWP alone. Many believed that such points were relevant to other Government departments as well and, in particular, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

‘They are confusing forms. Go to section 5B then Section A, B, C. It isn’t in any order – it doesn’t make sense.’

(Manchester, medium business)

This was, however, frustrating to employers but, perhaps more importantly, it had an impact on how effectively they felt DWP meets the needs of its wider constituency. Employers tended to think of themselves as being relatively competent when it comes to understanding information and completing paperwork. However, they thought that this would not be the case for many of DWP’s customers and, in particular, the more vulnerable groups such as people with a disability, the long-term unemployed or lone parents. Thus, they were concerned as to whether such individuals would be able to interact with the Department effectively given their own experience of its written communications.

‘It’s a basic bit of paper and it took up half an hour of my time. If you can’t get that basic stuff right then God knows what’s going on with the millions of others they deal with.’

(London, medium business)

### 4.1.2 Telephone contact

Many employers had experience in ringing DWP for help and advice. Indeed, more generally, employers spoke of the shift from face-to-face support to a call-centre approach in many walks of life (such as, for example, financial transactions) and, though not wholeheartedly endorsed, they did understand the business case for
it and recognised that it, potentially, provided a more cost-effective and efficient way of dealing with a large customer base.

However, a number of issues were raised by employers regarding this channel of communication. In the first instance, many found it difficult to determine which number they should ring for help on any given issue. There were two main drivers for this. Firstly, and as mentioned in Section 3.2, many employers were unaware as to the full scope and breadth of the Department’s work and, furthermore, did not always know where the boundaries lay between it and other Government departments. Consequently, they did not always understand what it was and was not responsible for. Secondly, many employers felt that DWP does not make its contact numbers as instantly obvious as it perhaps could to encourage dialogue between employers and the Department.

‘Try and find the number in the phone book – I don’t even know where to begin to look.’

(London, large business)

Employers also spoke of difficulties actually getting through to DWP on the phone. They mentioned how, regarding Jobcentre Plus in particular, there are often long queues to actually speak with an advisor. Some employers, particularly small businesses, mentioned the cost associated with this, especially when calling from a mobile phone. More often though, businesses just saw this as a burden on their resources and an unnecessary use of their time.

‘On a few occasions, I have had a very negative experience. Put on hold for fifteen to twenty minutes and then cut off.’

(London, small business)

Beyond this, some employers also questioned the ability of those working in an advisory capacity on the phone-lines to actually deal effectively with the queries they are presented with. Some spoke of how when, on making contact, they were then passed around between different advisors until they found someone that was able to help them. More generally, other employers were critical of the telephone manner of some of DWP’s advisors. They perceived that staff sounded stressed and that this could come across on the phone as being rude and disinterested. Furthermore, some employers mentioned how they sometimes needed to phone DWP with a query of a sensitive nature, such as one regarding a disability. Because of this, they thought that a more personal approach would be appropriate and did not feel that telephone based contact met their needs in these instances.

‘Once you get through to people they can be quite rude and disorganised. They don’t take the time to look through your file.’

(London, small business)

It is important to state that these comments were not universal. There were those employers who found the telephone service to be very good and that it provided them with all the information that they needed. However, these employers were in
the minority and, on the whole and as with the written communications, employers found this method of communicating and imparting information frustrating. However, it also served to damage the reputation of the Department and made some employers query the extent to which DWP is committed to providing a quality public service. This was due to the fact that they were aware that, theoretically, the Department was in a position to be of help to them as employers. However, the difficulties they perceived in actually accessing this information led some to question whether DWP’s way of working was rooted in a genuine desire to help and work with employers or not.

‘When we speak to DWP at work we feel that they offer benefits but then make it difficult to get them. “Here’s the pot of gold – now try and get it”. Not a chance.’

(Manchester, small business)

Furthermore, these criticisms of the telephone based approach regarding help and advice are not unique to this study. In other research for the Department we have found that the shift towards offering telephone support is not only seen as being inappropriate for stakeholders (such as employers) who want to establish a more personal relationship with the Department but that, additionally, it is also not felt to meet the needs of DWP’s customer base who, it was recognised, include some of the most vulnerable groups in society.6

4.1.3 Electronic communications

Compared with other channels of communication, DWP’s website was viewed positively. For many employers, the website was used as a source of information when other channels of communication, such as the telephone and printed materials, had failed to provide them with the answers that they needed. The perceived advantages of DWP’s website was that it was seen as a comprehensive source of information and one which, importantly, could be accessed at a time which suited the employer. This point was raised, in particular, by small businesses. These employers spoke of the pressure on their resources; the owner of the business often had multiple responsibilities, for example, they were the ones in charge of running the businesses but also taking control of the finances and Human Resources (HR) functions. Given this, they appreciated a source of communication which placed as little a burden on them as possible in terms of when and where they accessed its content.

‘It is difficult to get through to someone on the phone so the Internet is quicker and you have all the information in front of you. If you do call up, they’ll probably refer you to the Internet anyway.’

(London, small business)

However, some employers did find the website hard to navigate. Although they believed the content stored on the site to be useful, their main issue was actually

finding the relevant information in the first place. They spoke of the need to use precise search terms in order to find what they needed and that, in some instances, they did not what these were. Therefore, some employers felt that the website assumed a prior level of knowledge which they did not necessarily have. This, in turn, mitigated against the time-saving benefits that many saw as being the main advantage of electronic communications.

‘DWP’s website is quite complicated; it’s not that easy to find the information you need quickly. It could be very useful to us if they were to reorganise it. In comparison, DirectGov’s website is very useful.’

(London, small business)

4.1.4 Face-to-face communications

Only a minority of employers spoke of having received information from DWP face-to-face. This tended to be the larger employers who attended seminars hosted by DWP on working practices or legislative changes. Those that attended these found them to be very helpful. There was a strong sense from these employers that communicating in this way enabled them to foster a better relationship with the Department and, furthermore, enabled them to address any queries that they might have on the specific issues under discussion.

Generally though, there was a real lack of awareness that DWP communicated with employers in this way. Many perceived the Department as being distant from them and some cited the closure of local Jobcentre Plus offices as indicative of this. Furthermore, there was some disagreement as to the extent to which this channel of communications is appropriate for employers. Many businesses, especially smaller ones, did not believe that they had the time or resources available to devote to interacting with the Department in such a manner.

4.2 Understanding the needs of business

Generally, employers did not feel as though DWP understood them as businesses. This perception was largely driven by the way that the Department chose to communicate with employers. As mentioned in Section 4.1, the channels of communications were not seen to be in tune with business needs; it was thought to take too long to access the information needed while others saw the information provided as being too complicated to easily digest and then action.

Perhaps more saliently, many employers criticised DWP’s communications strategy for being reactive rather than proactive. They stated that they were not given any warning when changes to legislation or working practices were to be made but, instead, were only informed after the event. This made some employers feel ill-prepared for new developments in the workplace and, furthermore, added to their perception that DWP does not understand the needs of businesses or how to work with them. To illustrate this point, some mentioned how HMRC send e-mail alerts to employers informing them of any forthcoming changes or developments
within the Department which may impact on them and their responsibilities. Employers spoke of how useful this was as it gave them time to prepare and, therefore, by the time these changes came into effect, they were ready for them.

‘When dealing with HMRC you get a bulletin from them letting you know of any changes. You don’t get anything of a similar nature from DWP.’

(Manchester, small business)

Furthermore, many employers felt as though communication with DWP was one-way only. While, as mentioned in Section 4.1.4, some employers were aware of, and had taken up, opportunities to meet and talk with representatives from DWP, these employers were very much in the minority. Additionally, smaller employers spoke of the difficulties they would face in trying to communicate with the Department in this way. They stated how the pressure on their resources was such that they could not spare staff to attend such an event without it having a negative effect on their business. Therefore, for many employers, the only interaction they had with the Department was when they were sent forms to fill in relating to employment statistics and were asked to return these to the Department.

‘With DWP, it is mostly filling forms in and sending them off. There’s not much communication – there’s not really a strong relationship with business.’

(London, small business)

Consequently, some employers felt as though they were being denied the opportunity to put their views across to the Department and that, as a result, they were unable to foster any sort of meaningful relationship with DWP. In turn, this impacted on the perceptions of the services they were offered, which were rarely seen to meet their needs. These issues are discussed in Section 4.3.

4.3 Experiences of working with DWP

In the workplace, employers tended to contact three out of four of DWP’s main businesses; Jobcentre Plus, The Pension Service and the DCS. While some employers had come into contact with the CSA, this tended to be on a personal, rather than a professional, basis. Employers’ experiences of these different businesses were markedly different and their issues are discussed in more detail throughout the remainder of this section.

4.3.1 Experiences of working with Jobcentre Plus

Employers had the most experience of working with Jobcentre Plus. In the main, their interaction with Jobcentre Plus tended to centre on their need to find employees but, beyond this, they also contacted this business about other issues such as the payment of the minimum wage and Statutory Sick Pay (SSP).

Many employers expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction with Jobcentre Plus’ services on helping to find staff. In the first instance, most employers did not believe that Jobcentre Plus worked with people to train them with appropriate
skills for the modern workplace. There was a strong perception among employers that Jobcentre Plus concentrated on those with individuals with a low skills base or, at the most, those with manual skills. However, with the exception of the few employers that worked in manufacturing or construction, employers spoke of how the economy has shifted to a service based one in which new skills, such as IT literacy and customer service, are necessary. This was believed to be in contrast to private recruitment agencies which were often believed to specialise in certain areas of employment. This meant that employers could access their services confident in the knowledge that they would be sent applicants with a background which was relevant to their vacancy.

‘Recruitment agencies specialise. Jobcentre Plus just concentrates on manual labour.’

(London, small business)

Linked in with this, the work of Jobcentre Plus was not thought to be targeted enough to meet the needs of employers. Many spoke of how, after submitting a candidate specification to Jobcentre Plus, they were sent people to interview who lacked the skills they needed. This embedded the perception that Jobcentre Plus is not attuned to the needs of business and does not understand them.

‘They send really inappropriate people. We told them the job spec but they just send anyone who is out of work.’

(Manchester, medium business)

There was some sympathy for this. Many employers believed this lack of a tailored approach was a direct result of the need for Jobcentre Plus to meet targets. They perceived that its staff were under a great deal of pressure and had to be seen to send people for interviews if they were to achieve their targets. As a result of this, employers believed that quality customer service took secondary place to meeting these high level objectives.

‘They just want to say at the end of each month that they have sent X number of people for interviews.’

(Manchester, medium business)

However, as a consequence of Jobcentre Plus failing to send appropriate people for interview, employers felt not only as though their time was being wasted by seeing unsuitable candidates but, moreover, that employers were being expected to undertake the work of the Department for them. Some spoke of how, the need for resources was so urgent that, in effect, they were sometimes forced into a position where they had to recruit candidates from Jobcentre Plus, irrespective of whether they possessed the right skills set. Consequently, the employers then had to invest their time and resources in training these individuals to ensure they could do the job they were hired to undertake.

Beyond this, many employers spoke of the difficulties in employing those that had, previously, been unemployed for a long period of time. They mentioned how
long-term unemployment often generated, or was a consequence of, other social problems including low self-esteem, a lack of motivation, depression and difficulties in interacting with others. Employers thought it unreasonable of Jobcentre Plus to expect them to cope, and handle, such issues effectively and thought that the Department should do more to ensure that its customers are work-ready when sent for interview.

‘It’s a disgrace that an employer should be dumped with a social misfit and expected to carry that person.’

(London, medium business)

Employers tended to compare the services offered by Jobcentre Plus with those of private recruitment agencies and, often, found the latter more favourable. This comparison was extended further when speaking about the extent to which Jobcentre Plus actively engaged with employers in their local area. Many spoke of how private recruitment agencies called them on a regular basis to determine their needs and to establish if they could be of any help. However, in contrast, it was felt that Jobcentre Plus was less interested in whether local employers worked with it or not. Some employers were mindful of the fact that Jobcentre Plus is providing a service and, therefore, believed that it could learn lessons from the private sector in how to work with employers to achieve this.

‘I get phone calls from employment agencies and recruitment consultants. I never get calls from Jobcentre Plus.’

(London, small business)

Many also thought that the working practices of Jobcentre Plus were out-of-date. In some instances, this was because previous negative experiences of working with Jobcentre Plus had discouraged them from doing so again and, therefore, they did not have any up-to-date experiences on which to base their perceptions. However, there was a sense that Jobcentre Plus could make better use of technology, such as displaying CVs on its website. It was thought that this approach would enable employers to easily and quickly determine whether their local Jobcentre would be able to help them regarding their recruitment queries rather than spending time and resources on interviewing unsuitable candidates.

‘There’s a perception that Jobcentre Plus still uses cards in the window to advertise jobs. It should make better use of the website so employers can pull off CVs from there.’

(Manchester, large business)

In spite of these criticisms, there were a minority of employers that were satisfied with Jobcentre Plus’ work. This perception was often held by, though not entirely restricted to, those working within the public sector. This was due to the fact that they were more aware and understanding of what Jobcentre Plus is trying to achieve and, furthermore, recognised and had sympathy with the constraints its staff are under. Furthermore, those working in the public sector tended to have
better in-house training programmes in place which meant that they were in a better position to tackle the issues that other employers raised regarding working with those that were previously the long-term unemployed.

‘We’ve had pretty good experiences with Jobcentre Plus. We take on trainees each year and build them up. For us, it’s good.’

(Manchester, medium business)

4.3.2 Experiences of working with The Pension Service

In contrast to employers’ perceptions of Jobcentre Plus, experiences of working with The Pension Service were comparatively positive. Employers engaged with The Pension Service for a number of reasons. Some provided it with information to be incorporated in the Combined Pension Forecasts for their employees to help them plan effectively for their retirement. In the main though, employers contacted The Pension Service for help on what information to give to their employees about retirement. This was particularly the case for those employers which employed part-time workers and were concerned about whether they had paid enough National Insurance Contributions (NICs) to guarantee them a full state pension in retirement.

Often, and particularly on complex queries such as those on NICs, employers acted as a bridge between The Pension Service and the employee. Therefore, they were of the opinion that it was vital that the information they were given by The Pension Service was not only accurate but, moreover, easy to understand and pass on to their staff.

On the whole, employers’ expectations of how The Pension Service should operate matched their experiences of it. Employers were very positive about the information it provided them with. They felt that it was comprehensive and detailed but, at the same time, easy to understand. Crucially, employers also felt that the information provided by The Pension Service was tailored to their needs and was not written with a mass audience in mind.

‘The Pension Service is the best. It gives very specific information.’

(London, small business)

Beyond this, employers also had the sense that The Pension Service was acting in their interests as businesses. They spoke of how it was perceived to work collaboratively with employers, rather than simply asking or expecting them to do something and this approach was greatly appreciated. Furthermore, because of the quality of the information provided, many employers had confidence in The Pension Service and trusted it to give them the right advice which would be both good for them as businesses and beneficial to their employers.

‘I’ve found them to be very helpful – it’s the one Government Department which actually provides help.’

(Manchester, small business)
The Pension Service was also felt to adopt a more personal approach to working with employers than that of Jobcentre Plus. Employers mentioned how they were often able to speak to the same advisor for different queries. This enabled employers to build a relationship with an individual based on knowledge and trust.

'We deal directly with The Pension Service and have had a very positive experience. They try and build a relationship.'

(London, large business)

Encouragingly for some employers as well, there were signs that the level of customer care provided by The Pension Service has improved in recent years. Some spoke of how, when the business was first set up, it could be quite disorganised in its approach and was often felt to be unable to help employers with the queries they had. However, these initial teething issues are largely felt to have been resolved. This not only gave employers confidence in the leadership of The Pension Service but, moreover, gave some hope that the same transformation could take place at Jobcentre Plus.

'The Pension Service is far better than it used to be. When it first came into being it was diabolical but they have worked on it. Individuals have made it better – they have put the effort in into making sure it works.'

(Manchester, medium business)

There was, however, some scepticism as to whether this would actually happen. Many employers were of the opinion that, even within the same Department, the different businesses did not share findings or experiences with each other. Consequently, they lacked confidence that the lessons of best practice which could be drawn from The Pension Service would be applied to DWP's other businesses.

4.3.3 Experiences of working with the DCS

Only a limited number of employers had come into contact with the DCS. This tended to come about as a result of queries regarding the correct implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Smaller employers, in particular, had issues with this, particularly regarding how to ensure that their employment premises were accessible for all and whether they might be able to receive help to ensure this.

Beyond this though, many employers spoke of the difficulties they faced with recruitment since the implementation of the DDA. While they all agreed with the legislation in principle, employers tended to be of the opinion that, all that mattered to them was the recruitment, and retention of someone that was right for the post in hand. Sometimes, employers had a perception of who this might be; for instance, those working in traditional manual industries stated that the ideal person for their work would be a young man who would be able to cope, physically, with the demands of their job.
However, there was a strong sense that as a result of the anti-discrimination legislation that is now in place, employers no longer have the jurisdiction to recruit freely; even if they are of the opinion that certain people will not be able to do the work they are advertising for. It was thought that this has, in turn, added considerably to the cost of the recruitment process as they feel they have to be seen to advertise inclusively, and also interview candidates that they know will not be suitable.

‘The DDA is not employer friendly. It’s not designed to help the disabled. It’s designed to hinder employers and forces us to be covert in the way we recruit.’

(London, medium business)

This split in opinion is highlighted in Figure 4.1 which shows how opinion is divided equally between those that agree that the disability discrimination legislation had benefited their business and those that disagree (30 per cent versus 31 per cent).

Figure 4.1 The impact of the DDA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The disability discrimination legislation has benefited business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All respondents.

On the whole, it was felt that while those working for the DCS are very helpful with regard to their knowledge of issues around disability, there is less of an understanding on their part as to how this might impact on business.

The next section of this report goes on to explore employers’ reactions to DWP’s priorities and the extent to which they felt they had a role in delivering on these.
5 Attitudes towards DWP’s priorities

This chapter explores employers’ views about the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) key strategic objectives. These included:

- maximising employment opportunity for all;
- reducing child poverty;
- promoting independence and well-being in later life;
- keeping workplaces healthy and safe;
- promoting equality of opportunity for all; and
- transforming the services that deliver DWP’s outcomes.

Participants were impressed with the principles underpinning DWP’s key strategic objectives and thought that these aims were admirable ideals to work towards. However, many employers wondered whether these aims would simply be too much or too many for the Department to achieve. In order to facilitate buy-in, many employers wanted to see evidence from DWP which would clearly set out how its performance on the objectives could be judged. Employers were unsure why DWP assumed that they would be part of the solution in realising these objectives, as they did not immediately perceive that there was anything they could do to drive these policies forward given their limited time, expertise and resources.

**Maximising employment opportunity for all:** While employers recognised the importance and value of employment, they did not automatically agree with this objective. Firstly, they felt there will always be people with social issues that as employers, they did not feel responsible for tackling. Secondly, employers stated they were no longer limited to searching within the United Kingdom (UK) for potential employees, as they could employ staff from European Union (EU) countries who were more cost effective, possessed more relevant skills and, crucially, wanted to work. Thirdly, some said that while they would be willing to work towards this objective, socio-economic conditions in their area prevented them from doing so.
Employers often felt that people did not possess the skills they needed to succeed in the modern economy and that DWP should ascertain what skills are needed, where there are gaps, and to target these effectively. Employers also thought that DWP needed to systematically reform the workings of the welfare state to make unemployment ‘less attractive’ and encourage people back into work.

**Promoting independence and wellbeing in later life:** Employers recognised that, as the workforce increases in age, they will need to be flexible about the opportunities they can offer. Some employers also acknowledged the benefits that an older workforce could bring in terms of skills and experience. However there was a concern that older workers could be more prone to ill health and would be unable to do the physical work involved in some industries.

Many employers believed that beyond providing a pension scheme which employees could join, they had few other responsibilities towards their employees regarding their independence and wellbeing in later life. Employers believed that their duty of care towards their employees was only relevant within working hours. Beyond this, they felt strongly that their employees’ lives were their own and should be lived how they wanted them to be.

**Keeping workplaces healthy and safe:** Some employers spoke freely of the need to ensure that their workplaces were kept healthy and safe, because of their duty of care towards their employees and to make sure that they were following employment laws. This could also bring significant cost and operational benefits to employers as it led to staff taking less time off as a result of a work-related illness. However, the wider definition of the term ‘healthy’ caused much discussion – again employers were opposed to interfering in their employees’ private lives, believing this went beyond the scope of their responsibilities as employers.

**Promoting equality of opportunity for all:** employers did see the need to keep an open mind about the skills and capabilities of different groups of people – particularly those with a long-term illness or disability. By failing to employ these groups, some employers believed they could miss out on a potentially skilled pool of people. Among the larger employers was a belief that being seen as an equal opportunities employer could enhance their brand and reputation. However, smaller employers felt they lacked the resources needed to drive this objective forward.

**Reducing child poverty:** This was perceived to be of least relevance to employers. Few employers had any conception as to how they might be able to alleviate child poverty and the only suggestions that were made were with regard to flexible working or subsidised child care. Again, it was thought that the burden of doing this would fall disproportionately on small businesses that may lack the resources to implement such a policy. Employers also felt that the responsibility for children lies with their parents who should ensure that they have sufficient means to fund their family.
Making DWP an exemplar of effective service delivery: While employers welcomed any initiatives that might improve the services offered to them, they did not believe this objective to be an immediate priority. Furthermore, given some employers’ negative experiences of working with DWP in the past, many did not think that such a transformation of service delivery was possible for DWP.

Overall, employers were not averse to working in conjunction with DWP. They could see that they were, essentially, working towards the same goal; that of increasing the skills of the population and contributing towards a successful and thriving economy. However, employers had strong views on what it was reasonable of DWP to expect them to do. While they were not averse to providing training to help increase the skills of their employees, they did want to secure a commitment from DWP to ensure that, generally, the standard of training across the country would be improved.

Once employers’ spontaneous perceptions of DWP were gathered, we then presented employers with information about the Department’s key strategic objectives. These were presented formally, by an expert witness from DWP, before being discussed in break-out groups facilitated by a moderator. The stimulus used for this can be found in Section A2 of the appendices. The aim of this element of the discussion was, firstly, to inform and educate employers about the work of the Department, which was often far removed from their perceptions of what it did. Moreover though, this aspect of the discussion was designed to help us understand the extent to which these objectives resonated with employers and whether they felt that they would be able to work collaboratively with the Department in achieving these.

In total, employers were presented with six key strategic objectives by DWP. These included:

- maximise employment opportunity for all;
- reduce child poverty;
- promote independence and well-being in later life;
- keep workplaces healthy and safe;
- promote equality of opportunity for all; and,
- transform the services that deliver DWP’s outcomes.

Employers’ reactions to these six key strategic objectives are outlined in detail throughout the remainder of this chapter.
5.1 Overall reactions to DWP’s priorities

Generally, participants were impressed with the principles underpinning DWP’s key strategic objectives and thought that these aims were admirable ideals to work towards. Moreover, some employers felt that these objectives demonstrated the commitment of DWP’s senior management to improving society and, furthermore, displayed clear forward-thinking.

‘I’m impressed with the vision – there’s a clear message from the top here about their intentions.’

(London, small business)

However, there was a great deal of scepticism about the delivery of these objectives. In the first instance, many employers found it very hard to prioritise which of these six key strategic objectives should be treated as the most important. Most were of the view that they were not mutually exclusive but, instead, needed to be worked towards together if the Department is to make a real difference. To illustrate, some employers made the point that it would be impossible to work towards maximising employment opportunity for all without tackling issues around equality and diversity at the same time.

‘I object to having to prioritise between the options – they are mutually supportive.’

(London, small business)

Furthermore, many employers wondered whether these aims would simply be too much for the Department to achieve. For instance, employers highlighted child poverty as a case in point here. They mentioned that this, in itself, is a huge, overarching cross-governmental issue with a very high political profile at the moment. To ensure that change is actually implemented and progress made, it may be wise for the Department to concentrate on one key issue at a time. It was thought that this would increase the chances of policies being delivered effectively rather than the resources of DWP being stretched in order to try and cover everything.

‘It’s all very honourable, but they are just trying to achieve too much.’

(London, medium business)

There was also concern about how the Department would be judged on its performance relative to these objectives. There was a strong sense that businesses perceived these objectives as being impossible, or at best very challenging, to measure and, consequently, it would be hard to tell what impact, if any, DWP will have made on these issues. In order to facilitate buy-in to these objectives, many employers wanted to see evidence from DWP which would clearly set out how they would judge their performance.

‘How do you measure if they’ve done a good or bad job? There’s nothing to say how they’ll do this.’

(Manchester, large business)
In relation to this, many employers also wanted to know more about what DWP might actually do to achieve these objectives. This need was driven by their perception of how challenging employers felt these objectives would be to achieve. Consequently, they stated that it would be important to have some understanding of how they would be driven forward. It was thought that this might make DWP’s objectives seem more credible as employers would be able to determine how they are grounded in reality.

‘I agree with what they’re trying to achieve, but I’m not confident about how they’re going to go about it.’

(Manchester, medium business)

There was also some resentment from employers as to why DWP assumed that they would be part of the solution in realising these objectives. This was not because employers disagreed with the principles behind them per se, rather more that they did not perceive that there was anything they could do to drive these policies forward given their limited time, expertise and resources. Furthermore, many made the point that, ultimately, they were in business to make a profit and that this, sometimes, worked against Government policy. For example, they spoke of how they would only recruit the right person for any particular vacancy in their company; they were not concerned about whether their recruitment policies were in line with the latest thinking on equality of opportunities – they just wanted to employ the best people they could.

‘The main aim of running a business is to make a profit. Now this doesn’t always go along with Government aims.’

(Manchester, small business)

To help combat some of this, some employers made the comment that, as a major employer itself, DWP should demonstrate what it is doing internally to meet these objectives. If it is to secure the buy-in of other employers regarding these objectives it was believed that the Department needs to lead from the front and by example.

‘Why don’t they tell us what they do as an employer? DWP should nail their colours to the mast!’

(London, small business)

The rest of this chapter goes on to explore employers’ reactions to each of DWP’s key strategic objectives in more detail. However, these overall perceptions provide useful context when examining reactions to each of the objectives in turn.

### 5.2 Maximising employment opportunity for all

As mentioned in Section 4.1, while employers recognised the importance and value of employment, this did not necessarily mean that employers automatically agreed with this objective.
In the first instance, they spoke of how they, as employers, did not actively want to maximise employment opportunity **for all**. They stated that, within society, there will always be people with issues that they, as employers do not feel responsible for tackling. These ranged from motivating the previously long-term unemployed to take pride in their work right through to up-skilling an individual so that their skill set meets the needs of the modern economy. While employers recognised that, to an extent, they had a responsibility to help ensure this is the case, they felt strongly that the lead should come from Government on this issue given the cost and time implications.

‘As a business, profit comes first. We need employees who will get on with the job, not ones that need training.’

(London, large business)

The impact of globalisation on the market place was also cited as a reason as to why employers may find working towards this objective challenging. They stated that since the freer movement of labour, and particularly since the accession of the A8 countries\(^7\) to the EU, employers were no longer limited to searching within the UK for potential employees. Instead, they set their sights further and employed workers from other countries in the EU. The reasons given for this were not due to cost alone, although many employers mentioned that this was a driving factor. More significantly though, there was a perception that workers from the EU often possess more relevant skills in the UK and, crucially, it was felt that they want to work. Therefore, there was a strong sense among employers that, until they perceived that those out of work in the UK more actively wanted to find employment, they would be unwilling and unable to help DWP work towards this objective.

‘The reason my company goes to Poland and Hungary is because English people don’t want to do the work. We get people who are grateful for having a job.’

(London, medium business)

This perception linked in with employers’ more general views on the nature of aspiration within the UK. Many spoke of how they felt that the ambitions of some young people have changed over the years and this, in part, was thought to be a result of the increase in ‘celebrity’ culture\(^8\) with less importance being attached to having skills and more being given to the amount of personal wealth, and the trappings that come with it, that one can acquire. They felt that these issues were wider societal ones and that, actually, there was very little that employers could

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\(^7\) The A8 countries acceded to the EU in 2004. These countries included Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

\(^8\) In 2006, sales of celebrity magazines hit the £1bn mark for the first time. Data taken from The Guardian *Spend, spend, spend: Britons lap up the high life*, 16.05.2007.
do to help resolve them; they can make sure there are jobs to be had, but cannot make people want to undertake them.

‘DWP should help people realise that flipping burgers is something that our grandparents would’ve called an opportunity. Young people see flash clothes and mobile phones and want that straight away.’

(London, medium business)

Furthermore, and related to the question as to whether this objective is out of the reach of employers, some made the point that while they would be willing to work towards this, the socio-economic conditions in their area prevented them from doing so. This point was made most forcibly by those working in traditional industry in some of the more economically depressed areas of the country. They stated how there were simply not the jobs available in their locality and, therefore, could not work towards this objective as their ability to do so was limited by the market conditions in their region.

‘The lack of opportunity is one of the biggest problems we have in the West of Scotland.’

(London, medium business)

Consequently, many businesses believed that, if DWP wanted to work towards this objective, then the onus should be on the Department to make it happen. They believed that, as employers, their responsibility was to provide the opportunities for people. However, they were firmly of the opinion that DWP should ensure that people are ready for work and are advised on what employment paths are right for them given their skills and experience.

‘DWP’s responsibility is to create an environment where this happens. As an employer, I just want to look after the business.’

(London, large business)

This question of skills was particularly salient to employers. Many, particularly those employers from the more traditional industrial and manufacturing sectors, spoke of the decline in apprenticeships and vocational training. They felt that, as a result of this, many people do not possess the skills they need to succeed in the modern economy. Indeed, this was an issue that employers felt would be increasingly important. They recognised that, with the onset of globalisation, the nature of employment is changing and there is less of a demand for low skilled labour. Consequently, they believed there is a real need for DWP to ascertain precisely what skills are needed, where there are gaps, and to target these effectively.

‘There isn’t enough of a focus on skills. The job market is changing – jobs today require more skills than the old manual ones.’

(Manchester, large business)

It was thought that DWP could do this by working in conjunction with other public sector agencies such as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Some employers
were aware of the LSC’s new initiative, Train to Gain, which aims to increase the proportion of people achieving at least Level Two qualifications. However, there was a strong sense among those aware of this that DWP is not working as closely as it should with the LSC. Evidence for this was cited in the perceived lack of knowledge of Jobcentre Plus staff about Train to Gain. It was thought that if DWP were to work more collaboratively with the LSC here, then it could more effectively determine what skills are necessary in the modern economy and ensure that as many people as possible are appropriately trained.

‘Go into a Jobcentre and ask their staff about ‘Train to Gain’ and they, generally, don’t know what you’re talking about.’

(Manchester, medium business)

This is not to say though that employers did not believe they had a part to play in helping DWP work towards this objective. In relation to skills, many employers were willing, to an extent, to help train people to ensure they are able to undertake the duties required of them. This was, however, more of an issue for the smaller businesses who did not necessarily believe that they had the resources or time to do this effectively.

Industry sector and size also had an impact on employers’ perceived ability to help work towards this objective. Employers recognised that one way to maximise employment opportunity for all would be to offer flexible ways of working such as job-sharing, more part-time positions, flexitime and the ability to work from home. It was thought that by doing this, it would be possible to encourage those with other commitments, such as parents, to come back to the workplace as they would be able to fit their working hours around childcare. However, those working within the service industries stated how flexible working was more difficult for them; for example, retail units needed to be open between set hours and, therefore, there was a limit as to how flexible their employees can be with regard to their hours. Similarly, small businesses felt that they simply did not have the resources to allow their employees to work flexibly and needed all staff to be available at all times.

‘I want things to be flexible for people with children. But it is easier for people working in certain fields – not all employers have that flexibility.’

(London, Small business)

This split in opinion was highlighted in the electronic voting sessions. As shown in Figure 5.1, over a third of employers agreed that flexible working policies can damage business interests compared with over two in five that disagreed (36 per cent versus 44 per cent).
Finally, some employers also thought that if DWP was serious about this objective, then it needed to systematically reform the workings of the welfare state. There was a strong sense that the provision of benefits does little to encourage people to work. While a few recognised that the payment of in-work benefits such as Working Tax Credit (WTC) has helped this situation to a certain extent, there still remained a perception that some people were, financially, better off out of work than in. Employers cited the rising numbers of people claiming Incapacity Benefit (IB) as evidence here and felt that this was due to the fact that it is paid at a higher rate than Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA). To rectify this, some employers suggested that DWP could make unemployment ‘less attractive’ by cutting the rates of both IB and JSA and, furthermore, impose stricter time limits on the period throughout which they can be paid. It was thought that this, more than anything, would help encourage people back into work as they would have no other choice but to do so.

‘Benefits do not encourage people to work. You can work all day and get the same amount as being on benefits.’

(London, small business)
5.3 Promoting independence and wellbeing in later life

Many employers were well aware of the demographic challenges facing the UK. They spoke of an ageing population and that this will mean that they, as employers, will have to make significant changes to how they operate their business going forward.

Many mentioned that, as the workforce increases in age, employers will need to be flexible in what kind of opportunities they can offer. They stated that older people may, physically, not be able to work a full five day week and therefore businesses will need to make sure that their needs are accommodated. Furthermore, employers saw this as a long-term issue they will need to be mindful of. They were aware that the retirement age for women is set to rise and, furthermore, thought that it would continue to do so – for both men and women – in the future.

‘Employers are going to have to be flexible. The elderly are going to want or need to work maybe two or three day weeks and we, as employers, will have to accommodate this.’

(London, medium business)

Some employers also recognised the benefits that an older workforce could bring. They spoke of how these employers were likely to be highly skilled and experienced due to their many years in employment and that, as a result, such individuals could be effective mentors for younger generations to learn from. However, employers also believed that there would be a number of problems with having an older workforce and were keen to develop solutions to mitigate against these. They recognised that they had a duty of care to their workforce and, therefore, needed to ensure that they have strategies in place to ensure these obligations are met. To help here, many employers suggested the business networks could be utilised more effectively to facilitate the sharing of best practice and case studies from which employers could learn.

‘I’m not aware of any support or guidance for employers. It would be useful to know examples of best practice so we could help them achieve this.’

(Manchester, medium business)

While an ageing workforce was seen as inevitable, many employers did express concerns about this. In the first instance, employers were of the opinion that older workers would be more prone to ill health and that, as a result, may take more time off work on sick leave. In turn, it was thought that this could impact on the capacity of the business to undertake the work that they are meant to do. Furthermore, it would cause disruption as temporary workers would need to be brought in to make up the shortfall in labour.

‘There will be increased sickness levels as a result of working later in life.’

(Manchester, medium business)
Employers also mentioned that while, in principle, an older workforce was something to be welcomed this would only, in practice, be possible in a certain number of industries. Those that worked in more traditional industry or manufacturing mentioned that the physical work involved meant that their opportunities were only really suitable for younger people who could cope with tough, manual labour.

‘If they can get to work, then they can still have a job. Unless it’s a physical one.’

(Manchester, small business)

Linked in with this, some businesses were worried about the associated employer liabilities of employing an older workforce – especially where the work involved was physical. They were concerned about elderly employees being injured, or worse, on site and that they would be held responsible – even if their injury was a result of nothing more than old age. Therefore, these employers were keen to know what safeguards were in place to protect them in these circumstances.

‘It depends on the profession. I couldn’t have someone croak it on the job.’

(Manchester, small business)

Furthermore, to mitigate against these risks, many employers suggested that DWP could work to re-skill older workers who, previously, have been employed in more traditional industry. It was thought that by doing this, people would be able to remain in the workforce for longer but, importantly, that they would be able to undertake a role which was more suitable given their age.

‘There should be further education so we can allow for a second career for people who have previously been in a trade.’

(London, large business)

However, for many employers, when thinking about how to promote wellbeing and independence later in life, the debate centred on the provision of employee pensions. Most recognised that they have a responsibility to provide a pension scheme for their employees and many too agreed that this scheme should include an employer contribution. Beyond this though, opinion was divided as to what the precise role of the employers should be regarding encouraging their employees to save for their retirement.

Some thought that they have a responsibility to safeguard the wellbeing of their employees – not only while they are in work, but also once they leave to retire. It was believed that this was not only the responsible course of action to take but, furthermore, was a way of motivating employees and encouraging them to think that their employer has their best interests at heart.

In addition, some employers also recognised that there is much mistrust on the part of the public regarding information about pensions. It was believed that past financial problems, such as Equitable Life, the mis-selling of endowments and
the Mirror group pension funds, had all impacted on popular perceptions of the
stability of pension funds. Furthermore, this research took place at a time when
the UK Stock Exchange was falling and the Northern Rock crisis was dominating
the media. Therefore, the stability and security of investments was something that
was very much top of mind. To counter this though, employers felt that they were
comparatively seen as trusted and authoritative and that their communications on
pensions may be taken more seriously than those from Government.

‘People may be more likely to take a message on board if it comes from an
employer.’

(London, large business)

Linked in with this, there was also some scepticism on the part of employers as
to the long-term future of the state pension. Some were unsure as to whether it
would exist at all while others believed that the rate payable would be so low that
it would mean that people would not be able to get by, financially, without some
other form of income in retirement. Consequently, some employers believed that
employer pensions would assume a new level of importance in the coming years
and that, because of this, they had a duty to communicate the details of what they
perceived may be peoples’ main source of funds for retirement in the future.

‘At the least, the employer should be telling their staff – especially now
when there is the possibility that people won’t even have a state pension
when they are older.’

(London, medium business)

Many employers though did not think that the responsibility of ensuring that
their employees were financially independent in retirement was theirs alone.
Government, and DWP in particular, was believed to have a role in educating
and informing people about their options for provision in retirement. It was
thought that the issue around people saving for their retirement is so great and
so embedded in society that any communications around this subject needs the
weight of Government behind them in order to make a real impact.

‘It’s up to the Government to educate people and encourage workers to
save earlier.’

(London, large business)

Indeed, some employers felt rather hopeless about trying to tackle this issue. They
highlighted past initiatives, such as the introduction of Stakeholder pensions,
which were designed to encourage people to save for their future and how these
had, to date, failed to bring about the behavioural change that is needed. This
made some employers think that if Government is not able to bring about change
then they, as employers, would not be able to do so either. This was particularly
the case among the smaller employers who felt that they lacked the resources
necessary to devote to informing and educating their workforce about making
provision for the future.
'The Government can’t make pensions work – what chance have I got?’
(Manchester, small business)

Furthermore, some employers made the point that until there are systematic reforms made to current pension policy, then this issue will remain prevalent in society. To illustrate this point, some employers made mention of how pensioners are required by her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to submit a P161 form on retirement. It was thought that this undermines the principle of saving and that more people may be encouraged to make provision for their retirement if they felt that they would not be taxed on it.

‘You shouldn’t tax pensioners. You spend your whole life working and then you’re betrayed by Government as they take your money away.’
(London, small business)

Ultimately though, many employers believed that beyond providing a pension scheme which employees could join, they had few other responsibilities towards their employees regarding their independence and wellbeing in later life. Employers believed that their duty of care towards their employees was only relevant within working hours. Beyond this, they felt strongly that their employees’ lives were their own and should be lived how they wanted them to be.

‘An employer’s responsibility is to provide a vehicle into which people can contribute. Nothing more, nothing less.’
(London, large business)

Furthermore, this polarisation of opinion regarding the employers’ role in terms of the wellbeing of employees in retirement was highlighted clearly in the electronic voting. Half of employees agreed that it is not their responsibility to ensure that their employees are prepared for retirement compared with three in ten that disagreed (50 per cent versus 31 per cent). This is highlighted in Figure 5.2. However, the proportion of employees agreeing with this increased as the discussions continued; initially, only four in ten employees agreed that this was not their responsibility.
Indeed, this notion of individual responsibility echoes the findings from recent deliberative work we have undertaken for the Department with the general public. This found that, while participants felt that employers do have some responsibility there was an overwhelming sense that, ultimately, it was down to the individual to ensure that they could get by, financially, in retirement. To illustrate, around three quarters (73 per cent) of participants for this research believed that ‘everyone should take responsibility for making provision for their retirement’.⁹

‘What my employees do out of work is none of my business.’

(Manchester, medium business)

5.4 Keeping workplaces healthy and safe

Many employers had direct experience of working with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and so saw the importance of working towards this objective. They spoke of how they had been subject to inspections by the HSE and that these could be quite an intimidating experience for employers. Furthermore, there was a perception that the HSE could be inflexible in how it dealt with minor infringements

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of the legislation and that its punishments were sometimes disproportionate to the offence committed. Consequently, many felt that they adhered to the health and safety legislation more out of fear and concern about the consequences they might face rather than out of any real understanding as to why such rules and regulations were important.

‘It instils fear if they arrive at your workplace. The inspections can be quite bureaucratic and the customer service needs to improve and on minor infringements, they can come down on you really hard.’

(Manchester, medium business)

However, some employers spoke freely of the need to ensure that their workplaces were kept healthy and safe. In the first instance, they realised that they had a duty of care towards their employees and, during working hours, it was their responsibility to ensure that those they employed were, as far as possible, kept out of danger. Furthermore, employers also recognised that they needed to work towards this objective out of self-interest as well. There was a perception that employment law can favour the employee rather than the employer and, therefore, businesses need to do all they can to mitigate any risks against them.

‘We need to reduce the risk of employees taking up cases against the company. We’ve got to take an active interest in getting this right to minimise the risks.’

(Manchester, medium business)

Furthermore, preventing accidents at work was not only carried out in the interests of reputation but also was seen to bring significant cost and operational benefits to employers as well. Some employers, particularly those working in manufacturing or the more traditional industries, mentioned how replacing those who have had to take time off as a result of a work-related illness can be very costly and, additionally, it is hard to find temporary staff with the same level of expertise as those they are covering for.

It’s more than just a responsibility – the cost of people being off with stress or off sick is just huge to businesses.

(Manchester, medium business)

There was much confusion among employers around their responsibilities regarding Statutory Sick Pay (SSP). Employers in small and medium sized companies were most affected by this due to their perceived lack of resources. Consequently, many thought that it would be useful to receive guidance from DWP regarding how to deal with long-term absences from work and ways in which they might absorb the costs of this, such as, employing someone on a temporary contract as short-term cover.

However, the wider definition of the term ‘healthy’ caused much discussion among employers. Many thought that this went beyond simply ensuring that workplaces were kept safe and, instead, strayed into the territory of encouraging employees
to live their lives in a certain way; such as eating healthily and taking exercise. As discussed in Section 5.4, some employers were opposed to this perceived interference in their employees’ private lives and felt it went beyond the scope of their responsibilities as employers.

Furthermore, many employers felt that in order to work towards this objective, what was needed was clear help and advice. They stated that, currently, all they receive is the legislation around health and safety in the workplace but that this only tells them what the rules are – not what it means for them as employers. Consequently, it was thought that it would be helpful if DWP, or the HSE, could provide information around the legislation then this would help employers to understand why this issue is important and what they might do to work towards it. It was thought that this information could come in the form of case studies and examples of best practice so employers could learn from the experiences of others.

‘What we need is clear and unambiguous guidance and good advice opposed to just the law.’

(Manchester, medium business)

This was an issue that was particularly raised by small businesses. They felt that the legislation, as it stands, is not ‘user friendly’ and is written using complicated legal terms which makes it hard for them to understand and then apply. Furthermore, small businesses stated that they lacked the resources to digest this information and also that they found it hard to keep up to date with the pace of change regarding the requirements on employers. Indeed, this is something that came out strongly in our recent research for the Cabinet Office which found that for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), it is not the legislation per se that is a problem, more the regularity with which it changes and how it is communicated to them.10

‘They need to explain what health and safety legislation means and make it relevant for employers.’

(London, small business)

Finally, there were some employers who felt that health and safety requirements worked against the interests of business. They stated that with every profit making exercise there was an element of risk and this was something that should be accepted, rather than legislated against. Furthermore, they also felt that adhering to these rules and regulations took their attention away from what they were primarily meant to be doing; that of running a successful and profitable business.

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5.5 Promoting equality of opportunity for all

Employers often found it hard to differentiate this objective from that of maximizing employment opportunity for all as discussed in Section 5.2. For many, the two objectives were intrinsically linked and they could not understand how one could be achieved without the other. However, when exploring this objective in more detail, employers tended to concentrate on anti-discrimination legislation in place, rather than looking at issues around training and how they might encourage people to work.

Employers did see the need to keep an open mind about the skills and capabilities of different groups of people – particularly those with a long-term illness or disability. There was a sense that by failing to employ these groups, employers could miss out on tapping into a potentially skilled pool of people that would benefit their business with their expertise. Furthermore, many employers also spoke of the social and psychological benefits of work and thought that by employing such groups, they would be performing a positive service to the community and may act as an inspiration to others to follow their lead.

‘There are latent skills in the workforce that are not being realised and need to be unleashed.’

(London, small business)

Furthermore, some employers saw real business benefits in working towards this objective. There was a sense, especially among the larger employers, that being seen as an equal opportunities employer could enhance their brand and reputation. Consequently, they believed that if for no other reasons than self interest and economic advantage, this was something that they should strive to achieve.

‘For a large employer to be seen as an equal opportunities employer sends out a really positive message.’

(London, large business)

Opinions were, however, markedly different among the smaller employers. While they recognised that large businesses have a public profile and are under more scrutiny to adopt methods of best practice, there was also a sense that such employers also have the resources to enable them to work in this way. They stated that, in contrast, smaller businesses rarely figure in the public eye and that, moreover, they lacked the resources needed to drive this objective forward. To illustrate, they believed that if they, as small businesses were to employ, for example, those with disabilities then they would need external assistance and support to ensure their workplaces were suitably equipped and laid out and also that they had appropriate training in place to help these people to develop their skills so they are ready for work.
‘As a small employer, you just want to make ends meet. Large employers who have a public reputation need to show they are anti-discrimination so they aren’t protested against.’

(London, small business)

Indeed, this question of external assistance was one which was critical to small businesses. As has been a consistent theme throughout this research, they mentioned again that their priority is to make money and to run a successful business. There was a sense that if they could continue to do this while, at the same time, working towards DWP’s objectives, then they would be happy to do so. However, most were of the opinion that these objectives – and especially those that centred on their employees – could potentially damage or limit their business interests. Consequently, smaller businesses perceived that they were being asked or encouraged to undertake work which was outside of their remit and would be reluctant to do this until reassurance from Government that they would receive assistance for doing so.

‘This just makes it too socially conscientious for the employer. They are there to employ people. That’s it.’

(Manchester, large business)

5.6 Reducing child poverty

Of all the six objectives that were presented to employers, this was perceived to be of least relevance to employers. Few employers had any conception as to how they might be able to alleviate child poverty and the only suggestions that were made were with regard to flexible working to enable more parents to fit their working hours around their child care obligations. However, as mentioned in Section 5.3, those working in the service sector in particular felt that offering this way of working would have a negative impact on their business and, therefore, were reluctant to roll this out.

‘It’s a large burden to place on employers. How can this be our responsibility?’

(Manchester, small business)

Another suggestion made as to how employers might be able to help was to subsidise child care or provide crèches for their employees to use. However, it was thought that the burden of doing this would fall disproportionately on small businesses that may lack the resources to implement such a policy. Furthermore, some felt that a move such as this could, inadvertently, lead to discrimination with employers refusing to extend opportunities to those with, or planning to start, a family so as to ensure they would not need to provide such facilities.

‘Small businesses are not able to afford to cater for childcare requirements.’

(London, small business)
This sense of inability to tackle this issue was expressed in the electronic voting. As shown in Figure 5.3, around two in five employers agreed that they were unable to do anything to reduce child poverty compared to around a third that disagreed (41 per cent versus 34 per cent). Interestingly, the proportion of those agreeing that they were unable to do anything to reduce child poverty increased as a result of a discussion on the issues – prior to exploring the subject of child poverty in depth, just over a quarter (26 per cent) believed that they were unable to do anything to reduce child poverty.

Figure 5.3 Working to reduce child poverty

As an employer, I am unable to do anything to help reduce child poverty

- Strongly agree: 10%
- Tend to agree: 31%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 23%
- Tend to disagree: 18%
- Strongly disagree: 16%
- Don’t know: 2%

Base: All respondents.

Furthermore, it was not just that employers felt unable to help on this issue but that, moreover, they did not believe that it was their responsibility to do so. Many held the view that the responsibility for children lies with their parents who should ensure that they have sufficient means to fund their family. Employers believed that their responsibility extended to their employees alone and not to the wider members of their employees’ families.

‘Child poverty is nothing to do with us – where are the parents?’
(Manchester, medium business)

Many also went further still and actually questioned the extent to which child poverty actually currently exists in the UK. Employers tended to take a ‘world view’ on poverty and stated that, in comparison with some of the developing countries
in the world, the situation in the UK was not an issue. Indeed, this was something that we find in much of our research on poverty and in recent work for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation we found that many think that poverty does not exist in the UK and that there is ‘no excuse’ for it given the long-term economic stability within the country. Instead, they thought that poverty was ‘the result of bad choices and wrong priorities and was therefore not a subject for public help’.11

‘What do you mean by child poverty? What is the definition?’

(London, medium business)

Additionally, many questioned the definition of ‘poverty’ and debated about the different measures of poverty; they were aware of recent debates in the media about the level of poverty in the UK and Government’s progress towards meeting its targets on this measure and this, to an extent, increased their negativity on this issue.

While, as previously mentioned, parents were seen to be the driving force behind achieving this objective, employers also believed it was a key area of action for Government. However, there was much debate as to why DWP should be the Department to lead on this. Many thought that the issue leant itself to fitting more naturally with the work of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). It was thought that this Department would have the in-house skills and experience to drive this objective forward more successfully than DWP. Furthermore, some made the point that the issue of child poverty has assumed such a high media profile recently that it should be a responsibility that is shared by all Government departments rather than just the one.

‘This has to be an underlying priority for all Government departments.’

(London, small business)

In all, only a minority of employers felt that working towards this objective was firstly something that was within their remit to do and, secondly, something that was worth striving for. The rationale for this were that some employers believed that they were not just there to run a successful business but that, moreover, they had an important role to play in their local community in contributing to the economic and social wellbeing of those that worked for them and those that were associated with their business in some way. They felt that they should not view their businesses as isolated units but, instead, as a force for positive social change in the area where they were based.

‘Providing support on issues like this makes us feel like we are contributing to wider society.’

(Manchester, small business)

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11 Castell, S and Thompson J. (2007), Understanding attitudes to poverty in the UK: Getting the public’s attention.
5.7 Making DWP an exemplar of effective service delivery

As mentioned in Section 5.3 of this report, many employers were currently dissatisfied with the level of service that they received from DWP and from Jobcentre Plus in particular. However, many failed to understand why this objective was relevant to the other five that they had discussed previously. They saw the other five objectives as being based on the work of the Department yet perceived this one as being more internally focused. So, while employers welcomed any initiatives that might improve the services offered to them, they did not believe this objective to be an immediate priority. Ultimately, they felt that DWP has a responsibility to its customers and these were perceived, in the main, to be those looking for work, those with a long-term illness or disability, single parents and pensions – but not employers. Therefore, many were keen that the Department works to achieve the objectives that will impact on its core customer base prior to tackling other, more internal, issues.

‘DWP has got a long way to go with this. But this is not an immediate priority – the other objectives should be in place first.’

(Manchester, medium business)

Furthermore, given some employers’ negative experiences of working with DWP in the past, there were concerns that the Department had, perhaps, set the bar too high by aiming to be an ‘exemplar’. They stated that the key issue with setting objectives is to ensure that they are achievable and many did not think that such a transformation of service delivery was possible for DWP given how employers perceived that it operates currently. Therefore, many were sceptical about whether DWP would actually be able to achieve this objective and this had an impact on how credible they saw DWP’s strategy as being.

‘An exemplar would be nice – but we would settle for an acceptable level of service.’

(London, small business)

That is not to say though that there was total agreement on this point. Some employers saw it as admirable that the Department was aiming to be the very best it could and believed that this should be the goal of any organisation. Furthermore, many saw effective service delivery as being the linchpin in ensuring DWP can successfully achieve the other objectives it proposes working towards. These employers felt that without the proper systems in place, actually meeting the needs of customers and employers would be impossible.

However, many believed that it would be challenging for the Department to achieve this. They were aware of a number of issues facing the Department, such as low morale and staff redundancies as a result of Government’s drive for efficiency. Therefore, they felt that the greatest barrier towards achieving this would be securing the buy-in of DWP’s own staff in the first instance. Only when this had
been done, and staff realised why working in this way is important, was it felt that DWP would be able to make inroads into achieving this objective.

‘My perception is that they are not particularly great as an employer; they are clearly on the brink of disputes. A report said that satisfaction at DWP was the lowest of all the Government departments.’

(Manchester, medium business)

5.8 The principle of working collaboratively

Just as employers saw that DWP itself can have a transformative effect on individuals, through deliberation, employers also realised that they themselves could act as catalysts for social change. Many spoke of the pride they felt when, as employers, they managed to train people to undertake a role which, previously, they would have been incapable of doing. Beyond this, they spoke of the more social benefits which they could bring to their employees such as increased levels of self-confidence.

In this sense, employers were not averse to working in conjunction with DWP. They could see that they were, essentially, working towards the same goal; that of increasing the skills of the population and contributing towards a successful and thriving economy.

Employer’s agreement with this sentiment was expressed in the electronic voting. As shown in Figure 5.4, around two-thirds of employers agreed that they had a role in helping DWP deliver on its priorities. Only one in ten disagreed with this (64 per cent versus 12 per cent).

Furthermore, employers believed that there could be advantages to fostering more of a partnership approach with DWP in the future. It was thought that the Department may be able to help employers train people with the skills they need and that this, in turn, would not only contribute to the development of society but, furthermore, would bring real business benefits to the employers. This perception is highlighted in Figure 5.5 which shows that around half of all employers agreed that there are more advantages than disadvantages to working more closely with DWP. Only one in ten employers disagreed with this (47 per cent versus ten per cent).
Figure 5.4  Working collaboratively

Employers have a role in helping DWP deliver on its priorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to agree</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Base: All respondents.

Figure 5.5  The benefits of working collaboratively

There are more advantages than disadvantages to working more closely with DWP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to agree</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Base: All respondents.
However, employers had strong views on what it was reasonable of DWP to expect them to do. While they were not averse to providing training to help increase the skills of their employees, they did want to secure a commitment from DWP to ensure that, generally, the standard of training across the country was improved. They saw it as the responsibility of DWP, and specifically Jobcentre Plus, to ensure that candidates sent to interview are motivated and ready – both physically and mentally – to work.

Beyond this, employers believed there was a clear demarcation between an individual’s professional and personal life. While they were happy, and believed they had a responsibility to take an active interest in the former, they felt they had less of a role over the latter. Consequently, when it came to broader societal issues, such as encouraging a healthier lifestyle, employers felt that asking for their help and involvement here went beyond their remit. Furthermore, they felt that these issues were so embedded in society as a whole that it would be beyond their power to influence change here. As a result, they believed that such objectives should be tackled, primarily, by Government.

This opinion is highlighted in Figure 5.6. Three quarters of employers agreed that it was unreasonable to expect employers to do the Government’s work and, by this, they meant addressing the issues which touched on people’s personal lives.

**Figure 5.6 The division of responsibilities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is unreasonable to expect employers to do the Government’s work</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tend to agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All respondents.
However, as this section of the report has shown, employers did recognise that fostering a closer working relationship with DWP could be beneficial to them. The next chapter of this report goes onto discuss ways in which this might be achieved and the barriers that prevent this from happening currently.
6 Building engagement

This chapter explores how the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and employers could improve relationships in the future. It examines how consultations and communications could be improved and concludes by examining employers’ suggestions of a more local presence for DWP and how the Department could work with other organisations.

Many employers were keen to foster a closer working relationship and mentioned a number of ways in which this could be achieved. However, employers felt that before this could be done, the Department needed to work at removing some of the barriers to engagement. Employers felt strongly that, in the past, the relationship between themselves and the Department had been hampered by the lack of understanding as to what its responsibilities are. Many employers also mentioned that a barrier to building a working relationship has been a lack of accessibility; for example difficulties getting through on the telephone.

There was a strong sense that DWP needed to build a better understanding of the issues facing, and pressures on, employers. It was thought that this could be achieved through appropriate consultations, where businesses could put their point across. Some employers were amenable to participating in such consultations, but were keen to be reassured by the Department that their views were being listened to, and acted on, where possible. However, smaller employers did not perceive that they would have the time to spare to attend such events and thought that the Department could build better links with industry and trade bodies which would represent their views.

Employers thought that DWP could make a number of improvements to how it communicates. Many believed that DWP’s website should be the linchpin in its communications strategy and that, ideally, employers could use this as a central point, once navigation on the site is improved. Some employers suggested there should be an e-mail facility whereby employers can submit questions. Linked in with this, many suggested that DWP could build a presence with employers by attending events and conferences hosted by industry organisations.
Employers often thought that DWP could build a greater local presence; by doing this employers would not only have a sense of what DWP could offer them but, furthermore, could relate to it more effectively. Furthermore, employers stated that the issues facing the different regions of the country were markedly different and that DWP should tailor its approach according to the area it is in.

Above all, employers were keen that in building a better relationship, DWP kept in mind the pressures they were under.

Regardless of whether employers believed the DWP objectives were the necessary foundations for building a successful collaborative relationship between employers and the Department, many were keen to foster a closer working relationship going forward. Furthermore, they considered that if DWP wished to work towards these priorities then this would be essential. This sentiment was highlighted in the electronic voting sessions. When employers were asked whether they believed that the relationship between DWP and employers needs to be strengthened in order to realise its priorities, just under nine in ten businesses agreed (88 per cent). This is highlighted in Figure 6.1.

**Figure 6.1 Strengthening relationships**

*The relationship between DWP and employers needs to be strengthened in order to realise these priorities*

- Strongly agree: 49%
- Tend to agree: 39%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 9%
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree: 3%
- Don’t know: 1%

Base: All respondents.
Employers believed that through a closer working relationship, they would be able to gain a better sense of what DWP’s priorities are and how they might be able to develop a realistic role in working towards this. Furthermore, there were hopes that a closer working relationship would allow for more useful two-way communications and, therefore, would open up opportunities for employers to influence the focus and implementation of DWP’s objectives.

Employees mentioned a number of ways in which this closer working relationship could be achieved including formal consultations, the utilisation of employer groups such as Business Link and the harnessing of technology. However, there was a strong sense from employers that before this could be done, the Department would need to work at removing some of the barriers which, traditionally, have prevented this joined-up working. These issues are explored, in detail, throughout the remainder of this section.

6.1 Barriers to engagement

Employers recognised that they themselves were part of the reason as to why they did not have a relationship with DWP that was as productive as they would perhaps like it to be. The main barrier they cited in relation was the lack of time and resources that they had at their disposal. This was something that was common to all employers but was felt particularly strongly by smaller businesses. They stated that, ultimately, their priority was to run a successful business and ensure that this took the vast majority of their time. Consequently, they did not feel able to spend the time they felt that they needed to keep up to date with the work of DWP.

‘We are just so busy – we don’t have the time. We just have to hope that things will look after themselves.’

(Manchester, small business)

However, there was a strong sense from employers that the driving force for fostering a better relationship needed to come from the Department itself. There was a perception that working towards these key strategic objectives would benefit DWP more than they would employers and, consequently, if the Department wanted to secure the help of employers then it needed to be proactive in securing their engagement from the outset. Employers seemed to be prepared to wait for visible signs of DWP working more closely with them before committing to any kind of long-term collaborative relationship. It was thought that evidence for this could come in the form of communications about why collaboration was important going forward.

‘Employers need to give a bit as well, but once we feel the effort is being made by DWP then we might be able to move towards some common ground.’

(Manchester, small business)
Beyond this, employers felt strongly that, in the past, the relationship between themselves and the Department had been hampered by the lack of understanding as to what its responsibilities are. As mentioned in Section 4.2 of this report, there was much confusion about the remit of DWP and how it compared to that of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC), the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Business and Regulatory Reform (BERR). Consequently, employers tended to conflate Government and ascribe failures to departments where it was not their responsibility. Therefore, there was a strong sense that, previously, a barrier to a constructive working relationship has been a lack of understanding as to what the precise role of DWP is in relation to other departments.

‘There’s just a complete lack of understanding as to what their framework is.’

(London, large business)

Finally, many employers mentioned that a barrier to building a working relationship has been accessibility. Some stated that their local Jobcentre Plus office was some distance away and, furthermore, was only open at limited times. Given the demands on employers’ time and resources it was, therefore, difficult for many of them to actually forge personal links with the Department. Similar issues applied to the phone lines. Employers felt that it was very difficult to speak with DWP staff on the phone given the long queues and, furthermore, the fact that, often, they did not know who to ring about a certain query. Therefore, there was a strong sense that the Department needed to work flexibly and be available for queries at all times of day. This was particularly salient for employers given that they had previously been discussing ways in which they could work flexibly themselves and, as such, many thought that DWP needed to lead by example on this.

‘They need to be open when I need them. Even banks work longer hours than they do now. DWP needs to bring in its own flexible hours and not just ask us to do it.’

(London, medium business)

Furthermore, it should be noted that there were some employers who actively did not want a relationship with DWP. This was because, for employers, the term ‘relationship’ implied a two-way transaction and while many were willing to receive information and updates from DWP, they did not want to do anything for the Department in return. This was not only because they perceived they lacked the time to foster a relationship, but also that doing this would work against the interests of business; that of being successful and making a profit.

‘As long as DWP is there when I need it to be, why would I want any other kind of relationship with them?’

(London, small business)

This, however, was only a minority viewpoint. The remainder of this section highlights ways in which the barriers which have been highlighted can be overcome and makes suggestions, based on employers’ views, as to how the relationship between DWP and business can be strengthened going forward.
6.2 Using consultations to build relationships

There was a strong sense among employers that in order to build relations, DWP needed to build a better understanding of the issues facing and pressures on employers. It was thought that this could be achieved through appropriate consultations, which would help forge better relations and, furthermore, would prevent businesses from ignoring issues which DWP would like them to tackle. Additionally, businesses believed they would be able to more forcibly put their point across to the Department via this channel of communication.

‘This could be beneficial. Face-to-face contact is always good.’

(London, small business)

Indeed, employers’ positive perceptions on the principle of consultations was evident in the electronic voting sessions when they were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that they would be happy to get involved in future consultations with DWP with over nine in ten (92 per cent) employers agreeing with this. This is highlighted in Figure 6.2.

**Figure 6.2 Involvement in future consultations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I would be happy to get involved in future consultations with DWP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All respondents.

However, while the principle of more consultation with employers was welcomed, there was concern as to how these would be run in practice. It was thought that any face-to-face consultation would need to be held according to strict guidelines.
In the first instance, employers believed it important that the DWP attendees at such events should be senior enough to be able to answer any questions that employees might have, but that they should also be in touch with issues on the ground that are affecting the areas where the employers are based. Secondly, many also believed that DWP should feedback to those attending. Employers were amenable to participating in consultations but were keen to be reassured by the Department that their views were being listened to and acted on where possible.

‘Unless you hear back, then I wouldn’t trust it. I wouldn’t feel as though my voice had been heard.’

(London, medium business)

However, there were those that thought that such a manner of building relationships was inappropriate. These comments tended to come from the smaller employers who did not perceive that they would have the time to spare to attend such events and, consequently, would get cut-off from news about DWP. Indeed, many small businesses made the point that it had been challenging for them to arrange for them to attend the deliberative workshops held as part of this research and could not see how they would have the resources to commit to other, similar, events in the future.

Consequently, some employers suggested online consultations as being an effective means of ensuring that employers can have their voice heard while, at the same time, being less of a burden on their time. It was thought that, in particular, this approach might be particularly beneficial for those in certain industry sectors, such as service or clerical, where employers are office-based and used to working with technology. Furthermore, others believed that it would be an appropriate means of encouraging younger employers, who were perceived to possess greater technological skills, to engage with the work of DWP.

However, even those small employers who expressed reservations about the time demands that a face-to-face consultation would impose were unsure as to whether the online route provided an adequate solution. Their main criticism of this was that the Internet is a more impersonal channel of communication and, consequently, it would be harder to build up the same kind of rapport with representatives from the Department. This was seen to be crucial. It was believed that one of the key issues hampering the relationship between business and DWP in the past has been a lack of understanding, on both sides, as to the pressures and challenges each party faces. It was thought that this could only be resolved by coming together and confronting the issues, face-to-face. However, they were keen that, were they to invest their time in doing this, any consultations be targeted, relevant to their needs and, most importantly, that the findings from these were acted on.

‘This would not be as a good as a face-to-face consultation. Everyone will have different issues and questions which can’t really be answered on the Internet.’

(London, small business)
6.3 Communicating with employers

Generally, it was thought that DWP could make a number of improvements to how it communicates with employers. One major point that was picked up by all businesses was that of the language used by DWP in its communications. Many felt that this was overly complex and did little to explain the issues clearly to employers. This, in turn, left them confused and, as a consequence, they often had to rely on third parties to help them interpret the information they had received. This was particularly the case for smaller employers where, often, the person in charge was responsible for a number of different functions within the business, for example, personnel, finance and managerial. However, they did not feel as though they had the available time to understand all of these areas of their work in depth and, therefore, it was particularly important to them that DWP communicates using simple language which is easy to understand.

‘On the language they just need to keep it simple. They need to understand that we are not all HR professionals.’

(London, small business)

Furthermore, some employers mentioned that they receive printed communications on a number of different issues from a wide variety of organisations. Consequently, many felt overwhelmed with information being provided in this way and felt that there was a risk that using this channel might lead to the information sent by DWP being ignored.

‘I get such a lot of newsletters – it is hard to keep up.’

(London, small business)

Additionally, other employers felt that this channel of communications was impersonal. They felt that the real benefit of a face-to-face approach is that it involves a two-way dialogue; employers can hear the views of DWP, but also put their own case forward for debate. However, printed communications were felt to be more one-way only, with DWP informing employers of its proposed plans with little chance for them to input to them and have their say. Therefore, in the interests of building a relationship, many employers felt that printed communications should only be used to reinforce messages that had already been delivered via another medium.

‘Newsletters and leaflets are just so impersonal. It would only be appropriate if there had been an initial consultation.’

(London, small business)

There were some employers, however, who wondered whether DWP could do more to harness technology in communicating with employers. Many believed that DWP’s website should be the linchpin in its communications strategy and that, ideally, employers could use this as a central point for all their queries relating to the work of the Department. The benefits of this were seen to be its convenience;
employers could access the information at a time and in a location that suited them. Beyond this, some believed that communicating via the internet would result in cost savings for DWP as well as bringing about environmental benefits.

‘Using the Internet is just so much more efficient than sending out stacks and stacks of leaflets.’

(London, large business)

However, for this to be the case, many employers felt that much development work was needed. In the main, employers wanted reassurance that the information included on the website is accurate and up-to-date. They also suggested that navigation could be improved so they could easily find their way around the site. Linked in with this, given their confusion as to the precise responsibilities of DWP, they also suggested that the website contain links to other relevant organisations and Government departments so they can easily find the information they are looking for.

Some employers suggested there should be an e-mail facility whereby employers can submit questions and receive an instant reply telling them when they can expect their query to be dealt with. Additionally, some thought that the website could host an interactive bulletin board for employers where they can come together, online, and discuss relevant issues and share examples of best practice with moderators from the Department.

‘There should be a discussion board where we can pose questions to each other and get responses from other employers and from DWP.’

(London, large business)

6.4 Building a local presence

Two of the key issues employers raised regarding working with DWP were that, firstly, they did not fully understand what the Department is responsible for. Secondly, because it was seen to be such a large organisation, many felt that it was too impersonal and they did not know how to approach it.

Consequently, many wished for DWP to build a greater local presence and it was thought that by doing this employers would not only have a sense of what DWP could offer them but, furthermore, could relate to it more effectively. It was suggested that this could be achieved using face-to-face communications. Employers wanted DWP to be proactive and to go out into their local areas and inform businesses about what they could do and how they wished to work in partnership with them.

‘They have to get out of their offices and into the local community and make us aware of what they can provide.’

(Manchester, medium business)
The idea of building a local, rather than a national identity was also important to employers. As employers had been drawn from right across Great Britain for these workshops, they often realised that the issues facing the different regions of the country were markedly different. Some, from more urban centres, spoke of an increased pressure on jobs as a result of the arrival of new communities, while those from areas which, typically, have focused on traditional industry, mentioned how the skills sets of the people in their area no longer meet the needs of the increasingly service-based economy. Consequently, there was a perception that DWP should tailor its approach according to the area it is in and offer different services depending on the precise needs of that locality. However, it was believed that this could only be achieved by building up effective relations on an area by area basis.

‘It needs to be more localised – if they want to understand us they need to get out into the local areas.’

(London, small business)

6.5 Working with other organisations

Smaller businesses felt at times as though they were cut off from the workings of central Government. This was because of their perceived lack of resources; they simply did not feel they had the spare time or manpower to keep up to date with developments, attend conferences and contribute to consultations. Many small businesses were also dissatisfied with this; they did not see why they should be left out of the loop by virtue of their business size.

‘Small businesses are the ones that have been ignored and lost in the system.’

(Manchester, small business)

As a means of ensuring that their views were heard by DWP, many suggested that the Department worked to build better links with industry and trade bodies. These included the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), which were both trusted by employers. Many were of the opinion that these organisations understood the needs of and pressures faced by businesses; employers stated they have a good relationship with them and they have plenty of opportunities for their views to be heard. Consequently, they believed that both the FSB and the CBI would present their opinions fairly to DWP and, furthermore, would ensure that the interests of employers was kept in mind when developing new policies.

‘Links with the CBI would benefit DWP. CBI is employer-facing – they understand us.’

(Manchester, medium business)

Linked in with this, many suggested that DWP could build a presence with employers by attending events and conferences hosted by industry organisations.
For example, many of those working within Human Resources (HR) and personnel mentioned how they regularly attended events hosted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). These events were thought to be very useful as they enabled employers to keep up-to-date with developments, share examples of best practice, and also allowed them to come together informally with members of their peer group. It was thought that if DWP and CIPD were to host events together then it would build employers’ awareness of DWP and, furthermore, would add a more personal element to the Department.

‘DWP should piggy-back onto CIPD’s conferences. These agencies should be working hand-in-hand.’

(London, large business)

Building better relations with the Department was important for many employers. They believed that this would have a number of positive impacts; they would not only have a better understanding of the work of DWP but, furthermore, would be able to work more effectively with it in achieving their shared goals such as increasing employment opportunity and improving the skills of the workforce.

However, employers were keen that in building a better relationship, DWP kept in mind the pressures they were under. Consequently, going forward, they wished to see a more tailored approach to communications which not only took into account the needs of their local area but, furthermore, the extent to which they are able to get actively involved. The next section of this report discusses, in light of these findings, some considerations for DWP going forward.
This final chapter considers the main messages from this research for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the possible issues it might need to consider going forward.

This report presents mixed messages for the Department. On the one hand, employers broadly agreed with the objectives DWP is working towards and feel its aims are worthwhile. Additionally, they are happy to work more closely with DWP in the future. They recognised that they are both working to up-skill people in society in the interests of a successful economy and, therefore, could see the sense of joining up on these issues.

However, there were also some issues raised which DWP may need to overcome if it is to build a successful working relationship with employers. Many employers could not immediately see how some of DWP's aims were relevant to them and, therefore, future communications may need to emphasise the benefits to employers in working towards them.

There was also an appetite for learning more about what DWP itself is going to do to work towards these objectives. Some felt as though they were being expected to carry the burden of realising these aims on their own and this acted as a barrier to engagement; they felt as though they had other, more pressing, demands on their time and could not be responsible for taking on these issues as well. Therefore, communicating the steps that DWP will take may also be important.

Improving channels of communication may also be a step which needs to be taken in order to foster better working relations. Many expressed a preference for electronic communications. While employers felt that this more remote channel of communication was less effective at helping build relationships with the Department, the Internet was praised as being a convenient and accessible communications channel which has the benefit of being easily kept up-to-date.
It may also be worthwhile considering how to encourage the sense among employers that their views are being listened to and, where appropriate, acted on by the Department. Developing an interactive website was one suggestion made by employers while others urged DWP to build closer links with industry bodies who they trusted to speak for them and represent their views fairly.

In one sense, this report represents a positive message for the DWP. Broadly, employers agreed with the strategic objectives the Department is working towards and, additionally, believed its aims are laudable. Furthermore, there was evidence of some sympathy towards DWP. Employers were of the opinion that the work it does is very important, but of late, the issues of unemployment and skills have fallen down the political agenda at the expense of others. Consequently, many felt that the work of the Department does not receive the attention it should and, moreover, that it may lack the funds it needs to make real progress.

It should also be noted that, in principle, employers were receptive to working more closely with DWP in the future. They recognised that, ultimately, they have the same goals as the Department; that of building skills and contributing to a successful and thriving economy. Consequently, they could see the sense in working together to help do this.

However, this report also presents some challenges for DWP to overcome if it is to actually realise its aim of working more collaboratively with employers going forward. In the first instance, many employers did not see how either DWP’s objectives were relevant to them and nor how they could help work towards them. This was particularly true on broader societal issues, such as reducing child poverty. Employers were often not able to see how this might impact on them and, furthermore, felt that this issue was too large for them to tackle. Consequently, there was a sense that issues such as these were not a responsibility for employers.

This, in turn, created barriers. Employers felt that they were being asked to undertake the Government’s work on its behalf and did not perceive that they would benefit from doing this. Therefore, the implications of realising DWP’s objectives need to be communicated to employers in a way that they can relate to and see the advantages of easily. To illustrate, taking the issue of child poverty, employers only began to see the merit in working towards this objective when they considered that those growing up in poverty may be likely to possess fewer skills and, therefore, this may have implications for recruitment and training in the future. For those working in urban centres, where it was perceived that poverty may be more prevalent, it was believed that this could negatively affect employers and, therefore, made them realise that they could have a stake in working towards this objective.
Beyond this, DWP could communicate clearly that it does not expect the burden for working towards these objectives to fall on employers alone. A common theme throughout this research was that the Department is not perceived to understand the pressures faced by employers. This issue was particularly raised by those working for smaller businesses where the owner was in charge of multiple functions; strategy, Human Resources (HR), finance, compliance with legislation and training to name but a few. They felt that they struggled to get by with limited resources and believed that DWP was asking them to do more work with little by way of return.

This perception is clearly outlined in Figure 7.1. While there are clear differences between the results in Manchester and London, the main message to take is that the majority of businesses do not believe that DWP understands the needs of businesses (53 per cent agree in London and 75 per cent in Manchester).

**Figure 7.1 Understanding the needs of business**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to agree</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All valid responses - London and Manchester.

Therefore, it may be worthwhile to demonstrate that working towards these objectives is very much a joint effort with DWP contributing its fair share to their realisation. Throughout this research, many employers were keen to know what DWP would do regarding these objectives and the measures it would put in place to achieve them. Furthermore, there was also a desire to know about how the
Department would be judged on its performance against them; whether targets would be set and the milestones the Department needs to work towards.

Of course, it is not just what is communicated but the channels which are used to do so which was of importance to employers. There is real scope for developing the Department’s website as a ‘one-stop shop’ for all employers’ information needs regarding the work of DWP. While some expressed a preference for face-to-face communications as it was thought that these were an ideal vehicle for building good relations, many did not feel that had the spare time needed to communicate with the Department in this way. Consequently, the Internet was seen as being a useful tool for communications; it can be accessed at a time and in a location which suits employers and, furthermore, many were confident that the information contained on the site could be kept up-to-date easily. Furthermore, they recognised the cost effectiveness of communicating with a mass audience in this way and this too was appreciated. Therefore, developing such channels of communication will be important in order to encourage employers to play their part in working towards these objectives.

Finally, the Department will need to overcome issues of mistrust in order to ensure employers buy-in to the objectives DWP has set. To illustrate, Figure 7.2 shows that while around two in five employers agreed that DWP would listen to the views expressed in the workshop, a third disagreed (43 per cent and 34 per cent respectively). Additionally, a further quarter were undecided (18 per cent stated they neither agreed nor disagreed while six per cent stated that they did not know).

Therefore, demonstrating that the views of employers are being listened to and, where appropriate, acted on will be important if the Department is to encourage employers to work more closely with it in the future. Furthermore, it is important that this starts immediately. Feeding back from this consultation exercise will be an important first step in working towards this; many were keen to know how their contribution would be used by the Department and communicating this will be essential if DWP is to try and work with employers in the long-term.

Beyond this though, there will be a need to ensure that employers are given the opportunity to have their views heard by the Department. This, however, does not have to be realised via face-to-face consultations. Many were receptive towards the idea of an interactive forum on DWP’s website where they could respond to any given issue and have their contribution commented on over e-mail. Furthermore, and for smaller businesses in particular, there was a willingness for their views to be represented by trade or sector bodies such as the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). Consequently, it may be worthwhile in building better links with these organisations as a means of accessing an employer perspective.
Therefore, if the Department is to work collaboratively with businesses in the future there may be a need for some strong foundations to be put in place in the immediate future. Demonstrating the benefit to employers of realising these objectives and highlighting the steps that DWP itself is taking will encourage employers to buy-in to them. Furthermore, it may be necessary to reconsider how such messages are communicated to employers. However, encouragingly, employers are receptive to a more collaborative working relationship with the Department in principle and this underlying attitude should stand DWP in good stead to build on this going forward.

**Figure 7.2  Listening to employers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am confident that DWP will listen to the views expressed in today’s workshops</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to agree</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All respondents.
Appendix A
Discussion guide

Improving engagement with employers
Deliberative event with employers
J31466 – FINAL DISCUSSION GUIDE

Aim
To contribute to the development of a DWP Employer Strategy by gaining an in-depth understanding of employers’ views about DWP and their motivations for interacting with us.

Core objectives
The research will establish:

• What matters to DWP, what matters to employers, and how the views can be aligned. We will explore what DWP currently does well with employers and employer networks and what the drivers for success are.

• Whether employers recognise the DWP brand and if this is important, or not.

• The best tools and levers to better engage with employers and to motivate them to contribute to DWP’s objectives and targets;

• Which of DWP’s policies matter (most) to which type of employers, and in view of this how DWP can best create a ‘win-win’ situation of engagement?

• What the DWP “offer” to employers should be – can it clearly define what its proposition is for different types of employers? Is the whole organisation clear about what it is putting forward to employers and what it should provide that meets employers’ needs and requirements? What (if anything) DWP should expect in return?
Outline of the event programme

• 2 x day long events from 10am-4pm during the week of the 17th September.

• The day will consist of a mix of plenary and small group discussion sessions.

• At each event, c.60 participants will be divided into 8 groups and each group will have a dedicated facilitator and note taker from Ipsos MORI.

• Aside from their contribution to small group discussions, there will be other ways for participants to give their views. They can write comments which can be put in a comments box, register their views through real time voting during plenary sessions, give views in a video diary room or by filling in a feedback form.

Below is an outline of the discussion sessions.
### Discussion sections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Timing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introductions &amp; spontaneous views on current engagement with DWP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Feedback on DWP’s priorities and resonance of these with employers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How DWP’s priorities impact on employers and their relationship with DWP &amp; how to get them more involved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How far would employers go to assist with non-compulsory priorities &amp; how DWP can facilitate this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival &amp; Registration</td>
<td>9.30-10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plenary session</td>
<td>10.00 – 10.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction by Chair and initial IML voting session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break out groups</td>
<td>10.30 – 11.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warm up session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Scene-setting:
- Thank participants for taking part
- Introduce Ipsos MORI moderator and note taker
- Role of Ipsos MORI – research organisation, gather all opinions: all opinions valid, disagreements OK
- Confidentiality: reassure all responses will not be traced back to individuals
- Explain that note taker will transcribe for quotes, no detailed attribution.
- Get participants to introduce themselves to each other: THEIR ROLE, COMPANY AND SECTOR

### Spontaneous views of working with DWP and what DWP stands for
- What’s your overall impression of DWP? Why do you say that?
  - What are the good and bad things about the way it works?

### Welcome
- Orientates participants, gets them prepared to take part in the discussion
- Outlines the ‘rules’ of the interview (including those we are required to tell them about under MRS and Data Protection Act guidelines)
- To identify ‘top of mind’ themes that are particularly important to stakeholders.

### Note to moderator:
- ‘Park’ specific issues if conversation gets stuck. Can return to them in groups at later stage

### Additional notes:
- 10 mins
What kind of things does DWP cover? What are its areas of work? What does DWP do – or aim to do? What is its role? Who does it mostly deal with?


What does DWP stand for? What are its aims or values? **PROBE IF NECESSARY:**

- EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL
- SUPPORT IN RETIREMENT/ PENSIONS
- DISABILITY/CARERS
- TACKLING CHILD POVERTY

What kind of reputation does the department have? What does the general public think of DWP do you think – or do you think they think of the department much at all? And how does that compare to how those in HR think of DWP? Why do you say that? How about compared to other government departments – what’s its reputation like as an organisation in general? And as someone to work with? How helpful is it as an organisation?

And how does DWP relate to businesses? What does it require of them? **PROBE ON THEIR ROLE AS SERVICE USERS, AGENTS AND INFLUencers**

What does it do for them or on behalf of them? Are there things that it does or requires of only some businesses? What does it cover that other government departments don’t?

How do you get in touch with DWP? What for? What channels do you use? How well do you feel these work?

**Note to moderator:**
Please use the A3 note pad on the table if you want to list positive and negative points.

This section will allow us to see what attitudes are ‘top of the mind’ in participants’ perceptions and their unprompted views of DWP.
What are your experiences of interacting with DWP? What could DWP do differently – or do better? How could they make it easier for you to work with them to achieve the necessary outcomes? PROBE THE FOLLOWING AREAS IF NECESSARY:

- PLACING ADVERTS IN JOBCENTRE PLUS
- OCCUPATIONAL PENSION REGULATION
- STATUTORY SICK PAY
- STATUTORY MATERNITY PAY
- CHILD MAINTAINENCE PAYMENTS
- VERIFYING BENEFIT CLAIMANT INFO
- CONFORMING TO AGE/DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION LEGISLATION

What do you think - do DWP make it easy for businesses to fulfil their statutory responsibilities? Why do you say that?

| Tea/coffee break | 11.10–11.30 |
What do you think about what you’ve just heard? PROBE FOR ANYTHING SURPRISING, UNEXPECTED, ANTICIPATED ETC.

1. Maximise employment opportunity for all

Is this a priority for employers? Why do you say this? How important is this? How does the importance you place on this compare with DWP’s views? Why do you say that?

What can employers do to help maximise employment opportunity for all? What else? PROBE FOR ISSUES BEYOND LEGAL REQUIREMENTS.

And which of these things do you already do? Why not the others?

What incentives are there for employers to advertise jobs through JobCentre Plus? What are the advantages/disadvantages?

How does the discrimination legislation (e.g. age, disability, gender, race) affect you as an employer? What are the advantages/disadvantages of discrimination legislation? What are the practical issues of implementing this policy? How has this impacted on the way they operate?

Have you heard of Local Employment Partnerships? IF NO – REITERATE BRIEFLY. Would you be willing to enter into such an agreement with Jobcentre Plus? Why/why not?

DWP pres will focus on our priorities with regards to employers; will also touch on more “routine” interactions; please aim to close off discussion re routine interactions quickly – our main interest is wider engagement issues

Note: we’re more interested in the alignment issue here than in generating discussion about whether DWP’s priorities are right/wrong

Note to moderator: Try to establish what impact DWP’s objectives have on small businesses and how, if at all, this differs from the impact on larger employers.
2. Promote independence and wellbeing in later life, continuing to tackle pensioner poverty and implementing pension reform

What can employers do to help promote independence and wellbeing in later life? What else? PROBE FOR ISSUES BEYOND LEGAL REQUIREMENTS.

And which of these things do you already do? Why is this?

Do employers have the responsibility to help their employees plan for their retirement? Why, why not? PROBE: POSITIVE/NEGATIVE IMPACT FOR EMPLOYERS

What are the implications of people working longer? Does the age of your employees matter? Why, why not?

3. Keep work places healthy and safe

Is this a priority for employers? Why do you say this? How important is it? How does the importance you place on this compare with DWP’s views? Why?

What can employers do to help keep work places healthy and safe? What else? PROBE FOR ISSUES BEYOND LEGAL REQUIREMENTS.

And which of these things do you already do? Why is this?

Should employers be concerned about providing SSP/SMP to their employees? Why, why not? PROBE: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MIRCO/SMALL AND LARGER EMPLOYERS

4. Promote equality of opportunity for all

Is this a priority for employers? Why do you say this? How important is it? How does the importance you place on this compare with DWP’s views? Why?

What can employers do to reduce experiences of discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, age, religion or belief, or sexual orientation? What else? PROBE FOR ISSUES BEYOND LEGAL REQUIREMENTS.

Note to moderator: DWP want to explore the wider agenda around health and wellbeing at work, rather than the more HSE-focused industrial accidents, ambient lighting etc. Focus on wider healthy workplace issues, i.e., the idea that a healthy workplace keeps people in work, is good for the individual employees and good for society.
And which of these things do you already do? Why is this?
What affect do the anti-discrimination laws have on your company? Positive/negative?

5. Reduce child poverty
This priority might not immediately seem to have implications/relevance for employers, but thinking about the employment of lone parents, for example, how do you see this priority?

What can employers do to help reduce child poverty? What else? And which of these things do you already do? Why is this?

How realistic is it to expect employers to operate a flexible working policy? PROBE: POSITIVE/NEGATIVE IMPACT FOR EMPLOYERS. EXPLORE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MICRO/SMALL AND LARGE EMPLOYERS

Should employers be involved in the child maintenance system? Why, why not? PROBE: PRACTICALITIES

6. Make DWP an exemplar of effective service delivery to individuals and employers
How do employers view this priority? Why do you say this? How important is it? How does the importance you place on this compare with DWP’s views? Why?

What more could DWP do to help employers? How might their services be improved? PROBE ON JCP, ADVICE TO EMPLOYERS, SYSTEMS EMPLOYERS USE

How might communications between DWP and employers be improved?
How else might employers want DWP to transform its services? Why is this? How might this work in practice? And what kind of impact do you think it would have?
**Plenary session**

Welcome back by the chair

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session</th>
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<tr>
<td>13:30 – 13:35</td>
<td>Plenary session</td>
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<tr>
<td>13:35 – 14:05</td>
<td>Break-out sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>13:35 – 14:05</td>
<td>How DWP’s priorities impact on employers and their relationship with DWP &amp; how to get them more involved</td>
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- Thinking about your role as an employer – what are the practical implications for you of DWP’s priorities that involve employers and of meeting legislative requirements? Gather spontaneous suggestions and thoughts.
- What impact do these priorities have on your internal practices? How does this affect your business? Probe on the following areas if necessary:
  - Age and disability discrimination legislation
  - Flexible working
  - Up-skilling workers
  - Occupational pensions and their regulation
  - Retirement age
  - Enabling employees to manage workplace health problems
- And were you to treat these as priorities, what do you think the impact would be on your employees? And what difference would this make?

**IML voting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Voting</th>
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<tr>
<td>14:05 – 14:20</td>
<td>IML voting</td>
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The aim of this section is to move towards understanding how employers have experienced the role/impact of policies and legislation in the “real world.”
**Break-out sessions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How far would employers go to assist with [non-compulsory] priorities &amp; how DWP can facilitate this</th>
<th>14:20 – 15:00</th>
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<tr>
<td>Case study based discussion around the “real world” impact of the DWP’s policies and legislation as discussed in the morning. Please probe on DWP responsibilities as much as on employers’ responsibilities. Moderators to introduce case studies, and prompt discussion using the ‘starter’ questions below. Discussion can be developed using issues raised by participants. 1. Sarah is a personnel manager for a high street bank. She’s heard that there have been some updates in the last year to anti-discrimination legislation with regard to age but she’s not sure what it means for her and her company. The company is looking to recruit additional members of staff and Sarah favours employing people straight out of university. <strong>Who should Sarah approach for advice about this?</strong> What issues/laws does she need to bear in mind? What would you do in her situation? Does the anti-discrimination act have any impact on the decision? If yes, in what way? 2. Marilyn runs a small business and really needs to employ someone to help her with basic administrative tasks. She is reluctant to use Jobcentre Plus as a means of finding staff – candidates from there failed to turn up to interviews a few years ago – so she relies on more expensive private recruitment consultants. <strong>What would encourage Marilyn to use Jobcentre Plus?</strong> How can this be achieved? What other services does JCP need to offer to make it more attractive to employers? How can it communicate its services to employers better?</td>
<td>This section establishes how far employers would be willing to go in helping DWP with the things that aren’t covered by legislation. Note to moderator: Try to avoid using language that explicitly differentiates routine interactions from wider engagement issues, i.e., “non-compulsory” priorities. Note to moderator: Some of these case studies touch on requirements that are covered by legislation. It is not always clear where the boundaries are (what is compulsory and what is not). For example, age discrimination legislation makes specific requirements of employers, but there are wider questions around engagement with efforts to promote employment of older workers etc.</td>
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3. Terrence owns a small company who design and fit kitchens. Peter, one of his team, is currently approaching retirement age, but he’s talking about wanting to stay on working. He says he enjoys the job and the people he works with and likes the structure (and income!) that comes with a job.

Terrence isn’t sure how sensible this is – after all there is a physical element to the job that an older man might find difficult to cope with. It might look better for business to have a younger person working for him. In addition, won’t it make it really complicated working out NI payments – and how does it affect Peter’s pension?

How should Terrence approach this? What are his rights? What are Peter’s rights? How can he present the case to Peter fairly? Is he able to point out the physical impact of the job and encourage him to retire? Or should he let Peter decide what he’s capable of? Should Terrence try to restructure the job to help Peter cope with it better? What are his options? Who can he discuss this with?

4. Lisa works in the HR department of a large company and has just learned that DWP are planning to introduce new regulations which will impact on the occupational pensions of all employees at her company.

What would you do in Lisa’s situation? What engagement should she have with DWP over this proposed change? What obligations does she have to her employees? What obligations do DWP have to help her make appropriate adjustments?
ONLY COVER IF THERE IS TIME.
5. William is the owner of a small accountancy firm that employs 3 people. One of his employees has been away from work with a stress-related illness for the last four days and has called William to inform him that his doctor has signed her off work for the next five weeks. She believes she is entitled to Statutory Sick Pay. However, William does not think she should be entitled to this – he runs a small business and cannot afford to pay SSP as well as employing a temp to cover her role.

What should William do now? What obligations does William have to his employee? What obligations does the employee have (if any) to her employer? What records does he need to keep? What would you do if you were in William’s situation? What help and support should he get, if any, from the Government?

General:

Thinking about the case studies we have just discussed, what areas do you think should remain DWP’s responsibility alone? And what should remain employers’ responsibilities alone?

Where are the areas where there should be closer working? Why do you say this?
### Working with employers in the future

- **MODERATOR TO EXPLAIN THAT IN THE PREVIOUS SECTIONS WE EXPLORED AREAS WHERE THERE IS OVERLAP [AND POTENTIALLY DISSONANCE] BETWEEN THE PRIORITIES OF DWP AND EMPLOYERS – WE NOW WISH TO MOVE ON AND DISCUSS HOW BEST TO LEVERAGE THESE IN THE FUTURE**

- What are the barriers that exist regarding employers and DWP working more closely in the future? Why do you say this? How might these be removed?

- On these areas of mutual interest how might the Department and employers work more closely together in the future: PROBE ON
  - Formal/internet consultations
  - Newsletters/publications
  - Through intermediary organisations e.g. CBI, FSB
  - Government-related employer groups/initiatives e.g. National Employment Panel, Local Employment Partnerships

- What would the advantages and disadvantages of each of these approaches be? Why do you say this?

- What difference would a closer working relationship make to you as employers? To your employees? And to DWP?

- What should the ideal relationship be between DWP and businesses?

- What other ways could DWP and employers work more closely together? How would this work in practice? And what would the result be?

**Note to moderator:** This section assumes that by now employers are on board with the principle of working more closely with DWP; however there may not be complete consensus so you may need to tailor the tone of this section accordingly.
- Is there anything else we haven’t mentioned that you’d like to raise about building closer relationships with DWP?
- And what would be the main recommendation you would make about how to build relations between employers and DWP?

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<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>IML voting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thank you – by the Chair</td>
<td>15:55 – 16:00</td>
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Appendix B
DWP’s presentation to employers

DWP Priorities and Employers

September 2007
The Department for Work and Pensions

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was formed in 2001 out of the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Social Security.

The current Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is the Rt Hon Peter Hain MP.

The vision of the Department is to:

- Contribute towards fair, safe and fulfilling lives, free from poverty, for children, people in work and retirement, disabled people and carers;

- Reduce welfare dependency and increase economic competitiveness by helping people to work wherever they can and employers to secure the skills and employees they need; and

- Provide greater choice and personalisation and higher quality of service for customers where it is in their interests and those of taxpayers.

Our businesses

- Jobcentre Plus
- The Pension Service
- Disability and Carers Service
- Child Support Agency
Employers and DWP in practice

How might you have interacted with DWP?

- Advertising job vacancies through Jobcentre Plus
- Arranging deductions from employees’ earnings for child maintenance payments
- By providing DWP with details of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) paid to employees
- Providing occupational pension information for a combined pension forecast
- Finding out about your responsibilities under age/disability discrimination legislation
- Participating in policy consultation exercises (e.g. on Local Employment Partnerships – employers guaranteeing to provide employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups)

Key strategic objectives: Maximise employment opportunity for all

We aim to raise the employment rate of the working age population (up to 80% in the long term) and to narrow the gap between the employment rate of disadvantaged groups and the overall rate.

Employers are crucial to increasing employment

- Employers can provide jobs to job-ready candidates available through Jobcentre Plus
- New policy initiatives will rely on significant input from employers: Local Employment Partnerships and new integrated employment and skills services
- Age and disability should not be barriers to employment: employers have obligations under legislation and DWP has a duty to provide relevant information
**Key strategic objectives: Reduce child poverty**

DWP primarily seeks to address this by getting parents – especially lone parents – into work. The Jobcentre Plus network provides parents with support (e.g. childcare arrangements) to facilitate this. DWP also helps to improve the child maintenance system.

**Role of employers**

- Employers can help by employing parents (particularly lone parents) who have been out of the workforce long-term
- Employers can help by allowing parents (particularly lone parents) flexibility at work (e.g. so they can collect children from school)
- Employers are also involved in this area as you may deduct child maintenance payments from the salaries of non-compliant non-resident parents

**Key strategic objectives: Promote independence and wellbeing in later life**

The UK population is ageing and DWP is working to ensure a high quality of life for older people now and in the future. DWP’s activities in this area include:

- administering and reforming state pensions to tackle pensioner poverty;
- building a pensions system for the future that enables people to save for their retirement through private or occupational pensions; and
- encouraging people to work longer.

**Role of employers**

- Employers can assist DWP by providing Combined Pensions Forecasts to their employees
- Employers can encourage people to save more for their retirement, for example by providing an occupational or stakeholder pension to employees
- Employers can support older workers who wish to remain in work longer
- Employers will have obligations under proposed pensions reform (e.g. personal account)
**Key strategic objectives: Keep work places healthy and safe**

- DWP aims to give employees rights that enable them to work well, because healthy employees are good for society and good for employers.
- DWP wants to reduce the likelihood of individuals becoming unwell at work and support them to remain in, or return to, work if they do become sick.

**Role of employers**

- Employers pay Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) to employees who are unable to work because of sickness
- Employers pay Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) to expectant mothers to enable them to take time off to have a baby
- Employers need to ensure that work places are safe and healthy environments for employees

**Key strategic objectives: Promote equality of opportunity for all**

To achieve this objective DWP aims to:

- reduce experiences of discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, age, religion or belief, or sexual orientation
- narrow the gap between the employment rate of disadvantaged groups and the overall rate
- support the cross-Governmental strategy on equality issues through the Government Equalities office

**Role of employers**

- DWP undertakes various activities to provide employers with information about complying with discrimination legislation to make employers aware of their responsibilities
- Employers have a particular role to play both in employing people from disadvantaged groups and in helping to reduce their experiences of discrimination
- Employers have a role in promoting the benefits of diversity in the workplace
Key strategic objectives: Transform the services that deliver our outcomes

We want to design our services around our customers’ needs and we are working to improve the quality and efficiency of our services. Good customer service is not just about the individuals who access DWP services; it includes stakeholders too, such as employers.

What this means for employers

- We want to:
  - reduce the burdens we place on employers;
  - improve our services to employers; and
  - improve how we engage with employers

You are our customers and we want to improve our relationship with you

Employers are important to DWP

- Employers are key to many of the objectives DWP wants to achieve
- DWP consults with employers on policy proposals e.g. the Welfare Reform Green Paper (getting disadvantaged groups into work through Local Employment Partnerships)
- DWP wants to engage with employers more effectively
- DWP wants to hear what employers have to say about
  - what DWP’s priorities mean for you in practice; and
  - ways we could improve our engagement with you
- This is why you are here today – over to you
The Department for Work and Pensions: Key strategic objectives

DWP is in business to:

• Maximise employment opportunity for all and reduce the numbers of people on out-of-work benefits

• Keep workplaces healthy and safe

• Reduce the number of children living in poverty

• Promote independence and well-being in later life, continuing to tackle pensioner poverty and implementing pension reform

• Promote equality of opportunity for all

• Be an exemplar of effective service delivery to customers and employers

• Pay the right benefit to the right people at the right time