



Department for Work and Pensions consultation 21st Century Welfare

Revolving Doors Agency response 1 October 2010

About Revolving Doors Agency

Revolving Doors Agency is a charity working across England to change systems and improve services for people with multiple problems, including poor mental health, who are in repeat contact with the criminal justice system. We call them the revolving doors group.

Multiple problems experienced by women and men in the revolving doors group often include homelessness, drug and/or alcohol misuse, learning difficulties, physical health problems, poor relationships with family, poverty and debt.

Each problem feeds into and exacerbates the others. However, on their own, each need is usually not severe enough to meet the threshold for statutory services. So while poor mental health is a core or exacerbating factor, this is usually not considered severe enough to warrant care from statutory mental health services.

This all creates a downward spiral that brings people into contact with the criminal justice system. Our police, courts and prisons see people in this group everyday yet they get little or no effective help from mainstream health and other services.

We estimate this population to be approximately 60,000 at any one time, with further people at risk of entering it, or recovering. Most are living in poverty and almost all of this population are receiving benefits of some kind.

Our response

This response to 21st Century Welfare combines evidence and insight from our work with partners across the country, our research, in particular our report *Hand To Mouth* (Pratt & Jones 2009), and most importantly from members of our service user Forum.

The voice of people with direct experience of multiple problems is drawn from a focus group with Forum members, and in depth discussion with adults with multiple needs in contact with the criminal justice system. Details of consultations are included in Annex A. All quotes are from these discussions unless referenced otherwise.

Key points

1. The government should put an understanding of multiple needs at the forefront of their reform of the welfare system. This is the real change needed to bring the welfare system into the 21st century.
2. People with multiple problems need a staged approach in preparing for work. This should be holistic and recognise that for some people there is a distance to be travelled before sustainable work is a realistic option.
3. Increased conditionality must be preceded by increased support
4. Volunteering and service user involvement are highly valuable in supporting recovery and improving service provision
5. Benefits should continue to be paid be retained during short prison sentences but retained in an account and made immediately available on release. This should form part of a wider package of support including immediate access to accommodation and drug /alcohol treatment.
6. There is a need for better benefits advice during and after prison sentences
7. A move to more automated services should not be accompanied by a decline in the availability of face-to-face advice
8. Better joint working between agencies at a local level could improve the chances that people will successfully move towards employment
9. We strongly oppose any proposal to link benefit payments to conditions around treatment for drug or alcohol use. This would be entirely counterproductive and would “nudge people off the ladder rather than up it”.

I. What steps should the Government consider to reduce the cost of the welfare system and reduce welfare dependency and poverty?

A stepped approach

To achieve real change, the benefits and the welfare to work system must be grounded in the real experiences of people's lives. This is particularly important for people with multiple problems or needs. In recognition of this, **a stepped approach is essential in supporting people's rehabilitation and preparing them for work. This must be holistic – addressing the range of people's needs - and recognise the distance needed to travel before sustainable work is a realistic option.** This principle is based on insights from our research, service delivery and service user involvement work.

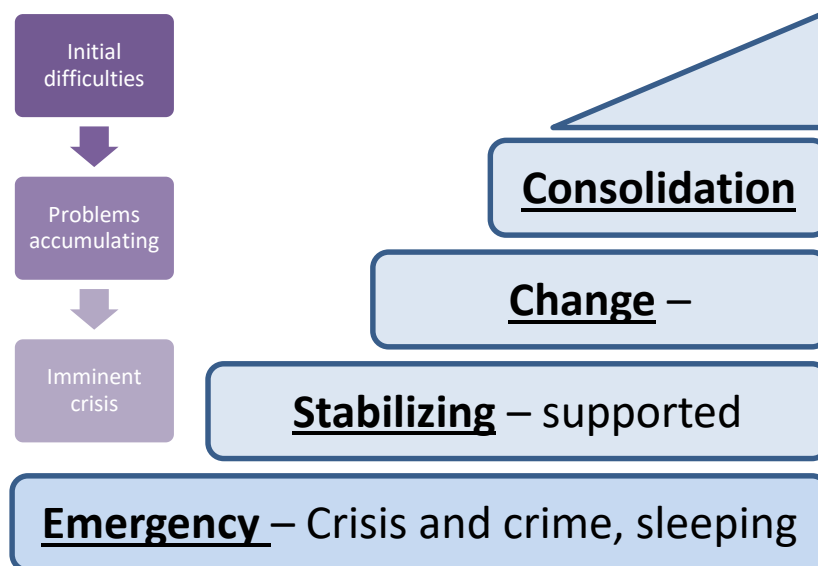
We agree that work should be the ultimate aspiration for everyone. However, our research, including *Hand to Mouth* (Pratt & Jones, 2009) and that of others (Keen, 2001, St Mungo's 2010) etc) shows that people whose multiple needs have resulted in chaos and crisis need help to achieve a stability in their lives before further progress can be made. People in this chaotic situation are fighting a daily battle to address their basic needs or are fearful that any small steps they have made could be threatened if they lose their benefits. In this situation it is not reasonable to expect them to be able to look for work.

Once basic stability has been established, a stepped approach is needed to address wider needs including mental health and substance misuse problems, and to build capacity and motivation. This stepped approach is set out below.

Benefits are the foundation stone of this journey towards stability, motivation and (eventually) work. They enable basic needs to be met through providing access to accommodation and basic living expenses.

However, imposing conditions at the early stages is unlikely to be helpful. Conditionality and expectations must be stepped to match this journey. More details on this are included under questions 7 and 8 below.

What should a stepped approach look like?



1. Emergency/ transition

At this point, people are likely to be living extremely chaotic lives. They may be frequently arrested, and spending short periods in prison. High drug and alcohol use is probable. They may be sleeping rough. They are likely to present at A&E when they need medical assistance and will not be registered with a GP. Attention is largely focused on meeting day to day needs. Support at this stage needs to focus on addressing basic needs (accommodation, food and water, medical assistance).

Outreach team, police custody diversion services and link workers along with emergency hostels and housing teams will be the lead agencies. Jobcentre Plus will have a role by helping re-establish benefit claims that may have broken down, offering crisis loans and ensuring housing benefit is paid.

2. Stabilising

Once basic needs have been addressed, progress can be made in other areas through addressing wider needs including drug and alcohol use, mental health problems, past trauma, debt. Building a trusting relationship with one or more professional is vital at this stage (HM Government 2010a).

Support required at this stage includes assessment, understanding and addressing wider needs and access to primary health care. A harm minimisation approach to drug use likely to be most viable starting point for treating substance misuse at this stage.

3. Change

As wider needs are addressed, their status as blocking factors is reduced or removed. The individual reaches a point where they are likely to be more receptive to efforts to build motivation and self-efficacy. Motivational interviewing and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy may be appropriate support. Individuals may request residential rehabilitation for drug or alcohol problems and seek to engage with positive social networks. As their aspirations build, stable employment starts to become a realistic goal.

4. Consolidation

Once the goal of employment as part of their recovery has been established, activities to prepare for work come in to play. This is likely to include engagement with education and training providers and welfare to work providers that specialise in supporting vulnerable individuals back to work (e.g. The Shaw Trust, A4E etc). Volunteering may play an important role here.

Self-efficacy is a useful concept applied at this stage. This is a person's belief that they have the capability to achieve a particular course of action. Albert Bandura (1995) suggested four sources of self efficacy beliefs: mastery experiences (practice), vicarious experiences (seeing other people that they can identify with succeed) social persuasion (affirmation and encouragement by others) and finally physiological and emotional state (the person's own state of stress, emotion, anxiety and depression). Support at this stage should focus on building self efficacy through peer support (vicarious experience), volunteering (mastery experience), talking therapies (emotional state) and motivation and encouragement (social persuasion).

Applied at this stage conditionality is considerably more likely to be effective. It may help to 'nudge' the individual towards training opportunities, and help to engender a sense of responsibility (see questions 5, 7 and 8). However, full benefits should be retained. Liaison with potential employers should start at this stage in order to prepare both employer and employee for work together.

5. Work

This stage should include a gradual move in to employment. Individuals are more likely to sustain employment if they start with a 'micro-job' of only a few hours per week. This can slowly be built up as the individual becomes more confident. The proposed disregard and taper elements of the Universal Credit model will be facilitative of this approach. In-work support for both employer and employee will be essential. Move away from benefits should be gradual.

The case study below illustrates an individual in stage 1.

Case study: Derek

Derek has been claiming benefits on and off since 2006 following his divorce.

At one stage his life was very chaotic – he was living on the streets and had drug problems. *“That was when I was getting divorced...then I was homeless and I was kicked out – that was my first time out onto the streets and I didn't know my way around then.”*

During this period of time he did not claim any benefits and was surviving through shoplifting and spent two short periods in prison.

“[My life] was in a mess, and I wouldn't have been able to [claim benefits] – cause on the Jobseeker's Allowance you have to prove that you've been looking for work, and have, like, certain appointments and things like that, and you have to write them down that you have applied for this number of jobs and where it was, and I wouldn't have been able to do all of that, so they would've cut my claim anyway.”

Although he might have been able to claim ESA he did not in fact do this: *“But even then, I wasn't thinking 'see the doctor' anything like that.”*

Support through the process: Continuity of support is essential as individuals move through the steps set out above. As individuals progress they will come into contact with a range of agencies. Working together and sharing information will enable these agencies to provide a greater degree of continuity and achieve more sustainable outcomes for their clients. Prime contractors and delivery agencies must recognise – and be rewarded through payment by results contracts - that recovery from mental health and substance misuse problems is rarely a straightforward progression and so flexibility is needed to reduce the risk that a temporary relapse or worsening of their condition undoes the progress made.

User involvement: Support at each stage should be tailored to individual need, and service users should be involved in the design of their support. As they progress through the stages, individuals may be interested in opportunities to become involved in supporting others through their journey, as peer mentors for example. This can be an important tool in supporting the recovery of both mentor and mentee. See question 9 for more detail on the benefits of user involvement.

Measuring outcomes: Each stage in this approach will have different outcomes that can be measured and paid for. In the early stages outcomes such as moving to stable accommodation, reduced drug/alcohol use, registration with a GP and reduced reoffending are likely to be most suitable outcomes. As progress is made, improved mental and physical health and engagement in residential detoxification become appropriate. In the later stages, volunteering, engagement in training and the retention of a 'micro-job' are suitable. However, these outcomes need to be staged. Using engagement in training as a paid for outcome in the early stages is unrealistic. Staging measured outcomes in a way that rewards 'distance travelled' essential in order to incentivise and reward providers.

Some outcomes, especially those in the earlier stages, can be hard to measure. There is hence a challenge regarding identifying non-subjective metrics to measure these outcomes that will incentivise and reward providers to support people with their recovery. We are keen to work with Government to explore the development of these.

Useful lessons may be learned from the Australian approach below.

Lessons from Australia's streamed approach: The model described above reflects the approach taken in Australia, where benefit claimants are categorised into one of four 'streams', with the most job ready referred to stream 1 and those with 'severe barriers' referred to stream 4. Those affected by mental health problems, substance use issues, homelessness, disability or abuse are likely to be referred to stream 4.

Welfare to work providers work with claimants to develop an Employment Pathway plan detailing how they can help the individual get work. Those in streams 2, 3 and 4 get more intensive services, aimed at addressing barriers to work. These are matched to individual needs and circumstances. The most pressing barriers are addressed first, and there is a recognition that, although the ultimate aim is to achieve employment, this may take some time.

<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Employment/JSA/EmploymentServices/Pages/streamServices.aspx>

Poverty

Steps to reduce the cost of the welfare system and reduce welfare dependency and poverty should be grounded in a recognition of the fact that measures to tackle financial exclusion have failed to reach some of the most excluded in society, and that many benefit claimants are living in poverty.

Research by Revolving Doors (Pratt & Jones, 2009) has found that “the lives of adults with multiple needs are often defined by poverty. People spoke graphically about the day to day realities of “living poor” – frequently referring to a lack of bare essentials ...with no financial contingency, this group were usually reliant on a benefits system which they experienced as complicated, slow and unhelpful. In extremis some returned to crime as a proven source of income.” (p.4-5).

The link between poverty and multiple needs is recognised by the Prime Minister:

“Poverty is about more than having no money. It's about having no opportunity because you failed at school; no purpose to life because you can't get a job; no loving network around you because your family's broken down.” (Cameron 2010a)

The day to day experience of living in poverty plays a significant role in reinforcing and exacerbating people’s multiple needs. Our report *Hand to Mouth* (Pratt & Jones, 2009) found that “Financial worries made people feel stressed and some said that it made their mental health problems such as depression and anxiety even worse. Practitioners agreed that financial pressure can trigger a decline in mental health.” (p64)

The interaction between a person’s multiple needs including poverty, poor mental health, substance misuse and other problems has a negative impact on their ability to deal effectively with the benefits system or other financial matters. This in turn can cause them further financial problems and lock them into the revolving door of crisis and crime.

2. Which aspects of the current benefits and Tax Credits system in particular lead to the widely held view that work does not pay for benefit recipients?

The government’s *State of the Nation report* (HM Government 2010b) clearly set out the fact that, due to the interplay of benefits, tax credits and wage levels, for many people moving into work does not mean an increase in net income. As *21st Century Welfare* states: “working legitimately is not a rational choice for many poor people to make” p13.

When people gain employment, they lose income from Job Seekers’ Allowance and, due to the extremely steep taper of Housing Benefit, face a sudden jump in their accommodation costs. Many find that they either worse off in work, or are better off by a miniscule amount. This is often experienced against a background of battling to overcome extensive barriers to work as set out in question 3 below.

For people with multiple needs, a period living in supported housing is often an essential part of the process of recovery. Here, they can receive support to address drug and/or alcohol problems and eventually get help in finding and preparing to move to independent accommodation. However, the high rent levels and the housing benefit taper makes moving into work even more difficult for people

in this situation. When a resident starts working they lose housing benefit so have to pay the full cost of service charge, rent and support costs. This is a huge leap in charges for many makes work far from cost effective.

The government should consider reorganising the subsidy of supported housing to reduce this barrier.

“When I start working, cos I live in a hostel, my rent goes up to £205 a week ... that basically takes all the initiative out of going out to get a job, cos all your money’s being taken anyway. ... When you’re living on benefits, you pay the minimum [level of rent at the hostel], the service charge, which is £27 a week ... it’s half your benefits every 2 weeks. ... You’re thinking ‘why should I go and work for that ... spend your whole day doing that, and then just taking that amount of money?’”

“Being homeless and wanting to go back to work, pretty much you are trapped on the benefits. A lot of people are like me, I want a job, but I’m trapped. I’m there all the time applying for jobs but if you’re living in supported housing, there’s no way you can get a job because ... you’re literally on minus money at the end of the week, not plus, you’re on minus.”

3. To what extent is the complexity of the system deterring some people from moving into work?

Effects of a complex system

Revolving Doors’ report *Hand to Mouth* (Pratt & Jones 2009) found that both service users and practitioners experience the benefits system as highly complex and confusing. In service user focus groups carried out for the report, ‘confusing benefits system’ came out as one of the most important issues for participants. Citizens Advice professionals interviewed also found the system complicated and reported finding it difficult to fill in the forms and follow the relevant procedures.

“Sometimes them forms ... you have to be a blooming rocket scientist to fill ‘em in.”

Matt, 20 (service user quoted in Pratt & Jones 2009, p.52)

“The process of claiming benefits is in itself complex and all the different paperwork that people have to supply. It can be a minefield particularly for clients that we see who have vulnerability for all sorts of reasons, especially mental health.”

Rachael (practitioner quoted in Pratt & Jones 2009, p.52)

This complexity means that people in the revolving doors group often require extensive support to navigate the system and receive correct benefits.

However, the complexity of the system is only one factor preventing people from moving into work.

Other factors preventing people from moving into work

Multiple mutually-reinforcing barriers: People with multiple needs including poor mental health who are in contact with the criminal justice system are often at a considerable distance from the job

market. The multiplicity of problems they face mean there are multiple barriers to overcome. As with their interlinking needs, these barriers feed into and reinforce the others.

Findings from DWP research by Bauld et al (2010) on *Problem drug users' experiences of employment and the benefit system* are highly relevant to this group, as many are problem drug users or face similar disadvantage. Bauld et al found that problem drug users “*face a variety of obstacles with regard to looking for employment, of which most are deeply entrenched. These include poor self-confidence and mental health problems, physical health problems, a lack of education, training and skills, ongoing drug use, receiving treatment whilst working and stigmatisation by employers, amongst other barriers.*” (Bauld et al, 2010, p,5)

This complex combination of barriers lies behind our argument (set out in question) for a stepped approach. Only by taking a holistic approach in addressing a full range of issues can moving to work become a realistic option. Ignoring one or more of the barriers is likely to result in ineffective engagement in the job market if this is achieved at all.

Mental Health: “Being unemployed increases the risk of mental illness fourfold compared with those in employment - and once you have a diagnosed mental health problem, your chances of finding or keeping a job are drastically reduced.” (Burstow 2010)

Under PSA16 the previous government prioritised moving more people with mental health problems into work. However, because this focused on people in touch with secondary mental health services it missed out the revolving doors group whose mental health needs are not considered serious enough to trigger secondary mental health support.

However, for this group tackling underlying mental health issues is essential as part of the stepped approach to recovery. The government should therefore ensure that their welfare reforms connect with their forthcoming strategy on mental health.

Rising unemployment: In this climate of diminishing resources and increasingly scarce job opportunities, competition for jobs is likely to be higher. It will be harder for everyone to find employment, not least the revolving doors group; who are likely to have a criminal record, little or inconsistent work experience, and have few qualifications and training.

'If unemployment rises the least employable will find it increasingly difficult to find work in full-time, long-term jobs that pay sufficient wages to avoid in-work poverty. The majority of drug service users accessing employability support are seeking to work in construction or jobs which are either in the service industries, or reliant on them (warehousing, retail, driving). These sectors will be hardest hit by any economic downturn'. (Johnson 2008)

The challenge of job opportunities is likely to increase over the next three years, as people receiving incapacity and other benefits are reassessed and are likely to be expected to move in to work. Many of these people will not have worked for a long time. They will also be at a considerable distance from the job market, increasing competition for more flexible job opportunities.

Criminal record: Many of our Forum members spoke of the challenge posed by having a criminal record in gaining employment. Often people's criminal record means they are turned away from

jobs, even if the offences are not relevant to the job. We heard from Mike, a recovering drug user who has been homeless since leaving prison 15 months ago. He feels he is ready to go back to work and goes to the Jobcentre consistently, uses the internet regularly and has uploaded his CV onto a number of sites. *“I’ve had a few [responses]...everything’s fine, but as soon as they get a whiff of the criminal record”.*

A particular issue is the time it takes for sentences to become spent. Nacro have recently launched a campaign *Change the Record* (www.changetherecord.org) which aims to address this issue, helping ex-offenders back to work by tackling discriminatory practice and laws that prevent them finding a job. The campaign focuses on amending the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974.

One former prisoner we spoke to had received training from probation about when it was necessary to disclose convictions and how to go about doing so. He found this very helpful, and we recommend that this is made available to more ex offenders.

Difficulties accessing training, qualifications and experience: The likelihood of getting a job is also diminished by a lack of relevant training and experience. In discussions with our service user Forum, members expressed frustration in not being able to access basic courses for qualifications such as Food and Hygiene Certificates, meaning they are unable to apply for certain jobs. Those that are able to obtain a place for training often find that they cannot afford to complete it. This lack of training means they are unable to gain experience, a prerequisite for many jobs. This leads people to have no choice but to accept a minimum wage job where they are paid so little they easily get in to debt.

“You can’t get a job if you’ve got a criminal record. If someone is given a job that pays minimum wage ... considering their rent, council tax, gas, yeah? It’ll put them in to debt. What will happen is that person probably will turn to crime ... for that little extra money in the back pocket, will put them into debt in the long run... before you know it you’re back into the courts, few years time they’ll be saying you have convictions for theft, we don’t want you here. It’s a vicious cycle of round and round in circles.”

4. To what extent is structural reform needed to deliver customer service improvements, drive down administration costs and cut the levels of error, overpayments and fraud?

The government should adopt an overall language and approach to welfare reform which recognises multiple needs and supports people to take realistic steps to recovery and employment. The profound effects of poor customer service, benefit delays and errors in perpetuating cycles of crisis and crime must be recognised within structural reforms.

“People are getting advice, but they’re not getting the right sort of advice, there needs to be some sort of national advice line where you get proper advice ... a lot people have got hang ups, a lot of discontent, a lot of anger against the system, and that’s quite a big block in moving forward.”

Customer service improvements: We have collected significant anecdotal evidence from our forum members relating to negative experiences they have had at Jobcentre Plus and the profound

effect this can have in perpetuating the cycle of crisis and crime. Research conducted with people with multiple problems by our national service user forum for the Making Every Adult Matter Coalition provided further evidence of this (Braithwaite & Revolving Doors' National Service User Forum, 2009).

These negative experiences include general stigma pertaining to their background, failure to understand their situation, poor communication and not being supported to access further education, voluntary work and to achieve their long-term career goals.

"It's very hard... I tried [to claim benefits], but as soon as you're walking into the Jobcentre – 'cause your homeless...you're in scraggily clothes, you're all rough looking, and straight away you're getting barriers from the security, when you're going to use the phone they're standing over you and things like that – it just makes you feel uneasy going in there anyway. It's not like it's open for everybody."

These unhelpful experiences are often at a time when people are not only going through the complicated process of applying for Jobseeker's Allowance but are likely to be simultaneously trying to deal with mental health difficulties, register with a GP, apply for housing and avoid slipping back into misusing substances and offending.

Case study: John

On release from a short prison sentence, John was advised to claim for Employment Support Allowance as he was undergoing a methadone detox. He was suffering from depression and found it very difficult to cope with the process of claiming for the benefit. *"It's very stressful, because the last thing that you want to be dealing with is Jobcentres and phones and speaking to lots of people because I had enough going on in my life. The doctor's already signed off, and mentally ,like, put me down as – like, I couldn't cope with it at that time...It was bad"*

Our Forum members recommended the following improvements:

- **More face to face contact:** Being able to speak to a person face to face rather than over a telephone or computer was highlighted as a key priority. Telephone calls are often stressful for people with poor communication skills and anxiety. More face to face contact would make it easier to explain one's situation, and to discuss what one needs to do to receive benefits. *"Computers – get 'em out – we want the humans back! We don't want people talking to computers...That's my opinion – I feel comfortable like that [face-to-face] but some other people might feel comfortable on the computer. Give them the opportunity to say."*
- **Better training for staff:** Many felt that better training would help staff to overcome stigma and be more accepting of drug users and people with mental health problems.
- **Service user involvement:** *"You want someone who's been through it and knows about it"* The proposal of working as peer advisors at the Jobcentre was proposed by a number of individuals. This could be a voluntary position, undertaken by a recovering drug user who is further on in their journey to recovery. The peer adviser model developed by St Giles Trust could be extended in support of this proposal.

Benefit errors and delays: Many of the people we consulted for this work and for *Hand to Mouth* (Pratt & Jones 2009) had experienced problems with their benefits payments, such as delays and

breaks in payments. These were often due to poor internal Jobcentre Plus administration. Several people told us of extensive delays following hard copies of documentation being lost in the internal post between London and Glasgow.

“I did have an initial problem with them receiving the sick certificate – there seems to be a problem with the post, the internal post at the Jobcentre. It’s internal as well – it’s not even external – it’s internal, it goes from their office in [this London borough, they’ve got an internal courier who takes it up to Glasgow. It just does not seem to get there. Normal post would be three days, five days – tops – but I don’t know how big Glasgow is...I had to get another sick note...and then that one, it actually got up to them – they faxed it up, emailed it up, sorry, - but they can’t do that the first time.”

During these gaps people have to rely on crisis loans (which in themselves can be hard to access, and allocated at a lower rate than required), borrowing from friends and family, or – for some – returning to crime.

“I had to stop a claim and I’ve got to start a new one ... I know I ain’t gonna get no money before Christmas I know that. So I know it’s better for me to go out and sell some drugs because I’m gonna make more money, a higher profit than waiting six weeks for a bit of cash to get my kid’s Christmas presents”
(James, quoted in Pratt & Jones, 2009, p.57)

When delayed or underpaid benefits are eventually repaid, they are often received in one lump sum. This makes it difficult for people to budget and would often be spent quickly. Some people interviewed for *Hand to Mouth* said they would rather have received it in staggered payments. People also said they would normally spend the money repaying friends who had supported them when they were not receiving any benefits. Practitioners said it was often difficult to get clients to prioritise paying their rent arrears when they also owed money to many different people.

Practitioners interviewed for *Hand to Mouth* agreed that back dated payments were particularly problematic when there was substance misuse was involved. Also, backdated payments were often not given automatically but needed chasing, and if people did not have the support of practitioners they might very easily miss out on money they were owed (Pratt & Jones, 2009, p.53).

Revolving Doors recommends that the welfare review includes a review of policy regarding the back payment of benefits, as these can be particularly problematic for adults with multiple needs, often leading to avoidable crisis and crime.

Access to independent advice and advocacy: The government should consider increasing the availability of advice and advocacy services in Jobcentres to support people who otherwise find it hard to negotiate the complex and difficult system or challenge decisions that they consider unfair.

Better customer complaint mechanisms and appeal systems should be put in place.

“You can’t have someone making a decision that’s going to affect our finances without us having the right to appeal. ... We need to make sure that ... there is some way of getting the right information before we have that sit down one on one. So that before we have a meeting we can speak to a person that does not work for the Jobcentre, an independent advisor, who can say to us, by the way, [explain what’s going to happen, what conditionality will be] ... we want some way of redressing ... we want a safeguard to safeguard us. We

want some kind of support system before we attend the interview. We want some support system after we've attending the interview. And we also want some kind of appeal panel, so that if I'm not happy with what that job person's got me to sign ... I can have an independent view."

5. Has the Government identified the right set of principles to use to guide reform?

Revolving Doors welcomes several aspects of the Government's principles for reform, in particular pledges to "support those most in need" and to "ensure that interactions with other systems of support for basic needs are considered".

However, we urge the Government to recognise the challenges faced by people multiple problems, and include them in the category of those "most in need". These people may sometimes be challenging to work with and will require ongoing support, but failing to support them creates considerable costs generated when they are trapped in lives of chaos, crisis and crime. Our economic cost benefit model, which we are developing with the Department of Health, will show that getting the right support to people could save the public purse many millions of pounds.

We urge the Government to recognise that the benefits system is critical in protecting people from spiralling in to a cycle of crisis and crime and in helping people to break away from this cycle, and to recognise the need for a staged approach in achieving this.

We are keen to highlight some challenges posed by two of the principles; those on personal responsibility and automating services.

➤ **Promote responsibility and positive behaviour, doing more to reward saving, strengthening the family and, in tandem with improving incentives, reinforcing conditionality**

Revolving Doors welcomes the Government's principle of promoting responsibility and positive behaviour. However, we urge the Government to recognise the need to empower people with multiple needs to take positive life choices. This will require a staged approach as set out in question 1, and for some, ongoing support. This recognises the need to build self efficacy (a person's belief in their own capability to achieve a goal) among people who are some way from the jobs market. (Bandura, 1997 etc. See question 1 for more detail.)

David Cameron believes that "the family is the crucible of responsibility" (Cameron 2010b). However, those in the revolving door group are often estranged from their families or have poor relations with them. Many have experienced traumatic childhoods, and/or family tension caused by mental health problems, anti-social behaviour, crime and substance misuse. In these situations, there will have been little opportunity to *learn* responsibility.

People who are living a life of chaos and crisis (as set out in the first stage of the stepped approach above) are likely to find it very hard to take responsibility for anything other than their day to day survival. Taking a stepped approach to building personal capacity is essential in supporting people to foster responsibility.

➤ **Automate processes and maximise self service, to reduce the scope for fraud, error and overpayments.**

As outlined above, Revolving Doors has extensive evidence of the effect negative experiences of customer service at Jobcentre Plus and the profound effect this can have in perpetuating the cycle of crisis and crime. Difficulties in speaking to an advisor face to face are a major factor in this.

Many people we spoke to were frustrated with the increased use of telephone services as illustrated by the quote below. We also heard evidence of extremely long waiting times on the telephone especially to request crisis loans and anxiety experienced by people with poor communication skills using telephone services.

“Glasgow is the benefits centre that deals with everything ... you can’t just walk in and go and speak to somebody when there’s a problem – and their answer is ‘oh, phone Glasgow, phone Glasgow’ – at the Jobcentre, as soon as they’ve got a problem it’s ‘phone Glasgow’ ... It might be an idea to actually let them see the advisor in the beginning, like the old system...people who actually deal with the benefits side of things and authorise the payments, to actually be in the Jobcentre.”

A move to online services was felt by some members of our service user forum to be a positive change, particularly if making claims is made easier. However, a move to online services risks excluding those who do not have access to the internet or are not IT literate. This will be particularly challenging for those who are arranging benefit claims from in prison, where inmates cannot access the internet. Computerised systems were also felt to have less flexibility than human interaction, a particular challenge for people who have complex situations and find it hard to express themselves.

“She hits a button on the computer and the computer says no. They ain’t got no skills – when the computer wasn’t here, I felt more...like you had a fighting chance...They just look at the computer now, it’s not about talking and asking how you’re feeling.”

We strongly recommend that the automation of services is accompanied by the provision of support to people who find it difficult to use these services. Without this support people are likely to fail to access benefits, without which they have no income and are more likely to turn to illegal means of obtaining funds.

7. Do you think we should increase the obligations on benefit claimants who can work to take the steps necessary to seek and enter work?

8. Do you think that we should have a system of conditionality which aims to maximise the amount of work a person does, consistent with their personal circumstances?

Revolving Doors welcomes the consultation’s statement that “by integrating and reforming the current income-related benefits and Tax Credits systems we could ensure that ... a fair balance is struck between support and conditionality, making clear that we will not accept a culture of dependency nor will anyone be written off” (p.5)

However **we urge that the “balance between support and conditionality” does not mean linking benefit sanctions and efforts to assist recovery.**

Benefits are a building block for stability. They enable access to supported accommodation, where basic needs can be met and people can access help to address drug/alcohol issues, poor mental health, and a range of other problems. If financial benefit sanctions are applied, this foundation stone is removed, and it is unlikely that clients will retain support. This will push people back in to chaos, crisis and crime.

Obligations at the right point - the consolidation stage in the stepped approach set out in question 1 - are more reasonable and are likely to encourage progress.

Any system of conditionality must recognise that for many people, there is a considerable distance to travel before a sustainable move from welfare to work is a realistic possibility. Conditionality should most definitely be consistent with personal circumstances, including drug and alcohol addiction, homelessness, and all levels of mental health problem.

9. If you agree that there should be greater localism what local flexibility would be required to deliver this?

Revolving Doors supports a move to greater local flexibility provided that this is supported by training, incentives and rewards to ensure that people with multiple needs are not further excluded from welfare services.

Many people we spoke to felt that poor customer service they received from Jobcentre Plus staff was in part due to their inability to use their discretion in dealing with complex situations posed by people with multiple needs.

Many people told us of conflicting mandatory appointments being imposed by Jobcentre Plus, Probation, drugs services, and the challenge of keeping these appointments. Local flexibility should include flexibility to share information with other agencies, to build links and improve partnership working.

As outlined above, Jobcentre Plus and welfare to work providers are unlikely to have a role in people's recovery until the later stages. Earlier on, people will require more support from health, social care and supported housing agencies. These agencies need to share information between them and work together to support people along their journey to recovery.

There are already examples of joint working increasing flexibility, such as the Together Women Project, where probation officers are located in a women's centre. The women's centre offers a holistic range of support services in a women-only environment. Women are able to attend probation appointments in the same location as accessing support to address their wider needs, which contribute to their offending behaviour.

User involvement

Involving service users in redesigning services in a local area has the potential to address the dual challenges of experiences of poor customer services and the common perception of people with multiple needs as hard to engage and difficult to work with.

Revolving Doors and Clinks recently published a guide on service user involvement. Below is an extract:

“There is widespread recognition and growing evidence that involving offenders, ex-offenders, their families or carers can improve the services they use. Because of their direct experiences of services, service users know better than anyone what works – and what does not. Involving them in your work brings unique insights and taps into a valuable resource. Service user involvement can also have a positive impact on the individuals involved by boosting their confidence and skills. This can lead to other opportunities such as training or employment.

“For service users, service user involvement:

- Offers them a voice if they have felt excluded
- Makes them feel valued and respected
- Gives them ownership of the services provided for them
- Enhances their understanding of services and how they work
- Improves skills and abilities
- Builds confidence
- Furthers the goal of recovery through inclusion, developing life skills and enhancing self-esteem
- Is a way of bringing people together to achieve mutually desirable outcomes.”

(Clinks and Revolving Doors Agency, 2010, p.14)

Revolving Doors is keen to work with local Jobcentres to explore how user involvement can be employed as a service improvement tool.

11. What would be the best way to organise delivery of a reformed system to achieve improvements in outcomes, customer service and efficiency?

It is essential that the Government and prime contractors recognise the need for a stepped approach (as set out in question 1) and ensure that subcontractors are incentivised and rewarded to provide stepped levels of support and conditionality.

Welfare to work providers need to work closely with health, social care and criminal justice partners to provide a stepped package of support that enables people to build self-efficacy and responsibility through a gradual process. Their role in initial stages is likely to be limited to ensuring benefits are flowing correctly. As the individual progresses, a bigger role in training and employment support develops.

This is a much more proactive role than the current situation as outlined below.

“The actual Jobcentre, they don’t really do anything. Before they used to sit down, they used to take time with the people and they used to help you – they used to ask you what jobs are you looking for, what hours your available and things like that – now they don’t – they just sign you and ‘get out’... All they’re doing is signing you, making sure your payment goes out – they’re not actually helping you to get back into work. And you could just sit on the system for the rest of your life.”

12. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the proposals in this document?

Welfare and criminal justice

The consultation document does not include any reference to prison and the effect of custodial sentences on benefits. We feel this is a major omission, and we recommend that the DWP works closely with the Ministry of Justice to consider the part welfare will play in the 'rehabilitation revolution.'

Entering prison: When someone enters prison or hospital, they are required to inform the benefits agency of their admission. However, many people are not aware of this and they may continue to receive benefits during their time away. Later they will have to pay this money back. Sometimes repayments are set so high that people could not afford them.

Whist in prison: Focus groups in several prisons raised the issue that although benefits advice was often available within the prison, short term prisoners are often unable to access them. Prisoners we spoke to put this down to the short length of their sentence ("*you put in an 'app' but by the time you get an appointment you're already out*"). We also repeatedly heard that prison staff simply have too many prisoners to oversee, leaving little flexibility to escort prisoners to appointments.

Release from prison: This can be an extremely difficult time for people. People may have lost their accommodation whilst in custody, be battling with drug addiction or withdrawal, be dealing with mental health problems, and face debt. Yet those who have served a short sentence are not entitled to support from an Offender Manager on release. Whilst 'through the gate' schemes exist, these are still few and far between.

Many people find that it takes several weeks or months to receive any benefit payment after release, and are left with only the discharge grant to live off. This often leaves people feeling they have no choice but to return to criminal activity.

"This time when I came out I had to wait ... four and a half months before I even got anything, which put me in ... debt and worry and obviously put me back into the criminal system because of not having any money."

(Jack, 26, quoted in Pratt & Jones, 2009)

"The punishment isn't prison, the punishment is when you come out. That's the real punishment. ... I did six months in prison, but the last 2 years have been my punishment ... when they release you with £45 ... it forces you to go shoplifting. Now if you get back on drugs ... I did it myself ... then that's your own fault really, but you're making a concerted effort, you can't, you end up back on drugs anyway cos you just get so stressed out and you just can't cope with it. It's a battle really to live off £45 ... that £45 lasts you three days tops ... Your time in prison becomes a lot worse knowing that you're going from 3 meals a day and a bed, to no meals a day and a hard concrete pavement."

Furthermore, many people also face debts accumulated before prison.

"A lot of people do come out of prison to outstanding bills and a lot of them panic and ... go straight back to crime to pay it simply because they don't know that there are other options."

(Mike, 45, quoted in Pratt & Jones, 2009)

DWP must work with other departments at a national and local level to improve the continuity of support for people leaving prison. Many arrangements can and should be made *before* people are released from prison, including benefit payments, immediate access to accommodation and drug, alcohol and/or mental health support.

Revolving Doors strongly recommends:

- **Effective, ongoing benefits advice is provided during and after periods in prison including people on short prison sentences.**
- **Benefits should be retained during short prison sentences. The opportunity to retain entitlement to housing benefit during short periods of imprisonment should be extended to other benefits. This would promote consistency within the system and limit the financial impact of such sentences.**
- **Immediate access to benefits should be arranged prior to release as part of a holistic package of support.**

Conclusion

Our key message is that the Government should put an understanding of multiple needs at the forefront of their reform of the welfare system. This is the real change needed to bring the welfare system into the 21st century.

We are pleased that the Government is focusing on addressing the earning disregards and tapering benefits to make work pay.

We recommend that these measures form part of a fully staged approach as set out in this response. This system is essential in order to support people with multiple problems in preparing for work. It should be holistic and recognise that for some people there is a considerable distance to be travelled before sustainable work is a realistic option.

We urge the government to carefully consider how conditionality is applied to people with multiple needs, especially those with mental health problems, drug and/or alcohol issues, those who are homeless and those in contact with the criminal justice system.

We strongly recommend that that benefit sanctions are not linked to efforts to assist recovery from substance misuse.

We recommend that in further developing the strategy the government makes every effort to involve people with direct experience of substance misuse, including people who are still in the process of recovery and those for whom the current system is not working.

Members of our service user forum, who have helped us prepare this response, would be happy to help with this.

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Appendix A

Sources of service user quotes

- Focus group on *21st Century Welfare* and current welfare system with members of Doors Agency's service user Forum, 9 September 2010
- Three in depth interviews with adults with multiple needs in contact with the criminal justice system, held in London and Oxford in September 2010.

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