

This is a repository copy of *Exploratory qualitative research on the 'single working age benefit'*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/73529/>

Monograph:

Sainsbury, R orcid.org/0000-0002-1217-6818 and Weston, K (2010) Exploratory qualitative research on the 'single working age benefit'. Research Report. Department for Work and Pensions Research Reports, 659 . Department for Work and Pensions , London.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Exploratory qualitative research on the 'single working age benefit'

by Roy Sainsbury and Katharine Weston

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 659

Exploratory qualitative research on the 'single working age benefit'

Roy Sainsbury and Katharine Weston

A report of research carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

© Crown Copyright 2010. Published for the Department for Work and Pensions under licence from the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Application for reproduction should be made in writing to The Copyright Unit, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, St Clements House, 2-16 Colegate, Norwich NR3 1BQ.

First Published 2010.

ISBN 978 1 84712 777 8

Views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the Department for Work and Pensions or any other Government Department.

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
The Authors.....	viii
Summary	1
1 Introduction	5
1.1 Policy background	6
1.2 Understanding complexity	7
1.3 Single working age benefit	7
1.4 Research questions	9
1.5 Research methods	9
1.5.1 <i>Sampling</i>	10
1.5.2 <i>Conduct of the discussion groups</i>	10
1.6 Structure of the report	12
2 Views about the current benefit system	13
2.1 The claimant perspective.....	13
2.1.1 <i>Overview</i>	13
2.1.2 <i>Work and the benefit system</i>	14
2.1.3 <i>Claiming more than one benefit</i>	15
2.1.4 <i>Moving between benefits</i>	16
2.1.5 <i>Aspects of delivery</i>	16

2.2	Adviser perspectives.....	17
2.2.1	<i>Impossibility of knowing everything.....</i>	17
2.2.2	<i>Complexity as a source of confusion and error.....</i>	18
2.2.3	<i>Complexity and moving towards work.....</i>	19
2.2.4	<i>Moving between benefits</i>	21
2.2.5	<i>Complexity and benefit processing</i>	21
2.3	Summary	22
3	Views about an ideal benefit system	23
3.1	Towards an ideal benefit system: the claimant perspective	23
3.1.1	<i>The purpose of the benefit system and who should be helped.....</i>	24
3.1.2	<i>Benefits and looking for work</i>	24
3.1.3	<i>Views about eligibility in an ideal benefit system.....</i>	25
3.1.4	<i>Aspects of organisation and delivery in an ideal benefit system</i>	26
3.1.5	<i>A note on ‘deservingness’ and ‘fairness’</i>	27
3.2	Advisers’ views on the need for reform	27
3.3	Summary	30
4	Views on the single working age benefit	33
4.1	How people engaged with the idea of a single working age benefit.....	34
4.2	Overall views about a single working age benefit	35
4.3	Basic component for everyday living expenses.....	36
4.4	Extra needs.....	37
4.5	The single working age benefit and moving towards work.....	38
4.6	Entitlement criteria – individual compared to household assessment; views on means testing	40
4.7	Organisation and delivery issues.....	40
4.8	Summing up research participants’ views – findings from the voting exercises.....	41
4.9	Summary	42

5	Discussion and conclusion.....	43
5.1	Introduction	43
5.2	Summary of findings – the current and ideal benefit system	44
5.2.1	<i>Stability and certainty.....</i>	45
5.2.2	<i>Transparency and fairness.....</i>	45
5.2.3	<i>Simplicity.....</i>	45
5.2.4	<i>Preferences about entitlement conditions.....</i>	46
5.2.5	<i>Quick decision making and payments</i>	46
5.2.6	<i>Help with return to work.....</i>	46
5.2.7	<i>Organisation and delivery of benefits</i>	47
5.3	Summary of findings – views about the single working age benefit	47
5.3.1	<i>Would a single benefit deal with people’s problems with their benefits?</i>	47
5.3.2	<i>Would a single working age benefit reduce concerns about trying work? How would it help move people further towards employment?.....</i>	48
5.3.3	<i>How would a single working age benefit help people to get their entitlement? Would it reduce uncertainties about entitlement?.....</i>	48
5.3.4	<i>How can there be a balance between a simple system and one that caters for individual need? Would people’s diverse needs be met by a single working age benefit?</i>	49
5.3.5	<i>Is there support for moving towards a single working age benefit? How would a single working age benefit match people’s expectations?.....</i>	49
5.4	A brief note on benefit reform in other countries.....	50
5.5	Conclusion	51
Appendix A	Research methods	53
Appendix B	Research instruments.....	57
References	65

List of tables

Table A.1	Recruitment targets	53
Table A.2	Achieved participation in claimant groups	54
Table A.3	Organisations invited to take part in adviser group discussions	55

Acknowledgements

Our first set of thanks is to the claimants and advisers who took part in the discussion groups in November and December of 2009. Their interest and involvement contributed greatly to the success and enjoyment of the discussions.

In the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) we are grateful for the encouragement and guidance (and competent management) of Karl Olsen, Robert Holmes and Marilyn Howard. Their commitment has made the experience of conducting the research smooth and enjoyable.

We are also grateful for the input from Colleen Norton and her network of recruitment agents at plusfour market research limited whom we contracted as the recruitment agency for the project.

Within the Social Policy Research Unit our thanks go to Annie Irvine who contributed to the fieldwork, and to Sally Pulleyn and the Support Team who supported the project throughout to their usual high standards. Job well done.

The Authors

Professor Roy Sainsbury is a Research Director in the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York and leads the research programme on welfare and employment.

Katharine Weston is a Research Fellow in the Social Policy Research Unit working on the welfare and employment programme.

Summary

This report presents findings from a study of the views and attitudes of social security claimants and people who advise claimants on benefits and employment issues about an idea for the radical reform of the benefit system. The idea in question is the 'single working age benefit', which in essence proposes to replace the full range of working age benefits with a single benefit.

There has been growing policy interest in recent years in the complexity of the British social security system and although there has been widespread acceptance that the system is undeniably complex, views differ about whether complexity renders the system dysfunctional. However, there does appear to be consensus that simplification of the benefit system is a desirable policy objective.

The overall aim of this research study was to explore views about a single working age benefit as a possible future direction for reform of the social security system. A series of discussion groups with social security claimants and benefit advisers was conducted in four locations in the UK in November and December 2009. The three broad topics explored with participants were:

- experiences and views of the current benefit system;
- the design of an improved (or ideal) social security system for the future;
- current ideas about benefit simplification via discussion of the principles of a single working age benefit.

This study was essentially exploratory in nature, given that the purpose of the group discussions was to generate views about an abstract idea rather than a concrete policy proposal or to collect data about actual experiences.

Key findings

Experiences and views of the current benefit system

What people thought about making improvements to the benefit system (and what an ideal system might look like) was often linked to their own experiences of being a benefit recipient or of advising them. Based on their experiences, people in the claimant groups fell into two broad groupings: First were those who expressed some form of dissatisfaction or confusion directed either at individual benefits (such as not knowing the names of benefits or why they received the amounts they did), at the way benefits interacted with each other (for example, how a new claim for benefits might lead to reassessment of others in payment) or at the organisation and delivery of benefits (a commonly reported problem was delays in processing claims). The second grouping comprised mainly male claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) who expressed very few, or no, complaints or dissatisfactions. They generally understood the benefit (why they were getting it, the conditionality requirements, and the amounts paid to them) and did not share any of the negative experiences of other claimants.

Participants in the adviser groups stressed how complexity made it impossible to be able to advise with confidence on the full range of benefits, and how confusion and error in advice and decision making were evident and often had negative implications for claimants. They also gave examples of how benefit complexity had discouraged claimant movements into work, citing, in particular, the difficulty of demonstrating with accuracy how people would be better off financially in paid work.

Views about an ideal benefit system

Part of the group discussions focused on thinking about what people would like to see in a benefit system in the future, and the following key characteristics were identified as desirable:

- **Stability and certainty:** Having a stable income that people could be confident about being paid routinely and reliably was thought to be extremely important for managing on a low income and avoiding falling into hardship or debt.
- **Transparency and fairness:** Many claimants expressed a strong desire to understand better their individual entitlement in order to be confident that they were receiving the right amount. There was also a prominent desire for the benefit system to be fair, by providing help to people with no access to other sources of income and refusing financial assistance for people who were perceived to be abusing the system in some way.
- **Simplicity:** There were numerous calls for greater simplicity in the benefit system and these were often linked to claimants' and advisers' desires to understand benefits better and for benefit processing to be more efficient.

- **Benefit entitlement based on individual assessment:** There was a general consensus that individual, rather than household, assessment of entitlement for benefits was preferable, particularly because it would avoid the negative consequences of household means testing. One example is the perception of financial burden placed on non-dependent adults or pressures to break up households.
- **Quick decision making and payments:** Prompt processing of claims was thought to be highly important in helping people to avoid serious financial problems, such as getting behind with rental payments to the point where court action had to be taken.
- **Help with return to work:** Most claimants talked about benefits and work as being linked with each other and thought that people should be offered the appropriate help to get back to work as soon as possible. Being able to provide people with clear indications of the financial impact of taking up paid work was also considered necessary by claimants and advisers.
- **Efficient and effective organisation and delivery of benefits:** Dealing with more than one organisation or having no face-to-face contact with benefit officials were perceived to be problematic for claimants and could lead to delays, contradictory advice and errors.

Views on the single working age benefit

The single working age benefit was introduced to study participants as having two components – a basic component intended to reflect the common everyday living requirements of individuals, and an ‘extra needs’ component designed as a response to the additional expenses generated for some, but not all, claimants by responsibilities for children, ill health or disability, rental obligations or a low income from work.

There were some immediate positive reactions to a basic component that would meet everyday living expenses, and that was a consistent amount regardless of age, length of time on benefit and reason for being out of work. In this respect the single working age benefit appeared to meet people’s desire for stability, certainty, transparency and fairness.

It was recognised that addressing people’s additional needs, through an extra needs component, would in all probability not be simple. However, by and large this drawback was not considered to be significant enough to abandon altogether the idea of the single working age benefit. Many claimants favoured the suggested simplification over the current system because they associated a single benefit with a single, slicker claiming process. In an ideal scenario they assumed they would be able to claim the basic component quickly and easily and then be guided towards claiming appropriate elements of the extra needs component. Key to claimants’ and advisers’ thinking about a single process for claiming benefits was to have only one organisation responsible for benefit delivery.

Advantages of the single benefit for encouraging movements into work were also perceived. A single benefit was thought by claimants and advisers to offer the prospect of clearer advice about the financial implications of taking work, and importantly, for returning to benefit if work was not successful for some reason. From the perspective of advisers, having a single benefit that could be explained easily and quickly to claimants would leave more time for focusing on help to return to work.

Some of the more negative reactions to the idea of a single working age benefit were not directed towards the benefit itself but at Government and how it would implement reform. Some advisers in particular demonstrated a lack of confidence in Government departments delivering fundamental change and implementing a new IT system to support it, based on past experiences. There were claimants who saw the single working age benefit as having little relevance to their lives or who perceived that ideas for benefit simplification were driven only by desires to cut costs. However, in both the claimant and adviser groups no support was expressed for maintaining the benefit system in its current complexity.

Implications for policy

In an exploratory study of this kind it was not possible to delve very deeply into what people thought about the detail of a single benefit. Difficult issues remain to be resolved such as how Housing Benefit (HB) (and Council Tax Benefit (CTB)) and tax credits could or should be included within a single working age benefit, about how carers would be accommodated, and about how diverse needs would be met through the extra needs component of the single benefit.

If the response of the claimants and advisers who took part in this study were replicated in the wider population, then we could be confident that any future policy debate about benefit simplification and the single working age benefit would attract widespread attention and involvement.

One consistent finding from this study is that the dominant feeling among the claimants and advisers taking part was that the difficulties they faced with claiming benefits, the problems caused when circumstances change, and the uncertainties that were created by the transition to work, all need addressing. A simplified benefit system was generally seen as having the potential for, possibly large, improvement, and the idea of a single working age benefit, as an example of radical simplification, attracted interest and support. The dysfunctions of benefit complexity noted by the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee are as evident in 2010 as they were four or five years ago. The imperative for change is arguably now even greater.

1 Introduction

This report presents findings from a study of the views and attitudes of social security claimants and people who advise claimants on benefits and employment issues about an idea for the radical reform of the benefit system. The idea in question is the 'single working age benefit', which in essence proposes to replace the full range of working age benefits with a single benefit. This idea is attracting interest from a range of stakeholders including political parties, public bodies with oversight of social security matters, and policy think tanks.

The research was based on a series of separate discussion groups with social security claimants and with benefit advisers in four locations in the UK conducted in November and December 2009. It was also informed by a selective review of research and policy literature from the UK and abroad.

The project was commissioned against the background of a growing level of interest in the idea of major benefit reform following critical examinations of benefit complexity from the Social Security Advisory Committee (2004), National Audit Office (2005), Public Accounts Committee (2006), and the Select Committee on Work and Pensions (2007).

In this chapter we firstly set out more fully the policy background to the single working age benefit (Section 1.1). Following this we explore the issue of complexity and its sources within the social security system (Section 1.2) and explain a version of the single working age benefit that we used in this study as a way of stimulating discussion with claimants and advisers (Section 1.3). The research questions that informed the study and the methods adopted are set out in Sections 1.4 and 1.5 respectively. Finally, the structure of the rest of the report is explained in Section 1.6.

1.1 Policy background

There has been growing policy interest in recent years in the complexity of the British social security system. As a starting point for debate there has been widespread acceptance that the system is undeniably complex. Some argue that it is too complex and therefore has become dysfunctional in a number of respects, including ensuring people's entitlements to benefits, and in acting as a hindrance to welfare to work policy.¹ Others suggest that complexity in the benefit system is an inevitable and necessary consequence of the diversity in people's lives. However, whichever view is taken about complexity, there does appear to be consensus that simplification of the benefit system is a desirable policy objective.

The idea of radical simplification and of a single working age benefit have also been considered (and to a large extent cautiously endorsed as deserving serious analysis and consideration by Government) in a number of other policy documents originating from within and outside Government (see for example, Freud, 2007; Institute for Public Policy Research, in Sainsbury and Stanley, 2007; Gregg, 2008; Martin, 2009; Centre for Social Justice, 2009).

Radical reform is not of course the only response to complexity. In its report in 2007, the Work and Pensions Select Committee outlined two other possible responses: first to accept complexity, but shield claimants from its dysfunctional effects (for example, by having robust computer systems and well-trained staff in Jobcentre Plus, and external advice agencies to assist claimants) and secondly for DWP to engage in an ongoing process of incremental simplification by examining specific parts of the benefit system where complexity has been identified as particularly problematic.

At the time this study was conceived the level of analysis of the single working age benefit was restricted mainly to broad principles. What such a benefit might look like in practice was still the subject of thought and development.² For the purposes of this study, therefore, we drew on one model of a single working age benefit suggested in Sainsbury and Stanley (2007) which we explain in Section 1.3. However, before we do so, it is useful to consider the different types of complexity affecting the current UK benefit system.

¹ The Public Accounts Committee (2006) gives a particularly useful summary of the problems caused by complexity.

² Having said that, in the course of the project, a blueprint for fundamental reform was published by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) (2009). Its proposal for replacing the 51 benefits (as defined by CSJ) under the current system with two benefits bears a close resemblance to the structure of a single working age benefit used in this study – see Section 1.3.

1.2 Understanding complexity

It is possible to identify three principal sources of complexity in the benefit system:

- complexity associated with the design of individual benefits;
- complexity generated by the structure of the benefit system, (i.e. the number of, and interaction between, benefits);
- complexity in the organisation and delivery of benefits.

Individual benefit complexity derives primarily from who and in what circumstances a benefit is intended to help, both of which will reflect the overall policy purpose of the benefit. Some benefits are relatively simple. Child Benefit, for example, has few rules. All parents are the intended target population and the main circumstance of relevance is the birth of a child. In general Child Benefit is easy to understand, simple to claim and simple to process. In contrast, means tested benefits such as Income Support (IS) and HB tend to be far more complex. There are rules pertaining to household composition, age, health, employer status, income and capital, and rules about reporting changes in circumstances. Other benefits, such as Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), have complex criteria relating to health and disability.

Structural complexity is generated by the large number of benefits in the current system and the nature of the links between them. For example, large numbers of people will be eligible for, and in receipt of, more than one benefit. For example, a person out of work will receive an income replacement benefit such as JSA, but may also receive Child Benefit if they have children, plus HB if they are in rented accommodation. If the claimant also has a health condition or disabling condition then other benefits might also be available, such as DLA. In addition, the receipt of one benefit might affect entitlement or the amount, of a different benefit.

Organisational complexity is the result of how Jobcentre Plus, local authorities and HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) structure their organisations and processes, and the way they interact with claimants. The more organisations, departments and people that claimants have to deal with, the interviews or medical assessments needed, the greater the information requirements, and the ease or difficulty of making contact will all contribute to the organisational complexity experienced by claimants.

It is important to keep these distinctions in mind in the chapters that follow as they have different implications for reforming the benefit system and for the impact that a single working age benefit can have.

1.3 Single working age benefit

As mentioned earlier there is no unique and agreed interpretation of what a single working age benefit might look like in practice. For the purpose of stimulating discussion in the groups of claimants and advisers we therefore chose to present

a version of a single working age benefit following Sainsbury and Stanley (2007) that would replace all existing benefits and have the following structure:

- A basic component payable to all claimants out of work regardless of the reason they are out of work.
- This basic component would be the same amount for all claimants.
- The amount paid in the basic component would not vary depending on the length of time on benefit (i.e. there would be no higher, long-term rates).
- Eligibility for the basic component would be based principally on being out of work, rather than the reason for being out of work.
- An 'extra needs' component would be available for people with additional expenses generated by, for example, family and caring responsibilities, and ill health or disability.

This structure of the single working age benefit is based on the argument that all adults have roughly the same everyday needs that they must meet (such as for food, heating, clothing) and that these do not vary according to the reason a person is out of work. Hence, the basic component can be paid at the same rate for everyone. Basing eligibility principally on being out of work would remove the need for medical assessments as part of the claiming process. For claimants who are out of work for health reasons, claiming benefit would therefore become 'de-medicalised'. The structure also recognises however – in the extra needs component – that people might have additional needs for financial help for a number of reasons (as noted above) that they cannot be expected to meet from the basic component.

This basic structure for a single working age benefit leaves some important issues integral to the detail of a single benefit to be decided, including:

- the level of benefit;
- unit of assessment (i.e. individual or household);
- basis of entitlement (i.e. means tested, contributory or universal);
- conditionality (i.e. the extent to which eligibility is based on work-related activity).

How these issues are resolved is not prescribed by the structure of the single working age benefit. For example, the principle of a single benefit does not provide an answer to the question of what level the benefit should be paid at, nor suggest that it should be assessed on an individual or household basis. We therefore used the group discussions to explore claimants' and advisers' views on them.

1.4 Research questions

The overall aim of the study was to explore views about a single working age benefit as a possible future direction for reform of the social security system. The scope of the research study therefore covered three broad topics:

- the current benefit system;
- the design of an improved (or ideal) social security system for the future;
- current ideas about benefit simplification via a single working age benefit.

We translated these into a series of more detailed research questions:

- What are the views of benefit recipients on the current benefit system?
- What would an ideal benefit system look like?
- What value is attached to contributory benefits and the trade-off between beliefs about entitlement and concerns about differential treatment and greater complexity?
- Would a single benefit deal with people's problems with their benefits?
- Would a single working age benefit reduce concerns about trying work?
- How would it help move people further towards employment?
- How would a single working age benefit help people to get their entitlement?
- Would it reduce uncertainties about entitlement?
- How can there be a balance between a simple system and one that caters for individual need?
- Would people's diverse needs be met by a single working age benefit?
- Is there support for moving towards a single working age benefit?
- How would a single working age benefit match people's expectations?

Addressing these questions was the principal objective of the group discussions. They were used, therefore, to inform the development of the research instruments used to gather data on experiences and to stimulate discussion about a single working age benefit. (The research instruments can be found in Appendix B.)

1.5 Research methods

We chose to use discussion groups with claimants and advisers on the basis that exploring policy ideas for the future or proposing solutions to existing problems is best tackled in some form of group setting where people feel less exposed and can react to ideas from their peers. Asking benefit recipients about hypothetical changes to the social security system is not straightforward and we know that

many claimants have a limited, or poor, understanding about their own benefits, let alone the wider range of benefits (Irvine *et al.*, 2008). Fieldwork was conducted in four locations in the UK in November and December 2009.

We also conducted a short, selective review of relevant literature from other countries in order to inform the development of research instruments and to provide some degree of international context for the study. (We use the findings from this review in Chapter 5 where we reflect on the outcomes of the discussion groups.)

1.5.1 Sampling

At the time that this study was being designed DWP were engaged in establishing new protocols for the transfer of confidential data about claimants to external organisations. We therefore adopted a suitable alternative method of recruitment that avoided any data transfer issues. (More details about recruitment are included in Appendix A.)

A recruitment agency was contracted to recruit participants to the claimant groups directly from Jobcentre Plus offices. A short screening instrument was used to ensure that an appropriate mix of claimants was recruited. The intention was that between 12 and 16 people would attend each group and be varied in terms of:

- age;
- sex;
- benefits received;
- their experiences of moving between benefits.

Appendix A sets out the recruitment methods and characteristics of the claimants attending the groups.

Sampling for the adviser groups was carried out by compiling lists for each fieldwork site of national and local advice organisations and organisations representing claimant groups (such as disabled people and lone parents) operating there. Personal letters of invitation were sent to each organisation requesting that a front line member of staff (i.e. who had regular contact with claimants as part of their duties) take part in the discussion group. We also asked Jobcentre Plus local office managers to nominate personal advisers to take part. Appendix A contains details of the advisers participating in the groups.

1.5.2 Conduct of the discussion groups

In interpreting the findings from the discussion groups it is important to understand how the discussion in the groups was structured (see also Appendix B). In contrast to many social research projects, the purpose of the groups was to generate views about an abstract idea rather than a concrete policy proposal or to collect data about actual experiences.

We were aware at the outset that this work would be essentially exploratory in nature. We did not know the extent to which claimants (though we were more confident about advisers) would be able or willing to engage with the subject. The groups, therefore, were structured to build up to a consideration of the single working age benefit rather than to begin discussion there. Hence, the first session asked about knowledge and experiences of the current benefit system before asking for whom, and for what purposes, the benefit system should be designed. We expected to generate a number of problems and criticisms of the current system. This would then allow us to ask the groups what an ideal benefit system might look like that would meet what they had identified as the purposes of social security and address the problems they had identified.

Having reached this point, we introduced the notion of a single working age benefit, explaining the rationale behind it, the basic principles underpinning it and what it might achieve (as outlined in Section 1.3). At the time of conducting the fieldwork we were not in a position to ask the groups to respond to more concrete proposals (such as different versions or models of a single working age benefit). However, we were able to generate responses about what people thought about a single working age benefit in principle, and to develop the discussion by asking whether people thought it met their view of an ideal benefit system and whether it would deal with some of the problems they had identified with the current system. The final question addressed by the researchers was whether a single working age benefit would affect their behaviour and choices about moving towards work.

The adviser groups were constructed differently but with the same rationale of building up to a discussion of the single working age benefit. The first topic raised was therefore the nature of complexity in the benefit system and the problems this caused. Advisers were then asked to think about how policy should respond to complexity. Here we used the Work and Pensions Select Committee's distinction between 'shielding' claimants, incremental change and radical reform (mentioned in Section 1.1) as a stimulus for discussion. Finally, the idea of a single working age benefit was introduced in the same way as in the claimant groups and views sought.

During both the claimant and adviser groups we also asked participants to complete a number of 'voting exercises' designed to gauge overall views and to prompt further discussions. These exercises comprised a number of statements about the current system, the need for reform and about the single working age benefit with which people were asked to agree or disagree (using a standard five-point Likert scale). (We report the outcomes of these exercises in Chapter 4.)

Appendix B contains the research instruments used for the discussion groups.

1.6 Structure of the report

Chapter 2 presents claimants' and advisers' views and experiences of the current benefit system and how complexity affects their experiences.

In Chapter 3 we explore people's views, from their perspectives as claimants or advisers, about how the benefit system could and should be improved in order to address the problems they experienced, and therefore what an 'ideal' benefit system might look like in the future.

Chapter 4 presents the responses of both sets of participants to the idea of a single working age benefit.

Chapter 5 comprises a summary of the findings from the groups and returns to the set of research questions that we set out to address in the study. We also consider the policy implications of this piece of exploratory research.

Appendices A and B comprise the methodological summary of the project.

2 Views about the current benefit system

As explained in Chapter 1 we asked the claimant group participants to talk about the current benefit system as a way of approaching discussion of the single working age benefit. The purpose of this was so that we could ask later whether and how a single working age benefit could maintain what people liked about the current system and deal with the problems that they had personally experienced. Discussion was prompted by the use of a showcard that contained a number of statements (derived from previous research projects conducted by SPRU) about people's knowledge and experience of the benefit system. (The showcard is reproduced in Appendix B.)

Generating views about the current system was approached differently in the groups with advisers; we asked participants to discuss the complexity of social security benefits and the effects of complexity on the lives of the people they saw as clients and on their work as advisers.

What emerged from the discussions were different perspectives. The claimants were able to talk about their personal experiences of being claimants, while the advisers drew on the experiences of working with many different claimants over many years.

2.1 The claimant perspective

2.1.1 Overview

One group of claimants stood out from the others in the extent to which they found the benefit system relatively easy to understand and negotiate. These were claimants of JSA, who were mostly men, and of whom many were single and in the younger age group. Their experience of the benefit system was straightforward. They mainly claimed JSA and no other benefit. They found it easy to understand, including the conditionality requirements, and received a consistent amount that did not vary and did not have additional premiums. They had not moved between

benefits or had experience of any overlapping rules. For them the experience of claiming was unproblematic, and in the discussion groups they often expressed surprise at the contrasting stories of other people who had encountered multiple difficulties.

In contrast, most people in the claimant groups said they found the benefit system confusing. Some, particularly those receiving IS or ESA expressed a view that this created a strong sense of frustration and insecurity from not having an understanding of why they received what they did and what would happen if their circumstances changed. For them, there was an inherent desire to know more about benefits – some expressed this view in terms of respect and dignity. They did not think they should be made to feel powerless and vulnerable by a benefit system that was meant to support them.

For some, there was a recognition that complex individual benefits that required long, complicated forms to be completed could act as a deterrent to people putting in legitimate claims. Unsurprisingly, because everyone attending the claimant groups was a current claimant, there were no personal examples, though several people described relatives who had been put off completely from claiming.

Also, people reported that their confusion meant that they did not know what they were entitled to and therefore what benefits to claim. One source of confusion was the number of benefits, the different names for each benefit and the changes in the names over the years. Some people referred to benefits that were either no longer part of the benefit system, or were unrecognisable to the researchers (for example, 'family allowance', 'disability benefit' and 'low income benefit'). Some talked about learning about benefits only when told by external advisers or health workers, and friends and neighbours rather than being informed by Jobcentre Plus advisers. This was another source of frustration and complaint.

Some claimants in the groups described reporting changes in circumstances to one part of the social security system and assuming that they had met their responsibilities and that the information would find its way to other parts of the system where it was relevant. However, their experience had been that this transfer of information did not happen and they subsequently found themselves having to respond to later queries, which was confusing and time-consuming, or had meant being faced with a demand to repay an overpayment.

Delays more generally were always a source of problems for claimants. Typically these occurred when people made a new claim for benefit, or were transferring between benefits. Delay meant being without possibly a major or sole source of income, which in some cases could lead to hardship or to threats of eviction from private or public landlords.

2.1.2 Work and the benefit system

It was noticeable how quickly questions from the researchers about experiences of the current benefit system prompted responses from some participants

about what help (or lack of it) they had received from Jobcentre Plus or external employment providers in their attempts to find work. This is perhaps not surprising given that most claimants making new claims will soon meet a personal adviser to discuss moving back to work so that the experience of the benefit system and employment help will be concurrent and therefore probably inextricably connected in their minds.

Despite the many criticisms and frustrations expressed about the benefit system, the majority of people attending all four claimant groups were actively seeking work. Some expressed strong, sometimes emotional, opinions that they were 'desperate' to work. The benefit system was therefore sometimes perceived more as an obstacle that had to be negotiated rather than a reason for not seeking work. People talked about the uncertainties of knowing whether it would be financially worthwhile taking a job but no-one offered a personal experience of not taking a job as a result. One complaint from a number of people was the uncertainty surrounding Better Off Calculations (BOCs) carried out by Jobcentre Plus or employment service provider staff. One of the most important questions they wanted answering in their discussions with advisers was what their income would be if they took a job. The most common experience however was that they were offered only tentative estimates.

Having said that most people attending the claimant groups wanted to work, there were some exceptions, for example from people who were close to retirement age and people with severe health conditions, who said that they did not want to work or could not see any possibility of work in the near future.

2.1.3 Claiming more than one benefit

People who were receiving more than one benefit fell into two broad groups: those who claimed more than one at the same time, and those on a benefit for some time before claiming an additional benefit.

The first group typically included people who had lost their jobs and were claiming an out-of-work benefit plus IS and HB (and CTB). Most spoke about the confusion caused by different claim forms (usually described as lengthy) that contained requests for the same information, having to deal with different officials (often in different organisations) and receiving contradictory or inconsistent advice. One participant said that her claim for multiple benefits was made at a time of acute illness and so she felt she had to trust the appropriate benefit authorities to make the correct decisions on her claims. Although she was in no condition to do otherwise she was not concerned about this at the time. She was both alarmed and delighted therefore when ten months later she was informed of an official error on a claim that had resulted in an underpayment that was now being paid as a lump sum.

People who claimed an additional benefit while already a claimant included those claiming Carer's Allowance and DLA. There were not many DLA claimants in the claimant groups but those who did receive this benefit compared it favourably with

other, means tested benefits. They said that it was clear what you were going to get: they understood that there were different rates and if you met the qualifying conditions then that was the amount you received. This was unlike IS which changed with circumstances and which it was difficult to get definitive advice about entitlements. However the process of claiming DLA was not straightforward and people who had been turned down were not satisfied with the decision even if it was not difficult to understand.

2.1.4 Moving between benefits

There were two types of moves between benefits mentioned by people in the claimant groups. The first was an obligatory move as circumstances changed. One of the biggest problems in moving between benefits was financial hardship experienced in the interim between one benefit stopping and another starting.

A number of people in the claimant groups had moved from JSA to ESA, and vice versa. People in the groups who had made the former move said that this had not been particularly difficult. People who had been obliged to move from ESA to JSA were far less satisfied but this was not primarily because of the administrative processes involved in making the change but because they found it hard to accept that they had been found 'fit for work' when their self-assessment was the opposite. However, one example of a procedural problem involved a claimant who experienced a period of around six weeks without either ESA or JSA during which time she was dependent on Social Fund Crisis Loans to meet her everyday living costs. As she explained it, her claim had apparently remained 'active' though no payments were being made which had the effect of halting the processing of her new claim for JSA. She did not understand why her claim for ESA had not been closed and no-one had explained the implications for her.

The second type of move, though less common, was associated with people making choices between out-of-work benefits, such as Carer's Allowance and IS. One claimant explained how he made the wrong choice. He was advised by a Jobcentre Plus adviser that his wife should claim Carer's Allowance for looking after him although he was already claiming IS. His wife made a successful claim but his IS was reassessed on a higher household income. Hence, while she received Carer's Allowance (at approximately £50 a week) he lost a higher amount of IS, HB and CTB. He said that for the £50 Carer's Allowance they lost £100 elsewhere.

2.1.5 Aspects of delivery

There were numerous complaints about the difficulty of doing business with Jobcentre Plus. People were dissatisfied when they could not get answers to their questions or get the advice they sought from staff in Jobcentre Plus offices who were acting principally as employment advisers. There was some resentment at being directed to banks of telephones in Jobcentre Plus offices when they wanted to query some aspect of the benefit. Having to wait to get access to a telephone,

a lack of privacy and the difficulty of finding a knowledgeable person eventually (if at all) created a sense of frustration and sometimes anger.

2.2 Adviser perspectives

2.2.1 Impossibility of knowing everything

As we have mentioned already, the notion of complexity was interpreted very widely in the group discussions. Complexity was associated with individual benefits, with the broader system of benefits, and with arrangements for processing benefits. There was a unanimous view that the benefit system is complex, and probably getting more complex. Although this view was usually offered in a largely non-judgmental way (i.e. it was seen as a rather obvious statement of fact) discussion quickly moved on to examples of where complexity caused them and the clients they advised particular (sometimes serious) problems.

In all the groups the first effect of complexity spontaneously mentioned was the impossibility of knowing about all benefits. The advisers in the groups, including Jobcentre Plus advisers, were quick to concede that they did not have a full understanding of the benefit system which made the job of advising some people very difficult. It was thought to be impossible to become an expert across the entire system and to understand the connections between its many and varied elements. Advisers generally only felt confident about giving advice on parts of the benefit (and welfare to work) system that they knew well and had experience of.

The Jobcentre Plus advisers in the groups said they were usually trained to have a good knowledge of one part of the benefit system if they were dealing with particular claimants, such as recipients of JSA or ESA. For working with some claimants, who were on one benefit only, their knowledge was sufficient and problems rarely arose. However, if a claimant had other benefits, which was very common, then a lack of knowledge of other benefits (especially HB) meant they found themselves unable to give the same level of advice. Resolving problems was not impossible but the time taken and the inconvenience and uncertainty created for claimants was seen as a serious drawback. One Jobcentre Plus adviser made the point that some of the claimants he saw displayed visible signs of stress.

Advisers in non-Jobcentre Plus organisations talked about the problems and frustrations of trying to help people with benefit problems. They often found it difficult to find a person who could talk authoritatively about an individual's claim, while some reported that they were 'not allowed' to talk to call centre staff on behalf of their clients.³ Call centre staff appeared to them to rely on scripts rather than having a good understanding of benefits that they could then apply to an

³ Personal advisers in Jobcentre Plus offices do not deal with the administration of benefit claims. Claimants who wish to query some aspect of their claim are required to make contact with a benefit processing office via a remote call centre.

individual's claim. Some advisers said that telephone contact with a Jobcentre Plus decision maker⁴ seemed almost impossible. Others reported instances where they or their clients had received different advice and interpretations from different Jobcentre Plus staff.

2.2.2 Complexity as a source of confusion and error

Lack of knowledge and understanding was seen as leading to incorrect awards. One Jobcentre Plus adviser manager expressed this firmly: *'I've no doubt that staff in this Jobcentre and in every Jobcentre are doing different bits wrong'*. Another adviser said that particularly difficult complaints come from claimants who had received some wrong advice or no advice at all when they should have and only learned later of some potential entitlement. If for some reason this could not be backdated then claimants became very aggrieved. One non-Jobcentre Plus adviser who worked mainly with foreign claimants and non-English speakers talked about a client who had been given completely wrong advice about eligibility to IS and therefore wasted weeks applying for a benefit to which he would never have been entitled.

One important consequence of complexity referred to by advisers was that breakdown or mistakes in processing a benefit at one point in the system could have negative consequences down the line, because of links between benefits and administrative processes. One example cited was of a claim for contribution-based JSA that was turned down for lack of National Insurance credits, resulting in the immediate cessation of HB and CTB.⁵

More generally the place of HB in the benefit system and its administration by local authorities was seen as a source of difficulty. The links between HB and other benefits were often mentioned as problematic. One adviser gave an example of the perverse effects that can emerge from the overlaps between HB and Working Tax Credit. A client who took up low paid work whilst in receipt of HB claimed Working Tax Credit which was awarded. HB was then reassessed and reduced because of this new source of income and the client found himself with only a small change in his overall income. However, he was now involved with two administrative organisations which added an unnecessary element of complexity to his life. Different administrative organisations were seen here as a partial cause

⁴ Decision makers are responsible for making decisions on claims. They do not personally collect information from, or interview, claimants face-to-face.

⁵ Although this was recounted as an example of an adverse effect of links between benefits, it is interesting to note that there is no clear reason why a decision on contribution-based JSA should have this effect since it is **income-based** JSA that passports claimants to HB and CTB. There may, of course, have been more to this story than mentioned in the discussion group or it might be an example of the confusion caused by the benefit system for people who are probably, in general, more well-informed than most claimants.

of difficulties. In advisers' experience, delays or mistakes in HB awards carried the threat of eviction proceedings being taken, sometimes surprisingly quickly.

There were numerous comments about lengthy claim forms for some benefits, which was said to be a source of concern and difficulty for many claimants.

ESA rules were seen as a cause of problems. There was a common view among advisers that ESA had tougher eligibility criteria than the benefit it had replaced (Incapacity Benefit (IB)) and that many people were not qualifying and having to make claims for JSA instead. Hence, a common experience for claimants was to make a claim for ESA, waiting while the claim was decided (which might include attending a medical examination as part of the Work Capability Assessment (WCA)) and then after failing the WCA having to claim JSA (which meant taking the initiative in making a claim as there is no automatic process activated when someone fails the WCA). Most advisers had had experience of unsuccessful claimants pursuing an appeal. One adviser mentioned the case of one client who had lodged an appeal and made a fresh claim for ESA at the same time. The adviser could envisage the possible situation of a second appeal being lodged before the first was resolved.

Some advisers identified an obvious and immediate drawback of the multiplicity of benefits each with its own name – claimants did not know benefit names, which could result in non-take up. (As noted above, this was echoed in the claimant groups.)

2.2.3 Complexity and moving towards work

The relationship between the benefit system and moving back to work was recognised as an issue. For most Jobcentre Plus advisers it was a common experience that much of their early engagement with a new client was taken up with dealing with benefit and related issues (such as debt and housing). Advisers said they often had to spend a substantial amount of time trying to unpick a client's benefit situation so that they could provide appropriate advice about returning to work. This was seen as time which could better be used discussing work-related activity.

Some advisers reported that claimants were often in a 'comfort zone' (of a regular and reliable benefit income) that they perceived would be threatened by trying work. Such a perception was strengthened when a claimant had experienced problems with the benefit system in the past, particularly when payments had been delayed. Some advisers said that they could not always reassure people that they would be better off financially in work sufficiently for them to take the step into work. One external adviser working with lone parents said that it was often only possible to estimate clients' current and possible future circumstances very roughly such that he could not often advise with any confidence that work would be a sensible choice. He put this succinctly: *'the system seems to be doing the opposite of what I thought it was for. It's meant to encourage people towards independence and standing on your own two feet – but it does the opposite'*.

Jobcentre Plus advisers generally felt that they could not offer a BOC without the assistance of a software package to do the calculations for them. BOCs were certainly seen as essential for their work but they could never be entirely sure that the output they produced was right. Most of the time they could only produce a rough estimate because they relied on inputting accurate figures from claimants of current and potential income and expenditure. Some advisers expressed a concern that people could experience financial hardship if they tried work and were not actually better off as a result. Such an experience could also damage the relationship with the adviser who did the BOC and discourage further attempts to try work.

In one adviser group there was agreement that the benefit system (especially because of its links with HB and tax credits) can act as a distinctive to long-term benefit claimants trying work because of the potential disruption to income and therefore ability to pay rent and bills. One adviser mentioned the danger of building up large overpayments of tax credits if work did not last long. If a claimant experienced this once, then they could be very wary of trying work again. And she argued, if word got round that this problem had been experienced then others would be discouraged.

Another concern, for people claiming long-term sickness benefits, was about the effect of trying work on their DLA awards. Advisers reported people having real fears that they might lose not only DLA but, importantly, many of the goods and services that DLA receipt entitled them to, such as Blue Badges (allowing parking concessions) from local authorities. Although DLA has no employment conditions attached to eligibility and is explained as a legitimate in-work benefit in Jobcentre Plus publicity material, people were often not convinced and advisers who had had experience of DLA recipients having claims reviewed after starting work felt they were not able to provide any guarantees to them.

Similarly, advisers reported that fear of being awarded a wrong tax credit amount, and subsequently being faced with an overpayment recovery, was another barrier for claimants.

However, there was not a strong feeling among advisers that new claimants are put off entering work by potential difficulties in moving back onto benefits if the job did not work out. Many claimants, it was suggested, could not understand why so many hoops and hurdles seemed to be put in their way through the complex rules of eligibility for benefits, but this did not put them off wanting to work. Echoing the evidence from the claimant groups reported above, there was a strong view expressed that the majority of people attending Jobcentre Plus offices or job brokers or advice centres genuinely wanted to get off benefits and into work.

One final observation from advisers has some bearing on thinking about the desirability of a single working age benefit. Several advisers talked favourably about Return to Work Credit (RTWC), the £40 a week tax-free payment available

to people leaving IB/ESA which is payable for a year. Advisers viewed RTWC as a very useful financial tool for helping people make the transition from benefits to work. It was easy to understand and explain and the application process was straightforward and relatively quick. Eligibility rules were considered to be simple and there were no complicating links to other benefits. It was recognised that RTWC is not a social security benefit but its simplicity was seen as a principle that might have wider relevance for the benefit system.

2.2.4 Moving between benefits

The most common moves between benefits mentioned by advisers in the discussion groups were between JSA and ESA, and ESA and JSA. The first of these created few if any problems for the advisers beyond what were seen as the expected delays and effort required in making a claim.

In contrast, advisers described negative experiences for some claimants in the move from ESA to JSA that derived from the nature of the medical test for ESA rather than any process problems. There was a feeling that JSA and ESA did not always correctly differentiate between people who were capable of work and those who were not. Examples were given of cancer patients and people with very limited walking ability not being entitled to ESA. Advisers reported that people simply could not understand why they had been found 'fit for work' when they had a health condition, particularly when they were being treated by their GP or a hospital doctor. Advisers could, therefore, find themselves in the uncomfortable position of trying to explain to clients why they had been taken off ESA after a WCA.

2.2.5 Complexity and benefit processing

One consequence of the number of benefits that was mentioned principally by advisers was the consequent number of IT systems used to process claims (and tax credits). There was a belief, backed up by examples of negative outcomes for their clients, of 'systems not talking to each other', i.e. information held by one part of the benefit system not being available or transferred to another part.

A Jobcentre Plus adviser said that processing benefits was '*much easier in the old days when it was all done under one roof*'. This was in response to a comment from an external adviser that the fragmentation of processing (between call centres, Jobcentre Plus offices, and Benefit Delivery Centres), which she called '*part of the complexity*' was problematic. The personal connection between a claimant, an office and the benefit staff had been lost. Another adviser commented that some people do not have the language skills to deal with telephone services provided for claimants. Many could not get past the initial automated stage when information is asked for and answers have to be punched into a telephone keypad.

2.3 Summary

One important distinction that can be made from analysis of the claimant group data is that views were often about the **process** of claiming and what they sometimes perceived as the **unfairness** of their benefits (including what they saw as the low amounts of money they received). There were probably fewer comments that we could identify as being specifically about the **structure** of the benefit system. Similarly, the views of the advisers can be divided into those which addressed the rules of individual benefits and the processes for claiming them, and the complexity of the system which derived from how benefits interacted with each other.

The main points to take forward from this chapter into later discussion about a single working age benefit can be summarised as follows:

- The only claimants who generally did not report problems in their dealings with the benefit system were JSA recipients. They generally understood the rules and amounts of benefit they were receiving.
- In contrast, most people expressed limited (sometimes very limited) knowledge not only of their own benefits but also about the wider benefit system.
- Many people felt strongly that they wanted to understand more, not only so that they were sure they were receiving their full entitlements but also because they saw it as an issue of self-respect and dignity.
- People found it time-consuming and frustrating having to deal with different people in different organisations, particularly when they felt they were given inconsistent information and advice.
- The main problem with moving between benefits, identified in both claimant and adviser groups, concerned financial hardship when moving between benefits, and moving from ESA to JSA.
- Advisers felt hampered by what they saw as the impossibility of being expert on the whole social security system. They felt they could not offer definitive advice on whether moving back to work was financially sensible.
- Advisers recognised that claimants could enter a 'comfort zone' of reliable benefit income and so become reluctant to take on what were perceived as the risks of trying work. Uncertainties around HB were identified by claimants and advisers as being especially problematic.

We will use these points in the coming chapters that explore how claimants and advisers would like to see the benefit change (Chapter 3), and in their responses to the idea of a single working age benefit (Chapter 4).

3 Views about an ideal benefit system

As explained in Chapter 1, the discussion groups with claimants were designed to follow a logical progression leading up to a consideration of the idea of a single working age benefit. After asking people about their experiences (positive and negative) of the current benefit system, discussion moved on to what people thought a better (or ideal) system would look like. The researchers prompted discussion by asking:

- What should the benefit system be trying to achieve? What is its purpose?
- Who should the system help? Should any groups be excluded?
- What should be the links between benefits and moving towards work?

The objective in having this discussion was to use claimants' views as a benchmark against which they could assess the principles of a single working age benefit later.

The approach in the adviser groups was slightly different. The initial discussion about the current benefit system (presented in Chapter 2) was followed by posing a more general question of what policy response was required (if any). As mentioned in Chapter 1 and explained in more detail later (in Section 3.2) we drew on the analysis of the Work and Pensions Select Committee (2007) to prompt discussion.

3.1 Towards an ideal benefit system: the claimant perspective

Although the researchers had not mentioned simplification of the benefit system in raising the questions above, it was interesting that in three of the four claimant groups there was some spontaneous response that an ideal benefit system would be a simple system that people could understand and access easily.

3.1.1 The purpose of the benefit system and who should be helped

The most common spontaneous response about what social security is for was that it should be a source of financial help for people who need it, i.e. for people with no other source of income. There was general agreement that the amount of financial help should be for basic living expenses only, or at a level just above basic expenses. There was no expectation or demand that people should be given money for anything above this, for example holidays or luxuries. Discussions about basic living expenses developed into recognition that these would be different for different household types and that some personal circumstances (such as health status) would affect financial needs. Mentioned particularly were families with young children (including lone parents), disabled people and older people.

The groups were quick to list familiar categories of claimant, including unemployed people, older people, families with children (including lone parents), and people with health problems and disabilities, as being the types of people who should be helped. Within these groups it was interesting that some particular groups in society were identified as in particular need for a variety of reasons. For example, young people were seen as vulnerable at a time of economic recession, and ex-servicemen were also seen as deserving of particular recognition.

In discussions of who should be helped by the benefit system, some people introduced the notion of entitlement through 'paying in' over a number of years or 'paying contributions' to the system. There was no consensus about whether only people who had contributed should receive benefits, or whether they should receive higher payments. People who held such views often moderated them when others talked about people (sometimes referring to their own experience) who were not able to make contributions but might still be in need.

3.1.2 Benefits and looking for work

Two strands of opinion emerged from discussions prompted by the question of how the benefit system should be linked to moving towards work. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the large majority of people attending the claimant groups expressed a desire (often a strong desire) to get into work. The first set of views expressed were therefore unsurprisingly about the help and support they felt they needed to make progress towards work. These views were frequently based on accounts of services already received that were found not to be helpful or on the experience of being denied the kind of help (for example training) that they thought would help them.

People who had become recently unemployed were confused and surprised when, as they perceived it, they received very little help in the initial weeks and months of being on benefit. For many, this seemed simply to make no sense, i.e. to deny help to someone who wanted to get back to work as soon as possible and for whom help was needed. Participants in the groups gave numerous examples of assistance that they had not been able to access and that they thought would

be worthwhile, including training, work equipment, apprenticeships, help with childcare, 'confidence boosting', and personal 'support workers'. In particular, there was a general view that having to wait up to six months for help (a common experience for JSA recipients) was particularly detrimental to young people and school leavers. There was support for the idea that there should be more apprenticeships and more (financial) support for attending college and for gaining skills.

The second strand of comment was about conditionality, although this was not the language used by the research participants. There was almost unanimous agreement that people should not be able to receive benefits without making some effort to return to work. Some strong views were expressed about benefit recipients who were perceived to '*just not want to work*' and judged to be lazy or to be exploiting the system. Community service and even National Service were made as serious suggestions for being conditions for the receipt of benefits. There was some support for making additional payments to people undertaking some form of work-related activity.

There was some discussion about benefit disregards. Some people had had experience of earnings from employment while receiving a means tested benefit, and of having benefit reduced when they exceeded the relevant disregard. The general view was that this was unfair, and discouraging, and that disregards should be increased or even removed as a way of incentivising claimants to try work.

3.1.3 Views about eligibility in an ideal benefit system

The groups were asked to reflect on different ways of defining the entitlement criteria for benefits. In particular they were asked for their thoughts on the pros and cons of basing entitlement on contributions or means testing and of assessing claimants on an individual or household basis.

Taking the second of these first, there was a lot of spontaneous support for the idea of individual assessment. Some people reported negative experiences of household assessment – for example one man considered it unfair that he could not receive HB because he had two sons living at home who were in full-time employment and their income (as non-dependants) was taken into account in his benefit assessment.⁶ Others identified very quickly what they saw as one advantage of individual assessment, namely that the rules relating to couples living together would become redundant. It was recognised by some people, particularly some of the lone parents, that the current rules created pressure on couples to live apart or to act fraudulently in reporting their living arrangements. They thought that individual assessment would have the positive effect that

⁶ Non-dependant deductions usually have the effect of reducing HB payments so it is not entirely clear why this man should report his whole claim was unsuccessful. What is reported above is his perception that having his sons at home was directly linked to the failure of his HB claim.

more couples would live together which they saw as being in the interests of the children of relationships. Individual assessment was also seen as inherently simpler than household assessment.

There were mixed views about the relative advantages and disadvantages of contributory-based and means tested benefits. There were some initial spontaneous responses in favour of not means testing, on the grounds that everyone without an income from employment and therefore in need of financial help should be eligible for benefits regardless of any savings they might have. There was a view that it was not fair effectively to penalise someone for being prudent in the past by saving money. However, when it was suggested that this argument would mean that someone with substantial capital (six figure sums were used as an example) would get the same as everyone else some people's enthusiasm for equal treatment wavered.

There was also a lack of agreement about whether people should receive more in benefit payments if they had contributed through National Insurance while they were in work. For some, it was perceived as natural fairness that someone 'paying in to the system' should get some reward for doing so. For others, particularly those who recognised that paying contributions was not possible for some people, it was unfair to differentiate in this way and they favoured consistent rates of payment. Others added another perspective, arguing that some people should forfeit their entitlement if, for example, they had deliberately given up employment.

3.1.4 Aspects of organisation and delivery in an ideal benefit system

When asked what an ideal benefit system might look like some responses were related to aspects of organisation and delivery rather than the structure of the benefit system as a whole or about individual benefits.

Some people argued for much simpler and shorter application forms and for better information about the range of benefits that they might be entitled to. There were some strong views from people who had applied for ESA that the processes of medical assessment were unfair. Apart from individual complaints about unsatisfactory treatment from examining doctors, some people argued that they wanted their GP to be the final arbiter of whether they were fit for work, rather than an anonymous doctor working on behalf of the Department.

A final suggestion from the claimant groups was that an ideal system would be administered by a single organisation to replace the various bodies (Jobcentre Plus, local authorities, tax authorities) that claimants often found themselves having to deal with. Though most people did not object in principle to using telephones to conduct their benefit business there was still a preference for having the opportunity of talking to someone who knew about their claim and for having face-to-face meetings if they wanted.

3.1.5 A note on 'deservingness' and 'fairness'

Although no one in the claimant groups used a language of 'deservingness' it was possible to detect in the discussions that people held quite firm normative views about who should be supported by the benefit system, in contrast with groups who might have limited income or resources but were felt to be outside the responsibility of the benefit system. People talked about those who were '*less fortunate*' than others, who '*needed help through no fault of their own*'. There was thus a lot of sympathetic language extended to older and disabled people, and as mentioned above to young people who were seen as blameless victims of economic recession.

Explanations for excluding some groups of people often included some element of comparison with either themselves or with the groups of people identified earlier in discussions as deserving of help. There were frequent references to the 'unfairness' of people having access to benefits or other assistance that was denied them for some reason or was felt to be inappropriate or unnecessary. It is not clear the extent to which people's views had any grounding in fact or whether they were expressions of prejudice or reflections of urban myths. However, people in the groups expressed strong views that people from abroad (whether working or not) and alcohol and drug abusers were treated too generously by the benefit system.⁷ Similarly, discussions about conditionality included references to what was 'fair' to expect of claimants in return for receiving benefits. These discussions did not yield any consensus beyond agreement that **something** should be required of most benefit recipients, but, as mentioned in Section 3.1.2, some people suggested some form of community service (or even a resurrection of National Service) was reasonable as reciprocation for receiving benefits.

3.2 Advisers' views on the need for reform

As mentioned in Chapter 1 the Work and Pensions Select Committee (2007) had identified three possible responses to benefit complexity:

- 'shielding' claimants from complexity;
- incremental changes to simplify benefit rules;
- a fundamental simplification of the structure of the benefit system.

We asked advisers in the discussion groups to think about these as ways of dealing with the problems in the benefit system they had identified earlier.

There was a collective view that shielding claimants from complexity was not an adequate response to the problems they encountered as advisers. None of the problems would be addressed, claimants would have no more understanding of benefits than they do now, current levels of confusion would persist, and they

⁷ Similar views were identified by Hall (2009) in a study of public views about spending priorities in the benefit system.

would need to spend as much time, and possibly more in the future, explaining benefits to clients and dealing with problems. One interesting view was that shielding could have the undesirable effect that claimants could effectively abdicate responsibility for their claims to advisers, and make no effort to increase their own understanding. This could lead to people staying with their current circumstances (their 'comfort zone'), particularly employment, rather than make efforts to change them. One adviser stressed the importance of transparency for claimants. In her experience she found that it was sometimes difficult to secure the trust of claimants because they did not believe explanations about benefits, especially when she was trying to explain something the claimant did not want to hear.

Most advisers recognised that, in their experience, making incremental changes to individual benefits was what happened now. It was not something they saw as a new approach. Their experience was of an almost continuous stream of amendments to benefit rules that they had to adjust to. Many of these were helpful⁸ – regardless of whether they were thought of as simplifications or not – while others caused further complication, particularly when the changes had effects on other benefits. However, there was a general view that the benefit system was, over time, increasing in complexity through incremental change rather than it being a force for simplification.

Responses to the idea that fundamental reform was necessary generated a mixed response. In general there was a majority view that some form of major reform was the most appropriate response to the current level of complexity in the benefit system. However, at the same time there was a fairly widespread feeling that the obstacles to major reform were so great that it was unlikely to happen or, if attempted, to succeed.

The following list summarises the varied problems that were perceived by advisers:

- Delivering a programme of major change is a huge challenge for Government/DWP with a high risk of failure. Examples of what advisers saw as poor implementation in the past were mentioned (including DLA and child support in the 1990s). Some of the advisers simply had no faith that if there was fundamental reform in the future it would be handled successfully.
- Similarly, fundamental change could require a new IT system which would present particular challenges for delivery. Some advisers said that not one IT programme (in any area of government that affected them) had ever been introduced smoothly.
- There would be no political will to introduce fundamental change. Fear of 'winners' and 'losers' and the long time frame needed to plan and implement change would constrain radical policy decisions.

⁸ One adviser mentioned Assessed Income Periods within Pension Credit as being helpful.

- Fundamental change could create disruption for claimants at the point of transition.
- Transitional protection arrangements would be necessary, thereby thwarting the aim of simplification.
- Fundamental change would be too costly.

These responses were interesting. For the researchers there seemed to be a degree of cynicism and even weariness about the suggestion of fundamental reform before people even began to think about what it might look like. For example, there were several almost instant responses from a number of advisers that fundamental change would be too costly, although objectively there could be no basis for this assumption. Another assumption was that change in itself would create complexity through the necessity of transitional protection for existing claimants. One adviser said that in her experience the introduction of ESA to replace IB had demonstrated how difficult it was for a lot of people to understand and accept that the benefit system now reflected a completely different view of ability to work. She saw this as indicating that any radical change might be even harder to get across to the claimant population.

Not all advisers expressed this level of pessimism though. Many took the view that problems with change had certainly been a familiar experience in the past but they concluded from this that fundamental change in the future would need long-term planning and consultation, and a continuing programme of re-education for existing claimants and for the public more generally. The many issues that would need addressing would require time to resolve rather than being a justification for continuing the status quo.

Having reached an almost unanimous consensus that, in principle, fundamental reform was desirable, discussion turned to what a future benefit system might look like. Suggestions that were raised included:

- consolidating the administration of benefits under one organisation. There was discussion about which of DWP or HMRC would be better placed to do this, but no conclusion reached. Both were seen as possible candidates;
- the introduction of a universal, out-of-work benefit, possibly not means tested. (NB the idea of a single working age benefit had not been introduced by researchers when this suggestion was made.);
- a clearer and stronger link with employment programmes. This might, for example, mean increased conditionality, or introducing a limit on the time people who were fit for work could remain on out-of-work benefits.

It is interesting to note the areas of overlap with the views of claimants presented above. There were unprompted suggestions from both groups for a much simplified system, suggestions that were sometimes expressed almost as pleas or demands. The call for one organisation to administer benefits reflected the wish

to avoid the frustration, confusion and delays of having to deal with different parts of DWP, local authorities and possibly HMRC. Ideas about closer links with employment programmes were also shared between the groups prompted mainly by people's desire to find work.

3.3 Summary

In its discussion of complexity in the benefit system, the Work and Pensions Select Committee (2007) was clear that complexity in itself should not be considered negatively; it was only when complexity became dysfunctional that concerns emerged and a policy response became necessary. From the discussions in the claimant and adviser groups it was clear that most people had some experience of the benefit system being dysfunctional. We can get some indication of this from the 'voting exercise' that claimants were asked to complete at the end of the discussions about personal experiences of benefits and what an ideal system might look like. The large majority of claimants agreed (or strongly agreed) with the statement 'the current system has personally caused me problems'.

Echoing the finding in Chapter 2 about people being frustrated by a benefit system they could not understand, there was a strong preference expressed for a simple system that allowed people to 'know where I stand'. From the accounts and discussions in the claimant groups we can identify that clarity, certainty and transparency would be welcome attributes of any reformed benefit system.

It was noticeable that the claimant groups displayed a strong work ethic which they would be happy to see translated into perhaps even more demanding conditions for the receipt of benefit than are part of the current system. However, there was a corresponding argument that conditionality should be matched by the provision of appropriate and, importantly, timely help ('from day one') soon after going onto benefits.

In discussions such as these we are aware that the views of claimants and advisers may be based partly on misperceptions of current benefit rules. We are also aware that in putting forward ideas for change, claimants did not necessarily think through the implications of their suggestions. (An example here is the claimant who suggested removing benefit disregard rules as a means of increasing the incentive to take paid employment, the logic of which would mean, for example, that anyone could claim benefits and earn as much as they liked.) Nevertheless, the contributions made are useful in highlighting where the benefit system was being dysfunctional in some way, acting against people's own aspirations. Hence, to pick up the example of disregards just mentioned, in thinking about benefit reform we are reminded that the current disregard rules may act against the policy aim of facilitating moves into work.

Overall, the main points to take forward to Chapter 4's discussion of a single working age benefit can be summarised as follows:

- Many claimants and advisers had experienced, and continued to experience, the dysfunctional effects of the benefit system.
- Negative experiences can be seen as deriving from the complexity of individual benefits, complexity in the benefit structure, and from aspects of organisation and delivery.
- Claimants' views on the purpose of the benefit system can be summarised as a recognition for the need to provide financial assistance for people with no or very limited income, and the recognition that some people have additional needs that should be supported.
- A lot of the discussion reflected a discourse of 'fairness', about to whom and in what circumstances the benefit system should provide help.
- Claimants' views about contributory versus means tested benefits were varied. There was no consensus about how to resolve the inherent tensions between them.
- Claimants saw advantages in moving towards individual assessment of benefits in place of household assessment.
- The desire to understand more about their own benefits came across very strongly from many claimants independently of any views about how this might affect their actions or choices about, for example, work or household arrangements.
- Advisers recognised the desirability of fundamental reform of the benefit system but expressed a lack of confidence about the likelihood that it would ever happen.
- Conditionality was discussed as a positive aspect of benefit rules, but one that needed to be matched by effective and timely help in moving towards employment.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter these points can be useful in providing a benchmark against which we can assess people's responses to the idea of a single working age benefit, the focus of the next chapter.

4 Views on the single working age benefit

In the final session of the group discussions the researchers introduced the idea of a single working age benefit as a way of responding to the complexity of the current benefit system. At this stage it was the intention to keep the explanation mostly at the level of principle rather than detail, such as what the level of benefit might be.

As explained in Chapter 1, the single working age benefit was described as comprising two components: a basic component to cover basic living expenses for all claimants with no income from paid employment and an extra needs component intended to contribute to additional needs generated, for example by an individual's household composition, or any health or disabling conditions they might have. It was explained that the reason for someone's unemployment would not be relevant under a single benefit, so there would be no need to differentiate between people out of work. Therefore, the basic component would effectively combine JSA, ESA (and IB), IS and potentially Bereavement Benefits and Carer's Allowance. It was suggested that the basic component of a single working age benefit could be paid at the same rate for all claimants, and could be kept at the same level regardless of the length of time of benefit.

The possible advantages of a single working age benefit were explained in the following way:

- equal treatment for all people without income from work;
- recognition of additional expenses in the extra needs component;
- no labelling of claimants, as 'disabled' for example;
- no need to transfer between benefits;
- no perverse incentive to declare sickness as a means of obtaining higher benefit payments;
- no perverse incentive to stay on benefits for long periods to secure higher, long-term rates;

- no need for medical assessments such as the current WCA for ESA, to claim the basic component.

The aim was to stimulate responses to the idea of a single benefit and for the researchers to use comments, observations and questions from the group participants to encourage discussion in greater depth. We wanted to know what people thought and what issues they raised.

In this chapter we reflect initially on how the discussions went, how people responded and the interest shown. We then present sections on what people said about the two components of a single benefit, and about how they viewed the potential effect on people's (including their own) moves towards work. As we expected there were many questions raised about a number of relevant issues, such as the level at which a single working age benefit might be paid, what eligibility criteria would need to be met, and the length of awards. We discuss these in Section 4.6. The penultimate section before concluding the chapter discusses the administration and delivery of the single working age benefit, which also emerged as topics of interest for claimants and advisers. Although the principle of a single working age benefit has no prescriptive implications for how the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) organises and delivers back-to-work help there were views expressed about this.

4.1 How people engaged with the idea of a single working age benefit

Before the research study commenced it was not known the extent to which claimants would be interested in, or able to, talk about the single working age benefit as a hypothetical idea. However, any concerns that the researchers might have had beforehand were mostly allayed by the way in which most of the research participants engaged with the topic. By the time the idea of a single working age benefit was introduced the groups had spent considerable time thinking about the current system and about the sorts of changes they would welcome in a reformed system. Hence, it was probably unsurprising that most people were able to contribute when asked their thoughts about the single benefit.

In reporting people's responses we should make it clear that people were invited to comment as soon as they wanted, as the principles behind the single working age benefit were explained. Because responses from the groups were invited immediately (rather than asking people to wait until a full explanation had been made by one of the researchers) other aspects of the single working age benefit idea were introduced as discussions progressed. For example, there were usually responses (positive and negative) to the principle of a single benefit before the researchers had reached the point in their explanations when they set out its purported advantages (i.e. as listed in the preceding bullet points).

Initial responses from claimants tended to be at general level, i.e. how a single working age benefit would deal with some of the problems identified with

benefits earlier, and how it would be easier for claimants in general to deal with their situation. Getting people to think about how a single benefit would affect them personally, in particular their thoughts and actions about work, required more input and prompting from the researchers.

Overall, our reflection was that most claimants were interested in talking about the benefit system, how it affected them and how it affected other people. While some people needed more coaxing than others to offer their views (which is the usual experience in group settings of this kind) most people were ready to give their opinions and responses even though some views, as would be expected, were not directly related to the single working age benefit, but covered a wide range of issues. The adviser groups also engaged readily with the task of thinking about a single working age benefit and how it would affect their roles and the lives of their clients. They needed little prompting.

In both groups there was a mainly constructive response to thinking about the single working age benefit, in the sense that people seemed willing to consider its positive implications and to be creative in generating other suggestions about benefit reform (such as links to employment support, or the organisation and delivery of a single benefit, both of which are discussed later in the chapter).

In the following sections we have presented an analysis of both claimants' and advisers' reactions to the idea of a single working age benefit. This includes both positive and negative views, though this is not to suggest that opinions were always expressed in such black and white terms. Positive views were sometimes conditional or matched with something less positive. Negative reactions were sometimes directed not at the idea of a single working age benefit itself, but towards the aims and intentions behind it, i.e. as people interpreted them.

4.2 Overall views about a single working age benefit

Some of the most spontaneous positive responses to a single working age benefit were linked to what people had earlier described as the problems with the current system. Some people immediately welcomed the idea of a single benefit as inherently simpler than a system of multiple benefits. For some, the prospect of a simple system that they could understand, or at least would be less confusing, was a strong reason on its own for endorsing the idea. One claimant (with a hint of relief in her voice) said that it was good that *'people will know what they are getting and what benefit they're on'*. Some people emphasised the importance to them of having a known and secure income that they could rely on and plan their household budgeting around. They therefore welcomed the idea that the basic component could guarantee them a stable financial basis which would not change even if some aspect of their circumstances did.

After hearing the initial explanation of the single working age benefit one participant's immediate response was very positive:

'I totally agree. I'm a big advocate of that. I think it sounds brilliant. Totally simplified. You've either got extra needs or you've not. There's none of this "... this benefit ... this benefit ... you'll have to claim this for a couple of months and then something else a few months later". All that carry on. Much better.'

The groups of advisers saw additional advantages of a single benefit. They envisaged that their task of explaining the benefit system to clients would become much easier and that hence more time would be available for helping them with other problems and with making progress towards work. A simpler system was also thought to generate fewer obstacles to work, and that performing a BOC would be easier and more transparent.

What was interesting about some of the discussions was the way in which people were willing to pursue the idea of a single working age benefit and look for ways in which it could deal with some of the problems with the current system. For example, some people were keen for a single benefit to remove the problem of linked and overlapping benefit rules. They argued therefore for each element of the extra needs component to be independent of the others and not be contingent on some other element of the single benefit.

The discussions about the single working age benefit were wide ranging but it was possible to identify many comments that were about either the basic component for everyday living expenses or about the extra needs component.

4.3 Basic component for everyday living expenses

For most people in the claimant groups the distinction between everyday living expenses and extra needs created by, for example, having children or being disabled was not difficult to grasp and the logic of having two components was recognised rather than challenged.

Many people responded positively to the idea that the basic component of a single benefit would be paid at the same rate for all claimants. Some responses here could be linked to earlier views about what was 'unfair' about the current system (i.e. that people in similar circumstances seemed to receive different amounts in benefit), and clearly reflected some people's sense of fairness. Discussions here sometimes developed with little input from researchers. For example, if the view was expressed that paying people the same meant that some people wouldn't have enough to pay for their needs (if they had children for example) others in the group responded that they would then be able to claim from the extra needs component.

Another welcome aspect of the single working age benefit noted by claimants was that the problematic task of having to choose which benefit to claim (for example between ESA and JSA, or between Carer's Allowance and a different

income replacement benefit) was avoided. Similarly, getting rid of the need to switch between benefits as circumstances changed was seen as an improvement, particularly by advisers who often became involved in trying to resolve the confusions and problems caused by this.

Some people also recognised that a single benefit, with an appropriate name, would avoid labelling claimants in unhelpful and possibly discriminatory ways. And as mentioned above it was viewed as positive simply to know clearly what benefit you were receiving.

A potential important gain from a single working age benefit was seen as quicker processing. As noted in Chapter 2, one of the major concerns of claimants was being left without any benefit income for periods of weeks while claims were being processed or reviewed. If the basic component of a single working age benefit had few initial eligibility criteria then people thought there should be no reason why claims could not be processed very quickly. There was a general view that as long as the basic component was put in payment quickly then the extra needs component could take longer to be dealt with without undue hardship resulting for claimants.

Where people expressed views about the basic component of a single benefit these were almost always positive (sometimes strongly so). People were generally supportive of the idea of equal payments to people out of work regardless of the reason for their unemployment as long as extra needs were also recognised.

4.4 Extra needs

As mentioned earlier people generally grasped and accepted the idea that it was possible to have a benefit system that responded to people's needs for everyday living expenses and to their extra needs. However, while the basic component was largely seen as feasible, it was recognised that extra needs were highly varied in type and intensity and that an extra needs component could not be designed with the same degree of simplicity.

There was widespread agreement that having children or being disabled generated needs that should be recognised in the benefit system, and that an extra needs component would be a feasible way of doing this. At this point some people began to comment that the single working age benefit, as a so-called 'simple benefit', was beginning to look complex in itself, and to resemble the current system.

There was some interesting discussion about the place of HB within a single working age benefit system. There was consensus that some people on low incomes (whether from social security or from work) could not afford to pay their full rents without help. The logic of this suggested to some that housing support should form one part of the extra needs component.

In discussions about HB the question arose of whether it was desirable for a simplified benefit system to have common entitlement conditions in place of the current mix of means tested, insurance-based, and universal benefits. We return to this issue in Section 4.6.

It was sometimes difficult to separate discussion about a simplified benefit system from discussion about individual benefits. For some people, if the rules of a single working age benefit, particularly in the extra needs component, were still complex then the object of simplification would be defeated. This was a view aired more in the adviser groups than the claimant groups. However, many claimants favoured the structure of a single benefit with two components, one for basic costs and the other for extra needs, even though they recognised that there would be different elements of the extra needs component. This was because they associated a single benefit with a single claiming process which they saw as much more preferable to their experiences of the current system in which they had to engage in multiple processes with different organisations.

In one adviser group, a potential positive consequence of an extra needs component was that there should be no need in future for the many, varied and complicated premiums that are part of different benefits. It was argued that because premiums were themselves a response to the additional costs of, for example disability or caring responsibilities then they could be absorbed within the elements of the extra needs component.

4.5 The single working age benefit and moving towards work

One of the key research questions of the study was whether a single working age benefit would influence people's thoughts and behaviours about moving towards work. As mentioned in Chapter 2, most claimants expressed a desire to work, so the question of whether a single benefit would change their attitudes towards work was effectively irrelevant. And the few people who did not want to work for health or age reasons said they would not think any differently whatever the design of the benefit system.

Nevertheless, a single benefit was thought to offer the prospect of clearer advice about the financial implications of taking work, and importantly, for returning to benefit if work was not successful for some reason. Although no-one in the claimant groups had had experience of the 'linking rules' there was a general desire for clarity and certainty about returning to the same level of benefit if they had to leave their employment.

Advisers had more experience of problems raised for their clients in the transitions into and out of work. Some recalled their earlier accounts (see Chapter 2) of trying to do BOCs for clients and the difficulty they had reassuring them that they would be better off in work. There was a view, therefore, that a single working age

benefit would enable them to give advice with a greater degree of certainty. Some advisers thought that if there was a single benefit that could be explained more easily, their clients would not be as occupied with their benefit status as they were at present but would be able to focus more quickly on moving towards work.

However, for most advisers, the problems of advising people about the financial effects of working were linked to the complexity of the tax credit system rather than the benefit system. We discuss this further in Section 4.6.

In talking about the links between a single working age benefit and work, many claimants reiterated what they had said earlier about what an ideal benefit system would look like. To recap, many people wanted the benefit system to be linked to better, more appropriate help in getting back to work, that importantly, was immediate rather than delayed in some way. The combination of a simplified benefit system and high quality employment help was viewed as highly desirable.

A small number of claimants attending the group discussions recorded that they were receiving, or had recently been receiving Working Tax Credit. However, we should note in the discussion that asked people about experiences of the current system, we did not ask specifically or explicitly about tax credits. Furthermore, in the explanation of the basic principle of a single working age benefit given by the researchers, the role or place of tax credits were not raised either. The reason for this approach was that the single working age benefit idea does not lead logically to any specific way of treating income from work for people receiving benefits. Rather it is a question that is open for a range of responses and ideas. Hence, as discussion of a single benefit progressed in the groups, the researchers raised the question themselves of 'where could, or should, tax credits fit in?'

Unfortunately, the claimant groups generated few views here, probably reflecting the small number of tax credit recipients in them. Advisers were more knowledgeable though and discussions raised a number of interesting, if inconclusive, issues. For some, reconciling tax credits (which are assessed on gross income retrospectively, compared with current net income for benefit purposes) with the idea of a single working age benefit was adjudged to be impossible. They felt that the inherent complexities of tax credits (as they saw them) and their links to benefits would have to be tolerated.

Some advisers had a different vision though. For them they could see that a simplified benefit would create the opportunity of dispensing with tax credits altogether. Instead they suggested that it might be possible to adopt the familiar device of the tapered withdrawal of benefit as earnings increased. Although this suggestion was not developed in any depth in the group discussions, the consequences of eliminating tax credits from the welfare payments system were seen as sufficiently attractive to be worthy of further and serious consideration.

4.6 Entitlement criteria – individual compared to household assessment; views on means testing

In the course of talking about the idea of a single working age benefit, some participants drew on earlier discussions about an ideal benefit system. Once again, there was a lot of support for a single benefit to be based on individual rather than household assessment. This would, it was argued, create the maximum amount of clarity about a person's benefit entitlement. Household means testing and, in particular, non-dependant deductions (for HB) were a source of not only confusion, but also some resentment and opposition. Some people repeated their view that couples would be more likely to maintain households together if there was individual assessment, thus contributing to family stability and to reducing pressure on housing supply.

There was less renewed discussion about means testing, contributions and universal benefits. However, in one of the adviser groups it was suggested that there would be a source of possible (perhaps considerable) confusion if some elements of the extra needs component were means tested, like HB, and some were needs based, like DLA. For others, this was seen as not such an important issue. They did not think it was necessary to opt for either means testing or some other basis of entitlement for all the elements of the extra needs component. As long as people were given the opportunity of accessing each element through a common application process this was seen as an improvement on a system that requires claimants to have knowledge of different benefits and make separate applications for each.

4.7 Organisation and delivery issues

While there was a good deal of support for the idea of a single working age benefit in principle, many of the group participants (particularly in the advisers groups) argued that the hoped-for gains of this kind of simplification would only be realised if there were associated changes in the organisation and delivery of the benefit.

Some strong support emerged for the idea that a single benefit could be administered by a single organisation. The line of some people's reasoning was interesting to follow here. They identified, initially, the possibility that a single benefit would not require the different administrative organisations to deliver, and that therefore, one of the main dissatisfactions of claimants (i.e. being passed between individuals and between organisations) could be addressed. The thinking then moved to a more normative position – that one organisation should be responsible for delivery. People began to imagine a process of claiming that required them only to engage with a single organisation. Many people in the claimant groups had spoken about their experiences of frustration, hassle and delay in claiming and maintaining benefits. What attracted these people to the idea of a single working age benefit was the prospect of a single, straightforward

claiming process during which they were able to claim the basic component quickly and easily and then guided towards claiming appropriate elements of the extra needs component. They would, in an ideal scenario, therefore be able to claim the basic component of the single benefit, and be asked a series of questions which would lead them to the appropriate elements of the extra needs component. Some people saw the possibility, therefore, of a single claim form, though others recognised that this would be unlikely given the different elements of the extra needs component. Although they acknowledged that they might still be asked a lot of questions in order to qualify for an extra needs element they would be more confident of eventually receiving their full entitlement to benefit through a unified process.

Some of the more negative reactions to the idea of a single working age benefit were not directed towards the benefit itself but at Government and Government departments that would have to implement reform. Some of the concerns and objections raised by advisers echoed discussions earlier when the prospects of fundamental reform of the benefit system were discussed (including the problems and costs of delivering fundamental change).

4.8 Summing up research participants' views – findings from the voting exercises

As explained in Chapter 1 a number of 'voting exercises' were used during the discussion groups as a means of gauging overall views about the current benefit system, the need for reform, and about the idea of a single working age benefit, and as a way of stimulating further discussion and views. Hence, research participants were asked to agree or disagree with a number of statements (see Appendix B for details of these).

It would be inappropriate to present the raw results from these exercises because the number of people taking part cannot be considered representative either of the general claiming population or the full range of people offering advice to benefit claimants. Nevertheless, it may be useful to make some observations about the views of the people in the groups as they were expressed through the voting exercises.

In general claimants and advisers concluded there was a need for major, radical reform of a benefit system that in the view of claimants was not working well or reflecting what they thought it should be doing. There was also a majority view from both groups that a single working age benefit would deal with many of the problems of the current system. Advisers, in particular, favoured radical reform over both incremental changes and a policy of 'shielding' claimants from complexity (it will be remembered that these were the three options described in the Select Committee's report on benefit complexity – see Chapter 1).

Two sets of responses from claimants in the voting exercises should be mentioned here as they appear on first sight to be contradictory. The overwhelming majority

of claimants agreed that the social security system needed major change, but a majority (though not so large) also said they would favour other changes over major reform. It is not possible to offer a conclusive answer to this apparent contradiction – we might hypothesise, for example, that people did not understand the statements they were being asked to respond to or that the statements were not sufficiently well defined. However, it is also possible that people saw no contradictions and that major reform **and** other changes were viewed as necessary. We suggest this as a possible explanation because of the varied problems and complaints raised about the current system and the diversity of suggestions of what a better, or ideal, system might look like, such as improvements in organisation and delivery in particular.

4.9 Summary

One conclusion that we can draw from our group discussions with claimants and advisers is that it is possible to engage a wide variety of people in thinking hypothetically about fundamental reform of the benefit system. It is not surprising that benefit entitlements are of great importance to people who rely on them to provide all or most of their income. However, it was also noteworthy that claimants' contributions were not only based on their own experiences; people were equally able to think about others and how they are, and might be in the future, affected by the benefit system.

With the possible exception of the men in the claimant groups who were in receipt of JSA only, all the participants had views about how they had found aspects of being a claimant difficult, confusing or frustrating. And so not surprisingly again, there were many views about how the system could be changed and improved.

When the idea of a single working age benefit was introduced to both the claimant and the adviser groups it was interesting that there was some immediate positive reactions to a basic component that would meet everyday living expenses, and that was a consistent amount regardless of age, length of time on benefit and reason for being out of work. This equality of treatment clearly appealed to some people's sense of fairness. This support however was contingent on additional expenses being met through an extra needs component. There was also strong support for benefit reform which would result in a simplified structure that could be easily understood.

There was, as might have been expected, widespread support for the simplification of the benefit system, though it was recognised that addressing people's additional needs would in all probability not be simple. In summary, we can say that reactions to the idea of a single working age benefit ranged between the (very) enthusiastic, through what we might describe as cautious interest, to those who had less interest and saw it as having little relevance to their lives. However, there was no support expressed for maintaining the benefit system in its current complexity.

5 Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Introduction

In this final chapter we will summarise the main findings of the study and relate them to the research questions that we set out to address. We must remember that this was an exploratory study designed not only to produce substantive findings but also to help us assess the extent to which it is possible to engage key actors, i.e. claimants and advisers, in a discussion about a policy idea that is still in its early stages of development.

The first conclusion we can draw is that as an experiment in engagement, the study was mostly successful. The groups of advisers taking part in the study readily engaged with each task (thinking about complexity in the current benefit system, how to respond to complexity, and specifically giving their views on a single working age benefit). To an extent, this was expected and we did not set out with any concerns about advisers contributing constructively to the study.

In contrast, we could not guarantee in advance that the groups with social security recipients would work in the same way. Getting people to think creatively and responsively about ideas is never as straightforward, as a research task, as asking people to recount personal experiences only. Hence, it was not surprising that it was not always easy to stimulate discussion, and some people did not contribute much, but overall most people had something very useful to offer. One thing we can say with confidence, however, is that there was a high level of interest in each of the topics pursued in the groups (talking about views and experiences of the current benefit system, thinking about what an ideal system might look like, and responding to the idea of a single working age benefit) despite some initial scepticism that the single working age benefit was an idea designed to cut costs only. Not surprisingly, how the benefit system affects them is of central importance to their lives. Many said they were pleased to be asked about what they thought.

In the rest of the chapter (Section 5.2) we begin by summarising findings about the current benefit system and what people thought a better (or ideal) system might look like. This provides context for the next section (Section 5.3) which

present a summary of findings about what people thought about the idea of a single working age benefit. In Section 5.4 we make some observations prompted by the selected review of benefit reform in other countries, mentioned in Chapter 1, though we should say immediately that this exercise yielded little of direct use for this study. We finally offer (Section 5.5) some concluding reflections on the findings from the study including how they might contribute to future policy thinking.

5.2 Summary of findings – the current and ideal benefit system

What people thought about making improvements to the benefit system (and what an ideal system might look like) was often linked to their own experiences of being a benefit recipient or as an adviser helping clients. In this section, therefore, we synthesise the findings from Chapters 2 and 3 as a way of providing context for people's responses to the idea of a single working age benefit.

Based on their experiences of the current benefit system people in the claimant groups fell into two broad groupings: First were those who expressed some form of dissatisfaction with their experiences. The dissatisfactions and complaints were many and varied, some of which we can conclude were directed at individual benefits, some a reflection on interactions between benefits, and some to do with the organisation and delivery of benefits (including local authorities and HMRC). The second grouping comprised mainly male claimants of JSA. In contrast to the first group, these claimants expressed very few, or no, complaints or dissatisfactions (apart from the low level of the payments and lack of access to some forms of employment assistance). They were generally happy with JSA, in the sense that they understood the benefit (why they were getting it, the conditionality requirements, and the amounts paid to them) and did not share any of the negative experiences of other claimants.

We draw on both groups' experiences (and the views of advisers) in summarising what people wanted ideally to see in a benefit system of the future. We present these under the following subheadings:

- Stability and certainty;
- Transparency and fairness;
- Simplicity;
- Preferences about entitlement conditions;
- Quick decision making and payments;
- Help with return to work;
- Organisation and delivery of benefits.

5.2.1 Stability and certainty

There was consensus that having a stable income that people could be confident about being paid routinely and reliably was not only desirable when trying to manage and budget on a low income but also essential in order to avoid the possibility of falling into hardship or debt. Stability was often disrupted by changes in circumstances (particularly in income, household and employment) that led to either a reassessment of an existing benefit or a move to a new benefit. Levels of uncertainty seemed to be particularly high when HB and/or tax credits were involved.

Stability and certainty were also undermined for claimants who effectively had to make choices about which benefit to apply for and for those who were subject to the rules of overlapping benefits. There was some confusion and frustration when benefit income, or an increase in benefits, triggered a reduction (sometimes 100 per cent) in another benefit.

5.2.2 Transparency and fairness

We have mentioned earlier (in Chapter 2) that many claimants expressed a strong desire to understand better their individual entitlement in order to be confident that they were receiving all they were entitled to, while at the same time not being paid too much (that they would be required to repay at some stage). As we noted in Chapter 1 most claimants reported that they were receiving more than one benefit. However, it was interesting to note that the desire to understand was sometimes expressed as something desirable in its own right regardless of whether it affected thinking or decisions about their lives.

Fairness in the benefit system also emerged as a prominent desire of many claimants. People's points of reference here were often linked to the wider benefit system (for example, in views about who should be helped by the system and who should not) or to comparisons of their own situation with neighbours or people in the local area. Thus, there was support for the idea that the benefit system should help people in need who had no access to other sources of income, with particular reference to older people, disabled people, families, and young people out of work. There was hostility towards people who were perceived to be abusing the benefit system in some way, either by feigning illness, not taking up work-related activity, or fraudulently claiming benefit in some way. We should also note the frequent dissatisfaction directed towards immigrants either as workers or as benefit claimants.

5.2.3 Simplicity

There were numerous calls for greater simplicity in the benefit system during the discussions about the current system and about how it could be improved. Some people made these spontaneous comments before any notion of simplification or the single working age benefit had been introduced into discussion.

5.2.4 Preferences about entitlement conditions

Similarly, people also made unprompted comments about the negative consequences of household means testing, such as the perceived financial burden placed on non-dependent adults whose income affects HB assessments (seen as unfair on them) or pressures to break up households (seen as detrimental to family stability). Hence, the suggestion arose that individual assessment of benefits would be a desirable reform (discussed in Chapter 3).

5.2.5 Quick decision making and payments

Delays in decision making and payments, whether connected to new claims or changes in circumstances, were causes of major concern for most people in the claimant discussion groups. Many had experienced delays that caused serious repercussions for them, such as getting behind with rental or Council Tax payments to the point when court action had been taken, or having to borrow money in order to pay for bills or everyday expenses such as food.

5.2.6 Help with return to work

Apart from the few people who did not want to return to employment, most claimants in the groups talked about benefits and work as being linked with each other. As noted in Chapter 2, when asked about views and experiences of the current system many people introduced their attempts to access employment help into the discussions very quickly. For them, it was clear that their experience of Jobcentre Plus involved both dealing with benefits and discussing and arranging work-related activity.

There was a general consensus that people should be offered the appropriate help they need in order to get back to work. There was no evidence that expectations were unrealistic here but, as we have seen in Chapter 2, there was some puzzlement and resentment that help seemed to be denied people in the early months of getting benefit. Providing help 'from day one' seemed to most people to make sense, rather than being forced to wait.

There were no views expressed against the idea of conditionality (though the term itself was not used). The claimants in the group discussions not only seemed to endorse the idea that people should have to take part in some form of work-related activity, but some were in favour of more stringent conditions than apply at present.

In addition to help getting back to work, people also wanted clearer indications of the financial impact of taking up work (or participating in training or education). They were frustrated that advisers could not offer them the certainty they wanted, a frustration matched by the advisers who agreed that they could rarely be certain of the impact on benefits and tax credits on overall income. Another frustration aired by advisers was the amount of time they spent talking to clients about benefits which, they felt, took time away from talking about work.

5.2.7 Organisation and delivery of benefits

Many of the frustrations of dealing with benefits derived from the necessity of dealing with more than one organisation. Most people in the study were receiving a DWP benefit and HB so had to deal with Jobcentre Plus and their local authority. Many others had to deal as well with HMRC about their Child Benefit or Working Tax Credit. Many research participants (including from the adviser groups) described experiences of delays, contradictory advice, errors, and failures of communication as a result of dealing with two, three or more agencies.

Although for some people conducting their social security business with remote call centres by telephone was not a problem many others expressed a preference for dealing with officials face-to-face, and ideally having a trusted named individual knowledgeable about their own claims.

5.3 Summary of findings – views about the single working age benefit

As explained in Chapter 4, the single working age benefit was introduced to the groups of claimants and advisers as having two components – a basic component intended to reflect the common everyday living requirements of individuals, and an ‘extra needs’ component designed as a response to the additional expenses generated for some, but not all, claimants by responsibilities for children, ill-health or disability, rental obligations or a low income from work.

In summarising people’s views of a single working age benefit we will return to and attempt to answer the relevant research questions that informed the study.

5.3.1 Would a single benefit deal with people’s problems with their benefits?

The problems identified by claimants during the group interviews could be linked variously to the complexity of the benefit system as a whole, to complexity within individual benefits (particularly the means tested benefits), to organisational complexity within and between the benefit processing agencies, and to the interaction of the benefit and the employment support systems.

For some people the experience they had of not understanding their benefit entitlement, not being certain that they were getting the right amount, and worrying about reassessments and possible overpayments was a problem in itself with the benefit system. These people were possibly most vociferous in their support for the idea of fundamental simplification, which a single working age benefit seemed to them to offer. They welcomed the idea of a single benefit paid at the same basic rate for all claimants with an extra needs component to contribute to additional needs. They saw the potential of clarity and transparency in a single benefit that was not present in the current system.

5.3.2 Would a single working age benefit reduce concerns about trying work? How would it help move people further towards employment?

These questions are particularly salient in discussing the potential of a single working age benefit and whether it would deliver a major change to people's attitudes and actions about returning to work. The evidence emerging from this study is not conclusive. This is partly because the majority of the claimants attending the groups expressed a desire to work. They did not need persuading either that work was desirable or that they would be better off financially in work; they needed opportunities and support. Many nevertheless said they found it difficult to get accurate advice about the financial implications of working and therefore would welcome a single benefit if it led to easier and clearer BOCs.

Some said that it would reassure them to some extent to know that there would be no doubt about their benefit entitlement if they had to leave their employment and return to benefit, i.e. it would, by definition, remain the same. They still would welcome reassurances also that reinstatement of benefit would be done quickly, which is more to do with organisation and delivery than the structure of the system.

The advisers were more positive about the potential of a single working age benefit for helping them help their clients back to work. As mentioned in Chapter 4 one of the principal advantages as they saw it was that they would be able to explain the benefit system much more easily and clearly to people with much more confidence than at present. This would, they deduced, mean that they would have to spend far less time explaining the benefit system and less time sorting out their clients' benefit problems, and would have more time for helping people to move into work.

A simplified system would also lead to easier BOCs, which they did see as a highly useful tool in persuading some people that work was financially worthwhile, and for motivating further those already wanting to work.

5.3.3 How would a single working age benefit help people to get their entitlement? Would it reduce uncertainties about entitlement?

People associated a simplified single benefit with a simpler claiming process, including simpler claim forms. Although none of the claimants participating in the research said they had been dissuaded from claiming because of the processes involved (by definition because they had been recruited on the basis of their recipient status), many described difficulties in filling in forms and delays in receiving payments. The advisers thought that some people they saw as clients were daunted by the prospect of claiming to the extent that they at least delayed claiming if not failed to claim completely.

Some claimants liked the idea that a single working age benefit (i.e. in the version described by the researchers) might mean they would not have to experience medical assessment by unfamiliar doctors working for an agency on behalf of DWP.

As might be expected from the comments on the current system about uncertainty, claimants in the groups were generally keen on the prospect of a single benefit being clear and consistent. This would satisfy their desire for greater understanding and stability.

Advisers would be in a better position to help people get their entitlement and give accurate advice as a single working age benefit would be easier for them to understand as well.

5.3.4 How can there be a balance between a simple system and one that caters for individual need? Would people's diverse needs be met by a single working age benefit?

In general claimants and advisers in the discussion groups were satisfied that a single working age benefit with a basic and an extra needs component could provide a reliable, stable income based on everyday living expenses but also, in the extra needs component, be responsive to individual circumstances. There were comments from a number of participants that the extra needs component might end up as complex as the range of individual benefits in the current system, but this was not used as an argument against the idea of a single working age benefit. People generally saw a single working age benefit as a significant and welcome simplification compared with the large number of benefits in the current system.

It was not possible to pose the question 'would people's diverse needs be met by a single working age benefit?' directly to the research participants because we could not propose any detail of the likely rules of a single working age benefit in the future. But people were generally positive that, depending on the substance and level of the extra needs component in particular, a single benefit could meet diverse needs.

5.3.5 Is there support for moving towards a single working age benefit? How would a single working age benefit match people's expectations?

It is of course invalid to generalise from the findings of any qualitative study to a general population. In an exploratory study of this kind we can only offer a tentative indication of how a wider population might respond to the idea of a single working age benefit. However, what we can say with confidence is that in the groups of claimants and advisers who took part in the study there was strong support for both radical reform of the benefit system and for a single benefit.

As we reported in Chapter 4, the voting exercises that we asked claimants to complete showed that most of them thought a single benefit would help them personally and might lead them to think differently about their own work/life choices.

From their perspective the advisers taking part in the study thought almost unanimously that some form of single working age benefit would remove many of the problems with the current system, and few favoured a strategy of 'shielding' claimants from complexity as an alternative to radical reform of the benefit system. Pursuing incremental reform and working towards more radical reform were not, however, seen as mutually exclusive options. Both approaches could be pursued at the same time.

5.4 A brief note on benefit reform in other countries

As mentioned in Chapter 1 a brief review of developments on benefit simplification in other countries was included as part of the research design. It is well-documented that benefit systems and individual benefits in other countries are complex to varying degrees and a cause of concern and policy interest (Work and Pensions Select Committee, 2007; Harris, 2008). However, except in the case of New Zealand efforts to simplify benefits have been targeted at individual benefits (or parts of individual benefits), at links with employment programmes (as conditionality requirements) or with time-limiting awards (which is a contested interpretation of simplification). Harris (2008) usefully reviews developments in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Sweden and Germany but it is difficult to draw useful lessons for the UK from these countries' experiences.

Only New Zealand has engaged with the idea of radical benefit reform in recent years but all progress there came to a stop in 2008 with the election of a new government that immediately abandoned proposals for a 'single core benefit' to replace the range of income replacement benefits (see Sainsbury and Stephens, 2009). It seems unlikely that the single core benefit will re-emerge as a viable policy idea in New Zealand for the foreseeable future.

Harris concludes in his review of developments in other countries thus:

'There is clear international evidence of a commitment towards simplification of social security benefits and systems ... However, the broad statements of intent in the various countries have yet to be fully matched by wide-scale concrete measures towards simplification.'

(2008: 30)

It is apparent, therefore, that the UK is at present in the vanguard in working towards possible concrete proposals for a single benefit, and it is difficult to suggest where policy makers should look in the near future for helpful lessons. One possible direction might be Vermont in the USA where a review of the problem of the poverty trap in the state (Hofmann and Dale, 2010) concluded that immediate incremental reforms should lead to more fundamental reform. As the paper argues:

'Benefits 'simplification' will perfectly complement benefits 'modernization' efforts already underway. A simplified process would allow for a more logical benefits structure, would increase understanding, would reduce errors, and would reduce processing time and complexity by staff. Over time it will reduce costs.'

(p.10)

At the time of writing, it was expected that recommendations to implement benefit simplification would appear in July 2010.

5.5 Conclusion

It is useful to reflect on the state of policy debate and development of the single working age benefit and how the findings of this study can contribute. Clearly the complexity of the current benefit system has been identified as a cause for concern. The dysfunctions of complexity noted by the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Communication are as evident in 2010 as they were four or five years ago. The imperative for change is arguably now even greater.

Certainly many of the well documented problems that people have with claiming and maintaining benefits were evident in the testimonies of the claimants and advisers taking part in this study. As we have noted already in this report, many of the research participants were minded to support major benefit reform not only as a necessary response to complexity but also as a way of easing their passage back to paid employment. The idea of a single working age benefit, as a mechanism for achieving radical change, generated a high level of interest and support.

Despite the scepticism of some claimants and advisers who doubted the ability of Government to deliver such radical reform successfully or who thought that reform would be prohibitively costly, most people thought that a single working age benefit held the promise of making the business of being a benefit claimant clearer and easier. The strength of feeling among claimants in favour of a benefit system that was simple for them to understand and access and would not cause them uncertainty and hardship was one of the more striking findings from the research. The accounts of some people's dealings with benefit agencies confirm that claimants sometimes do incur high 'compliance costs' that are both monetary and psychological in nature (Bennett *et al.*, 2009).

We should note of course that as with all small scale qualitative research, it is not possible to generalise findings to the wider populations of benefit recipients or benefit and employment advisers. That is not the purpose qualitative methodology. What has emerged, however, should be of use and interest to all stakeholders in thinking about the range of reactions that are likely if policy debate continues in the near future. If the responses of the claimants and advisers who took part in this study were replicated in the wider population then we could be confident of that any policy debate in the future would attract widespread attention and involvement. We are aware, however, that there are a number of sub-groups within

the claimant population, such as people from minority ethnic groups, severely disabled people, people with sensory impairments, carers, drug and alcohol mis-users, homeless people and ex-offenders, who were not very well represented in the claimant groups (though the advisers taking part were able to offer useful data on their dealings with them). Any future exercises in policy development should seek to draw on their views and experiences.

In an exploratory study of this kind it was not possible to delve very deeply into what people thought about how the detail of how the rules of a single benefit might be constructed or what levels of benefit it might be payable. There were questions raised about how HB (and CTB) and tax credits could or should be included within a single working age benefit, about how carers could be accommodated, and about how individuals' diverse needs would be met through the extra needs component of the single benefit. Hence, the findings from this study will not particularly help policy makers grapple with these questions.

If there is one consistent finding from this study it is that the dominant feeling among the claimants and advisers taking part was that the difficulties they faced with claiming benefits, the problems caused when their circumstances change, and the uncertainties that were created by the transition to work, all need addressing. A simplified benefit system was generally seen as having the potential for, possibly large, improvement, and the idea of a single working age benefit, as an example of radical simplification, attracted interest and support. What was not endorsed was a strategy of 'shielding' people from complexity or continuing with the status quo.

Appendix A

Research methods

A.1 Recruitment of claimants

Fieldwork took place in four locations in Great Britain. In each location social security claimants were recruited directly from Jobcentre Plus offices by a recruitment agency contracted to the Social Policy Research Unit. Recruiters approached claimants, explained the purpose of the groups and obtained agreement to take part. A cash gift of £50 was offered for attendance.

The aim was to achieve a group of between 12 and 16 participants. In order to achieve this recruiters oversampled (trying to recruit 18 people) in the expectation of some non-attendance. Recruitment took place around a week before each group discussion taking place. For each group the recruiters were asked to recruit people according to the following schedule.

Table A.1 Recruitment targets

	Target range
Sex	
Men	6-10
Women	6-10
Age	
Under 30	3-7
30-49	3-7
50 and over	3-7
Current benefit type	
IB or ESA	4-6
IS	4-6
JSA	4-6
Has claimant moved between benefits in last two years?	
Yes	8-12
No	4-6

Recruitment was generally very successful. Indeed in two areas more than the maximum target of 16 attended, as Table A.2 shows. A total of 59 claimants took part in the groups. There was an acceptable distribution of men/women, age groups and main benefit. It proved more difficult to recruit the desired number of people who had moved between benefits.

Table A.2 Achieved participation in claimant groups

	Achieved sample				Total
	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	
Sex					
Men	10	8	6	5	29
Women	8	10	7	5	30
Age					
Under 30	7	6	5	2	20
30-49	7	8	6	4	25
50 and over	4	4	2	4	14
Current benefit type					
IB or ESA	6	5	5	2	18
IS	6	7	5	5	23
JSA	6	6	3	3	18
Has claimant moved between benefits in last two years?					
Yes	7	8	5	4	24
No	11	10	8	6	35
Total number of participants	18	18	13	10	59

The group discussions spread over several hours during which some people in three of the groups left before the final session. This was not ideal but participation was voluntary and we could not insist people stayed for the whole time. In reflecting on this we noted that most of the people who left early had had less to say during the earlier discussions.

A.1.1 Comment on recruitment methods for claimants

As mentioned in Section 1.5 this study was designed at a time when DWP was reviewing its data security protocols for the transfer of personal details from the Department to outside contractors. As a result the standard method of recruitment could not be followed. Normally, DWP would have supplied the research team with a sample of benefit recipients (including address and telephone numbers) to whom an 'opt-out' letter would be sent. This letter invites people to participate and asks them to opt out (by telephone, email or using a pre-paid reply slip) if they do not wish to. However, as this method was not available to us we contracted a recruitment agency to carry out recruitment on our behalf.

This entailed a recruiter locating themselves in a Jobcentre Plus office for a day and approaching people directly to invite them to take part in a discussion group. An explanatory script was provided to recruiters but importantly they were authorised to offer potential participants a gift of £50 for taking part. The recruiters were required to recruit a mixed group, i.e. roughly equal numbers of men and women, a range of ages, a specified number of IB, IS and JSA claimants, and a minimum number of people who had moved between benefits.

Our reflection on this method of recruitment is that it seemed to attract a qualitatively different type of social security claimant compared with the opt out letter approach. We noted that the claimant discussion groups contained more drug users, homeless people, people with criminal records, people with mental health problems than a comparable sample of, for example, IB or JSA claimants.

A.1.2 Recruitment of advisers

Lists of potential participants were compiled for each fieldwork site of national and local advice organisations and organisations representing claimant groups (such as disabled people and lone parents). Personal letters of invitation were sent to each organisation requesting that a front line member of staff (i.e. who had regular contact with claimants as part of their duties) take part in the discussion group. Jobcentre Plus local office managers in the fieldwork locations were asked to nominate personal advisers to take part.

Table A.3 Organisations invited to take part in adviser group discussions

	Invited	Target for study group	Achieved
Jobcentre Plus	16	12	13
Citizens Advice	4	3	3
Local authority welfare rights	3	2	3
Lone parent organisations	3	2	2
Homelessness/housing organisations	3	1	
Employment advice and support organisations	2	2	2
General welfare rights advice, including Law Centres	4	2	
Disability organisations	2	2	2
Organisations for older people	2	1	1
Money advice organisation	1	1	1
Total	40	28	27

A.1.3 Conduct of groups

These have been described in Section 1.5.2.

Appendix B

Research instruments

1. Researcher's brief for claimant discussion groups
2. Researcher's brief for adviser discussion groups
3. Showcard 1 (claimant groups) – What people say about the benefit system
4. Showcard 2 (claimant groups) – Views on the current system
5. Showcard 3 (claimant groups) – views on benefit reform
6. Showcard 4 (adviser groups) – views on benefit reform

DISCUSSION GROUPS WITH BENEFIT RECIPIENTS – Researchers' brief

NB Times are illustrative

9.45-9.55 INTRODUCTION TO THE DAY

- Explanation of purpose and structure of day
- Explanation of context of benefit complexity and welfare reform
- Explanation of how data will be recorded and used

9.55-10.30 INITIAL EXERCISE – UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL SECURITY

This short exercise is designed to create some group cohesion and to generate data on experience of the benefit system and understanding of social security.

- Participants split into pairs for TEN minutes
 - o Completion of benefit information sheet
 - o Discussion of SHOWCARD 1
- Reconvene full group to discuss responses to Showcard 1

10.30-11.10 SMALL GROUP EXERCISE ON PURPOSE OF SOCIAL SECURITY

- Participants split into two groups. One researcher facilitates.
- Questions for group to consider:
 - o What should social security be trying to do/achieve?
 - Prompt: What does it do for YOU?
 - Prompt: How does it help other people?
 - o Who should social security help? And who should be excluded?
 - Prompt: people above a certain income?
 - o Prompt: how should the benefit system link to looking for work? (NB this is about conditionality)

11.10-11.30 CURRENT BENEFIT SYSTEM COMPARED WITH IDEAL

- Researchers present a summary on the groups' deliberations using flipchart. Identify underlying principles of a social security system: for example income replacement, paying for extra needs, insurance, income supplementation, or compensation. Conditionality will also likely feature.
- **Voting exercise 1** using SHOWCARD 2 – How far does current social security system meet the ideals identified?
- Discussion to explore responses
 - o Probe for types and cause of problems

- Probe for problems of benefits and work (e.g. moving in and out of work; is work worthwhile?)
- Probe for problems of moving between benefits

11.30 – COFFEE BREAK

11.45 – 1.00 DISCUSSION ABOUT SINGLE WORKING AGE BENEFIT

- Introduction to single working age benefit
 - o Principles (including links to extra needs benefits)
 - o Proposed advantages
 - o Issues (e.g. levels of benefit, unit of assessment, entitlement criteria)

Probe questions:

- o How would a single working age benefit help people to get their entitlement? Would it reduce uncertainties about entitlement?
- o How would a single working age benefit affect people who move between benefits?
- o How would a single working age benefit help move people further towards employment?
- o How can there be a balance between a simple system and one that caters for individual need?
- o How would SWAB match people's expectations?
- o What might be the role of contributions versus means testing?
- o Would people's diverse needs be met by a SWAB?
- **Voting exercise 2** – How far do the principles of a single working age benefit meet group members' aspirations for a future social security system? SHOWCARD 3.
- Discussion of responses to voting exercise
 - o Probe for responses to major/radical reform
 - o Identify concerns about major/radical reform
 - o Identify sources of concerns about major/radical reform
- **PROBE for possible changes to personal behaviour/choices, especially WORK**

THANKS AND GOODBYES

1.00 LUNCH

DISCUSSION GROUPS WITH ADVISERS – Researchers' brief

NB Times are illustrative

10.00 – 10.10 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

- Explanation of purpose and structure of day
- Explanation of context of benefit complexity and welfare reform
- Explanation of how data will be recorded and used

10.10 – 10.50 EXERCISE 1 – VIEWS ON COMPLEXITY

Everyone appears to think that the social security is complex. Do you agree?

If all agree it is complex, the next question is “does it matter”?

- Discussion to explore complexity
 - o How is it a problem?
 - o Probe for types and cause of problems
 - o Probe for links between complexity and return to work

10.50 – 11.15 EXERCISE 2 – VIEWS ON RESPONDING TO COMPLEXITY

- Discuss in pairs for 5 minutes
- Reconvene as group to discuss views
 - o Probe for responses to radical reform
 - What sort of reform is needed?
 - o Identify concerns about radical reform
 - Identify sources of concerns about radical reform
 - o What other reforms would be useful?
- How important is social security reform as a political issue?

11.15 – 11.25 BREAK

11.25 – 12.30 DISCUSSION ABOUT SINGLE WORKING AGE BENEFIT

- Introduction to single working age benefit
 - o Principles (including links to extra needs benefits)
 - o Proposed advantages
 - o Issues (e.g. levels of benefit, unit of assessment, entitlement criteria)
- Group discussion on responses to single working age benefit as a response to complexity (linking with problems identified in Exercise 1)

Probe questions:

- o How would a single working age benefit help move people further towards employment?
- o How would a single working age benefit help people to get their entitlement? Would it reduce uncertainties about entitlement?
- o How would a single working age benefit affect people who move between benefits?
- o How can there be a balance between a simple system and one that caters for individual need?
- o How would a single working age benefit match people's expectations?
- o What might be the role of contributions versus means testing?
- o Would people's diverse needs be met by a single working age benefit?
- EXERCISE 3 – Vote to gauge level of support for single working age benefit – SHOWCARD 4.
- Summing up and final comments from group.

12.30 THANKS AND GOODBYES

Showcard 1

Researcher study on reforming the benefit system

What people say about the benefit system

HERE ARE SOME DIFFERENT WAYS PEOPLE HAVE DESCRIBED WHAT THEY
KNOW ABOUT SOCIAL SECURITY

DO ANY OF THESE MATCH HOW YOU FEEL?

TICK AS MANY AS YOU LIKE. PUT **TWO** TICKS IF YOU AGREE STRONGLY.

“I know very little about my benefits”

“I know quite a bit about the benefit I’m on but not much beyond that”

“I am confident I know what I need to know about my benefits”

“I understand how my benefit is worked out”

“I don’t really understand why I am getting the amount I do”

“I think the benefit rules are very confusing”

“Honestly, I haven’t got a clue”

“I think the benefit system is too complicated”

Showcard 2

Researcher study on reforming the benefit system

Your views on the current system

	Agree strongly	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Disagree strongly
The social security system is working well					
The social security system isn't doing what I think it should					
The current system has personally caused me problems					

Showcard 3

Researcher study on reforming the benefit system

Your views on benefit reform

	Agree strongly	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Disagree strongly
The social security system needs MAJOR reform					
Some form of single working age benefit would remove many of the problems with the current benefit system					
I would favour other changes to the benefit system over major reform					
Some form of single working age benefit would help me					
I might think differently about some of my work/life choices if a single working age benefit was introduced					

Showcard 4

Researcher study on reforming the benefit system

Your views on benefit reform

	A g r e e strongly	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Disagree strongly
The social security system needs RADICAL reform					
Some form of single working age benefit would remove many of the problems with the current benefit system					
I would favour incremental changes to the benefit system over radical reform					
I would favour 'shielding' claimants as a response to complexity					

References

Bennett, F., Brewer, M. and Shaw, J. (2009). *Understanding the Compliance Costs of Benefits and Tax Credits*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Centre for Social Justice (2009). *Dynamic Benefits. Towards welfare that works*. London: Centre for Social Justice.

Freud, D. (2007). *Reducing Dependency, Increasing Opportunity: Options for the future of welfare to work*. Leeds: Corporate Document Services.

Gregg, P. (2008). *Realising Potential: A vision for personalised conditionality and support*. London: The Stationery Office.

Hall, S. (2009). *Spending priorities in the benefits system: Deliberative research with the public*. DWP Research Report No. 559. Leeds: Corporate Document Services.

Harris, N. (2008). Simplification of social security: the international experience, in *Journal of Social Security Law*, 15, 12-31.

Hofmann, R. and Dale, S. (2010). *Addressing the Benefits Cliff: Recommendations for further action*. Vermont: Vermont Agency of Human Services.

Irvine, A., Davidson, J. and Sainsbury, R. (2008). *Reporting changes in circumstances: Tackling error in the benefit system*. DWP Research Report No. 497. Leeds: Corporate Document Services.

Martin, D. (2009). *Benefit Simplification. How, and why it must be done*. London: Centre for Policy Studies.

National Audit Office (2005). *Dealing with the Complexity of the Benefits System*. London: The Stationery Office.

Public Accounts Committee (2006). *Tackling the Complexity of the Benefits System*, HC 765. London: The Stationery Office.

Sainsbury, R. and Stanley, K. (2007). One for all: active welfare and the single working age benefit, in Bennett, J. and Cooke, G. (eds). *It's All About You – Citizen-centred welfare*. London, ippr, pp.43-56.

Sainsbury, R. and Stephens, R. (2009). A single core benefit: lessons from New Zealand, *Journal of Social Security Law* 16, 1, 12-29.

Social Security Advisory Committee (2004). *Seventeenth Report, August 2003-July 2004*, London: SSAC.

Work and Pensions Select Committee (2007). *Benefit Simplification, HC 463-I*. London: The Stationery Office.

This report presents findings from a study of the views and attitudes of social security claimants and people who advise claimants on benefits and employment issues about an idea for the radical reform of the benefit system. The idea in question is the 'single working age benefit', which in essence proposes to replace the full range of working age benefits with a single benefit. Customers' and advisers' views on the current benefit system are explored along with views on what an ideal benefit system would look like and finally views on a single work age model.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please contact:
Paul Noakes, Commercial Support and Knowledge Management Team,
3rd Floor, Caxton House, Tothill Street, London SW1H 9NA

<http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>