

Attitudes to Social Welfare and Reform

September/October 2016



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Reader Information

Purpose This publication presents the results of a Department for Communities' module in the September/October 2016 Omnibus Survey. The main themes explored in the survey are awareness of and attitudes to Welfare Reform, employment and disability benefits and associated barriers to work.

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Target Audience DfC, benefit claimants, academics, general public, media and community group stakeholders.

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About Analytical Services Unit

Analytical Services Unit (ASU) provides an independent statistical and research service to the Department for Communities (DfC). The work of ASU informs policy, planning and decision making in the areas of social security, child maintenance and pensions, employment services, as well as housing, urban regeneration, culture, arts and leisure, community development and voluntary activity. The statisticians within ASU are seconded from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and our statistics are produced in accordance with the principles and protocols set out in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

This report has been produced by Customer Insight, a team within ASU whose role is to undertake research and statistical analysis of the Social Security customer base to inform the development and continuous improvement of DfC's customer policies, processes, services and communications.

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey provides a snapshot of the lifestyle and views of the people of Northern Ireland, sampling 2,200 private addresses at regular intervals. DfC commissioned questions in the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey September/October 2016, coinciding with the phased introduction of Welfare Reform.

This report presents results on those questions which cover a range of topics, including awareness of and attitudes to Welfare Reform, unemployment and disability benefits and associated barriers to work and accessing information on welfare changes. Full tabulated results from the DfC module of the September/October 2016 Omnibus Survey analysed by age group, gender, religion, disability status and employment status can be accessed on the DfC website.

Notes

Some questions seeking specific views on the Social Security Agency (SSA) have been included. Prior to the restructuring of Government Departments in Northern Ireland on 9th May 2016, the SSA was an executive agency within the Department for Social Development which had responsibility for the delivery of social security benefits. Any mention of the 'current welfare system' refers to the system prior to the phased implementation of Welfare Reform from May 2016.

People living in institutions are excluded from the sample. More details on the representativeness of the sample and the weighting used to adjust for household size are in the Quality Assurance section at the end of this report.

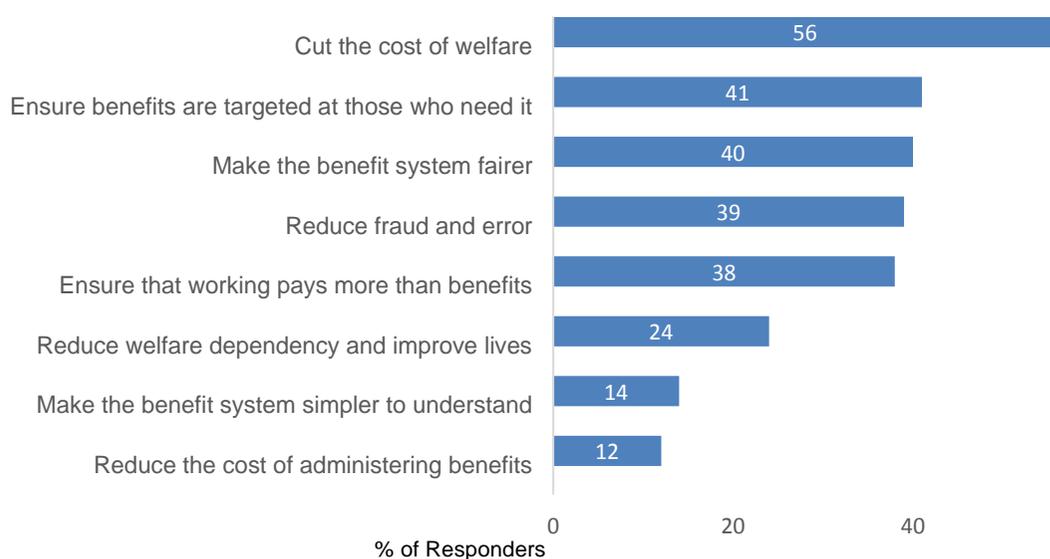
Percentages may not always sum to 100 due to rounding or where respondents could give more than one answer.

Rationale for Welfare Reform

Respondents were asked if the current welfare system is working. Most respondents said no (85%); 58% of respondents selecting that it was not working because too many people or the wrong people are receiving benefits; in addition just over a quarter (27%) stated that it's not providing enough financial support to the people who need it. Just 12% of respondents felt that the current welfare system is working and gives financial support to the right people.

Respondents were asked what the main reasons for making changes to the benefit system are (Figure 1). The main reason selected was to cut the cost of welfare (56%), while 41% felt it was to ensure benefits are targeted at those who need it.

Figure 1: Main Reasons for Benefit System Changes *



*Percentages may add to more than 100% due to multiple responses

Awareness of Welfare Reform

When asked about their general awareness of upcoming changes to the welfare system in Northern Ireland, nearly four-fifths of respondents (79%) were aware of the changes, with 34% having heard of but didn't know any details about the changes, 39% knew a little, and 6% knew a great deal. The remaining 21% of respondents hadn't heard of the changes at all or answered Don't Know.

Specific questions in relation to awareness of key Welfare Reform changes were asked.

- Over a third of respondents (34%) were not aware of any of the Welfare Reform changes.
- More than two fifths of respondents (43%) were aware that the Personal Independence Payment will replace Disability Living Allowance as the new form of support for adult customers.
- In relation to housing, over a quarter (28%) knew that Welfare Reform will introduce a limit to the amount of benefit any household can claim and just under a quarter of respondents (24%) were aware that Welfare Reform will introduce size criteria for social housing tenants.
- Just over a fifth of all respondents (21%) were aware that Universal Credit will simplify the benefit system and 19% knew that Universal Credit will mean that if a person works more hours they will always take home more money.

- A minority of respondents were aware that Employment and Support Allowance (contribution based) will be limited to one year for some customers (10%), that Discretionary Support will provide financial help for people with low incomes in times of crisis (12%) and that Welfare Reform will make it mandatory that a person must request an internal review of a disputed benefit decision (8%).

Respondents were also asked a number of questions on their awareness of proposed changes to specific aspects of the benefit system.

Assessing the work capability of benefit claimants claiming sickness benefits

Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) had heard of the changes to assessing the work capability of benefit claimants claiming sickness benefits. Of those, 36% didn't know any details about the changes, 27% knew a little, and 5% knew a great deal. Less than a third of respondents (30%) hadn't heard of the changes at all.

Making the system simpler and providing a clear incentive to work

Three-fifths of respondents (60%) had heard of the changes to make the benefit system simpler and providing a clear incentive to work. Of those, 35% didn't know any details about the changes, 23% knew a little, and 2% knew a great deal. Nearly two-fifths of respondents (39%) hadn't heard of the changes at all.

Changes to how entitlement to a disability benefit will be assessed

A majority of respondents (74%) had heard of the changes to how entitlement to a disability benefit will be assessed. Of those, 36% didn't know any details about the changes, 31% knew a little, and 7% knew a great deal. A quarter of respondents (25%) hadn't heard of the changes at all.

Changes to housing benefit in the private rented and social rented sectors

Three-fifths of respondents (60%) had heard of the changes to housing benefit in the private rented and social rented sectors. Of those, 34% didn't know any details about the changes, 23% knew a little and 3% knew a great deal. Nearly two-fifths of respondents (39%) hadn't heard of the changes at all.

The Benefit System and Employment

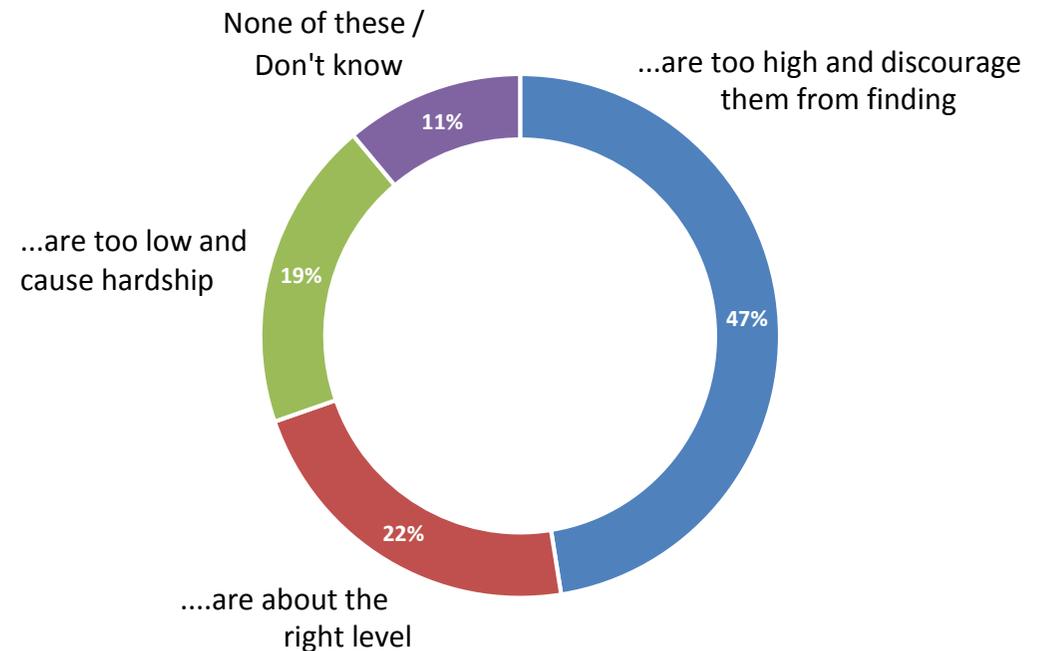
A number of questions were asked on the effectiveness of the benefit system in encouraging people to work and on barriers to employment.

Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of the current benefit system in encouraging people to work. Just under three-quarters (72%) believed that the current benefit system was not very effective or not effective at all in encouraging people to work. One quarter (25%) held the view that the existing benefit system was very effective or fairly effective in encouraging people to work. The remainder (3%) didn't know.

Respondents who indicated that the current benefit system is 'not very effective' or 'not effective at all' were asked why they believed the system is not effective (multiple response permitted). The most frequently reported reasons provided for an ineffective benefit system were that 'benefits can provide more money than working' (78%), that 'the system allows people to remain on benefits and avoid work' (68%), and that 'there is a culture of not working in some places/households' (65%). Other reported reasons were that that 'the system is complex so people do not know if working will provide more money than benefits' (25%), 'there are no jobs available' (18%) and that 'people don't have the skills to fill the jobs that are available' (16%).

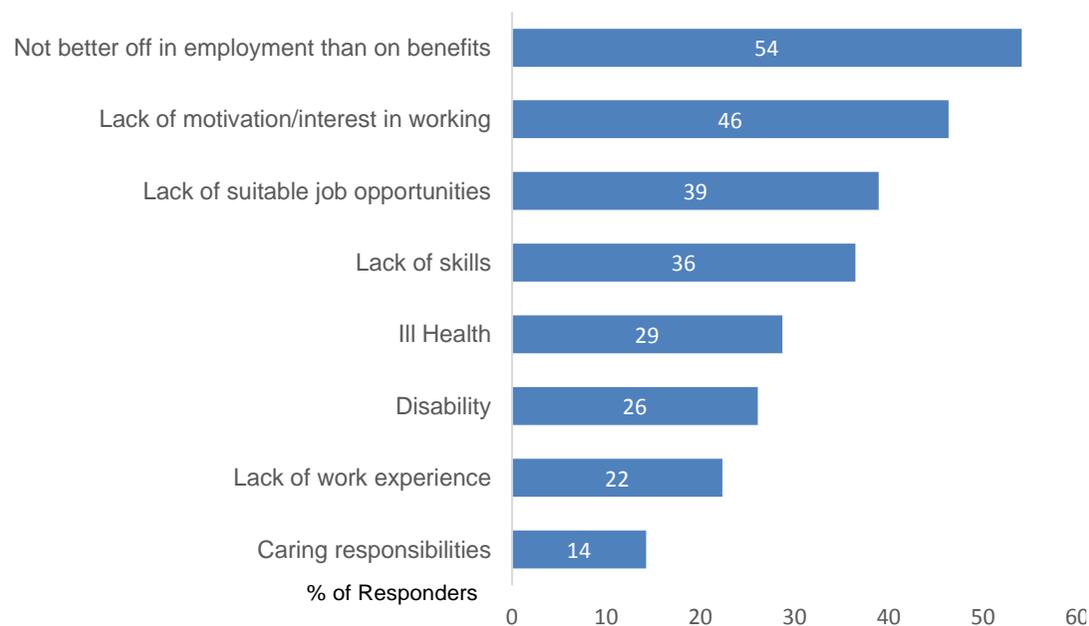
When asked their views on unemployment benefits available to people who are out of work (Figure 2), 47% of respondents agreed that benefits for unemployed people are too high and are a disincentive to find work. Just over a fifth of respondents believed that unemployment benefits are at the right level (22%) while a smaller proportion believed that unemployment benefits are too low and cause hardship (19%).

Figure 2: Views on Unemployment Benefits Available



Respondents were asked their views on the main barriers to people entering employment (Figure 3 multiple response). Ill health and Disability accounted for a combined 55%, while 54% respondents held the view that not being better off in employment compared with being on benefits was the main barrier. A lack of motivation/interest in working (46%), a lack of suitable job opportunities (39%), and a lack of skills (36%) were also identified as barriers to people entering employment.

Figure 3: Main Barriers to People Entering Employment in Northern Ireland



*Percentages may add to more than 100% due to multiple responses

Respondents were asked if unemployed benefit claimants should be required to take a job if it becomes available even if it is not the kind of job that they are looking for. More than half of respondents (55%) felt that unemployment claimants in this scenario should definitely take the available job and continue to look for more suitable employment. Just less than a third of respondents (32%) felt that they should probably take the available job while continuing to look for alternative employment. The remainder felt that the unemployed claimant should probably remain on benefits while continuing to look for employment (7%), definitely remain on benefits while continuing to look for work (2%) or that it depended on the circumstances (2%).

Disability Benefits and Employment

A number of questions were asked on current disability benefits, upcoming changes to disability benefits and the barriers to people with a disability entering the workplace.

When asked if they thought disability benefits are being paid to the right people less than half of respondents (47%) agreed with the following statement 'no, too many people who don't need support are receiving it'. Over a third of respondents (38%) agreed with the statement 'no, some people who need support don't get it'. A further 11% of respondents felt that disability benefits were being paid to the right people and were in agreement with the following statement 'yes, it's about right'. The remaining 4% of respondents gave an answer of 'don't know'.

Respondents were asked why Disability Living Allowance (DLA) was being replaced by Personal Independence Payment (PIP). Over two fifths of respondents (42%) agreed it was to reduce the cost of welfare expenditure on disability benefits, while 39% agreed it was to reduce fraud and 37% believed that it was to target resources to meet the needs of people most affected by their disability. The remainder gave an answer of 'don't know' (11%) or 'none of the above' (7%).

Respondents were asked how they felt about the proposed changes to the welfare system in which people aged between 16

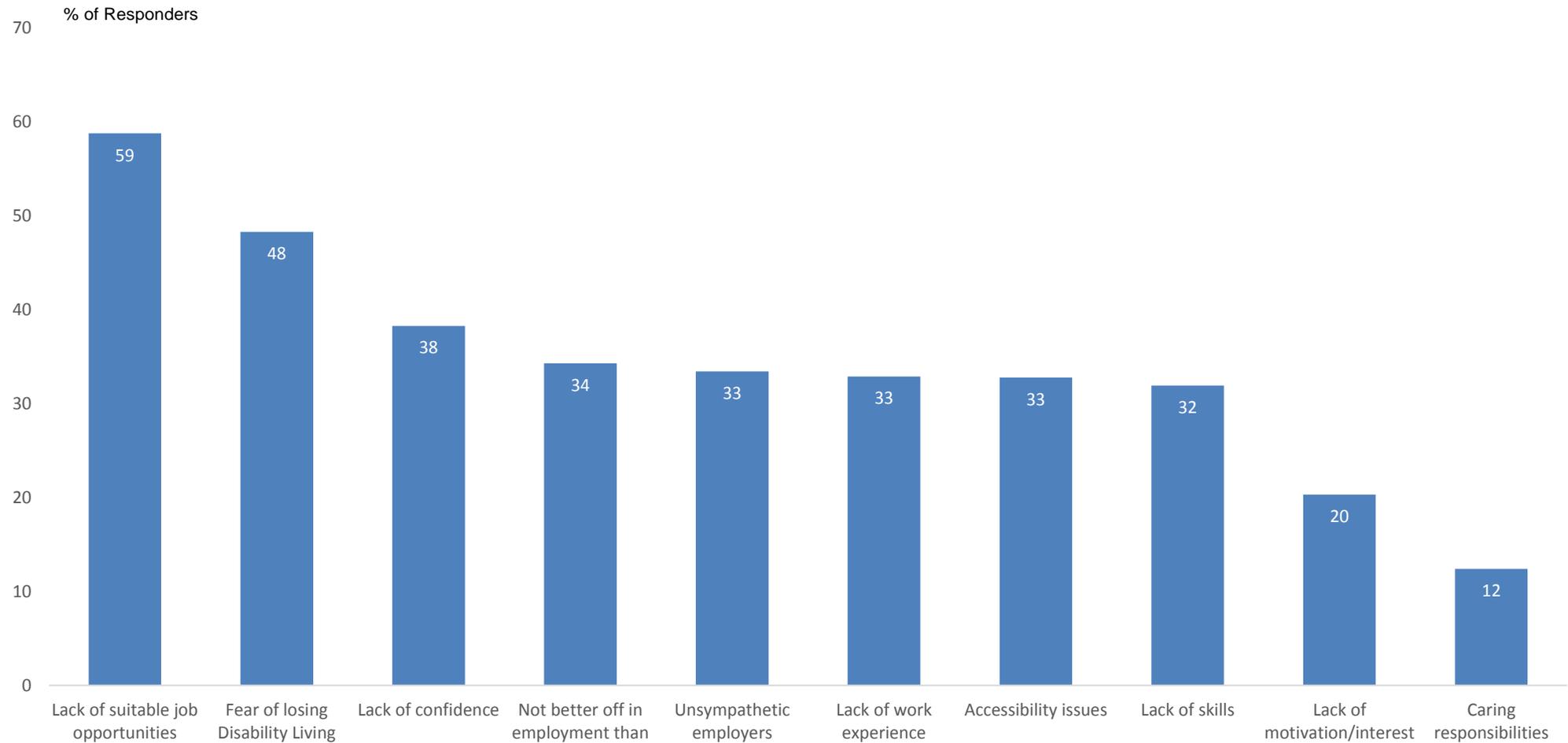
and 65 claiming DLA will have to go through an assessment to confirm eligibility for a new disability benefit.

The majority of respondents (72%) 'strongly supported' or 'tended to support' the proposed change, while 9% of respondents 'strongly opposed' or 'tended to oppose' the proposed change regarding the eligibility assessment for new disability benefits. A further 16% of respondents neither supported nor opposed the proposed changes and 2% gave a response of 'don't know'.

Respondents were also asked their views on the main barriers to people with disabilities entering employment in Northern Ireland (Figure 4).

The main barriers identified were lack of suitable job opportunities (59%), fear of losing DLA (48%), and lack of confidence (38%). Not better off in employment than on benefits (34%), unsympathetic employers (33%), lack of work experience (33%), accessibility issues (33%), and lack of skills (32%) were also given as barriers to people with disabilities entering employment.

Figure 4: Main barriers to people with disabilities entering employment in Northern Ireland*



*Percentages may add to more than 100% due to multiple responses

Respondents were asked what would assist people with disabilities to take up employment. The most popular responses were employers offering flexible working (62%), training and skills courses (60%), supported employment (52%) and assistance with transport (52%). Other types of support identified as assisting people with disabilities to take up employment were work experience (37%), support from family (33%) and assistance with childcare costs (33%), and 3% of respondents gave an answer of 'don't know' or 'other'.

Advice on Changes to the Benefit System

Respondents were asked where they would seek advice on specific areas related to benefit system changes (Figure 5). Respondents were most likely to use Advice Organisations for all areas. NI Direct was the second most popular source for advice with regard to online access to benefit claims and for information on how welfare changes affect you.

Figure 5: Percentage seeking help with different changes to the benefit system by Organisation type



Benefit Uptake

Respondents were asked about using the 'Make the Call' advice line to determine if they are entitled to any/more benefits. The majority of respondents (73%) reported that they were not aware of the Make a Call advice line. The remaining 26% were aware of the advice line.

Only 14% of respondents who were aware of 'Make the Call' confirmed they had used the advice line; the remaining 86% had never used it.

The majority of respondents (70%) reported that they would be comfortable in dealing directly with the Department if they were to use the 'Make the call' advice line, while 25% indicated that they would not be comfortable.

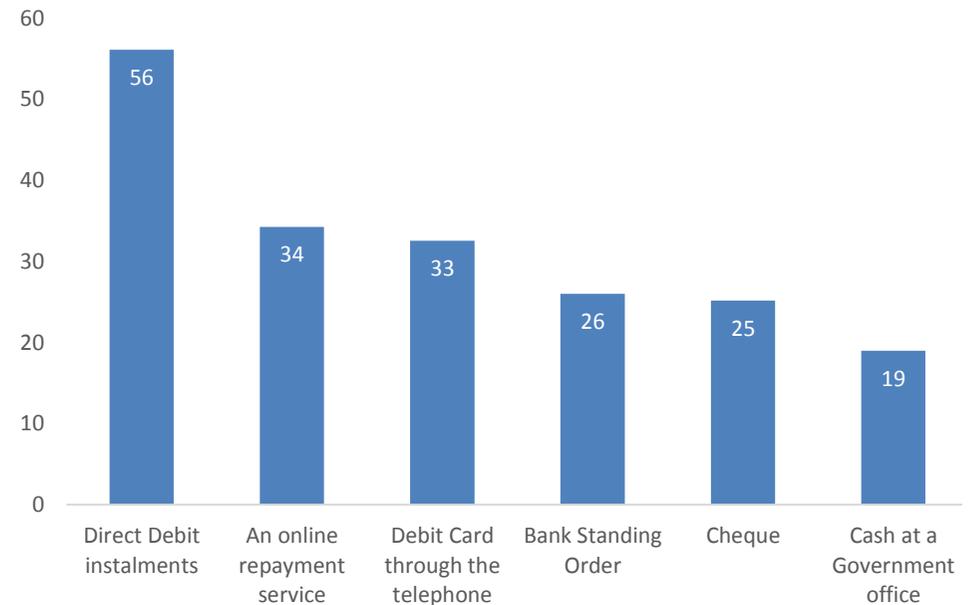
SMS text service to provide updates on the progress of a claim?

Of those who claim benefit from the Department, 73% stated that they would welcome an SMS texting service to keep them updated on the progress of their claim or as a reminder for dates and time of interviews. While 25% stated that they would not welcome the SMS service and 1% answered don't know.

Owing money to a Government Department

Respondents were asked if they owed money to a government Department what their main preferences would be for method of repayment (Figure 6). The main preferences were direct debit instalments (56%), an online repayment service (34%) and debit card through the telephone (33%).

Figure 6: Main preferences for method of paying back money to a Government Department



*Percentages may add to more than 100% due to multiple responses

Quality Assurance

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Relevance

This report has been produced by the Customer Insight, a team whose role is to undertake research and statistical analysis of the Social Security customer base to inform the development and continuous improvement of DfC's customer policies, processes, services and communications. DfC directly commissioned questions in the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey September/October 2016. Some questions were repeated from previous Omnibus Surveys and some were new, relevant to current policies and processes.

Customers include DfC, benefit claimants, academics, the general public, media and community group stakeholders.

Accuracy

In any survey there is a possibility of non-response bias. Non-response bias arises if the characteristics of non-respondents differ from those of respondents in such a way that they are reflected in the responses given in the survey. Accurate estimates of non-response bias can be obtained by comparing characteristics of the achieved sample with the distribution of the same characteristics in the population at the time of sampling. Such comparisons are usually made to the current Census of Population data.

To assess how accurately the Omnibus Survey sample reflects the population it has been compared with characteristics of the Northern Ireland Mid Year Population Estimates and to the achieved sample of the Continuous Household Survey (CHS) (Table 1.1).

Selecting only one individual for interview at each sampled address means that individuals living in large households have a lower chance of being included in the sample than individuals in small households.

Table 1.1 Representativeness of the Sample

	Mid Year Population Estimates 2014	CHS 2015/16 (all members of household 16+)	Omnibus (all members of household 16+)	Omnibus Selected Respondent
Age				
16-24	15	15	10	10
25-34	17	15	12	10
35-49	26	26	26	26
50-64	23	24	27	29
65 and over	19	20	25	25
Gender				
Male	49	47	49	48
Female	51	53	51	52
Base=100%	1,456,715	4,773	1,728	946

Before analysis, all households which provided a selected respondent are examined and the data are weighted in relation to the number of eligible adults at the address derived from the details of household structure recorded by interviewers on the questionnaire. This weighting process adjusts the results to those that would have been achieved if the sample had been drawn as a random sample of adults rather than of addresses. In this sample 39% of households consisted of one adult, while 45% of households consisted of two adults. 11% of households contained three adults, while 5% of households consisted of four or more adults.

Note: on occasions, in tables showing weighted data, the sum of column totals does not equal the grand total. This is due to the rounding process associated with weighting. The percentages in the tables are based on weighted data but the totals are un-weighted.

Table 1.2 Weighting of the Sample

Number of adults 16 and over	Number	Household Size x	Relative Scaled Weight
1	356	356	0.547453703
2	444	888	1.094907407
3	109	327	1.642361111
4	29	116	2.189814814
5	7	35	2.737268518
6	1	6	3.284722222

$$R = \frac{\text{Total number of Selected Respondents}}{\text{Total Number in Household}} = \frac{946}{1728} = 0.5474537037$$

Timeliness and Punctuality

This report is published promptly on the 7th February, 2 months after the fieldwork is completed. The Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey is carried out on a regular basis.

The fieldwork was spread over two months. Addresses were issued to a panel of 180 interviewers in October and 158 interviewers in November 2016. The fieldwork periods were Monday 3rd October - Saturday 5th November 2016 and Monday 7th November - Saturday 10th December 2016. The report was published on the 7th February, 2 months after data collection ceased. The current response rate for this data round is in Table 1.3.

Accessibility and clarity

This report is available online on the date of publication and full tabulated results from the DfC module of the September/October 2016 Omnibus Survey analysed by age group, gender, religion, disability status and employment status can be accessed on the DfC website at the following link:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/customer-insight>

Table 1.3 Response Rate	Number	
Set sample of addresses	2156	
- Ineligible known	234	
- Ineligible unknown (pre-adjustment)	18	
- Eligible known (pre-adjustment)	1904	
- Ineligible (after adjustment)	236	
Eligible (after adjustment) ¹	1920	100
Fully co-operating	941	49
Partially co-operating	5	0
Total co-operating	946	49
Refusal to co-operate	719	37
Non-contact	239	12

1 The adjusted eligible households include all pre-adjustment eligible households and a proportion of the pre-adjustment "eligibility unknown" households. The proportion of the pre-adjustment 'eligibility unknown' households reclassified as eligible is set at the proportion of pre-adjustment eligible households in the set sample of households: 89%.

The report is issued by the Customer Insight Team. If you have a question or require this document in another format, please contact us by email (asu@communities-ni.gov.uk) or phone (02890829255).

Comparability

This report provides a detailed breakdown of results from the September/October 2016 round of the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey. The report is also accompanied by full tabulated results from the DfC module of the September/October 2016 Omnibus Survey analysed by age group, gender, religion, disability status and employment status.

Coherence

The questions asked in the DfC module of the September/October 2016 Omnibus survey are unique and tailored to Departmental Strategy and Policy.