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Ethnic minority perceptions and experiences of Jobcentre Plus

**Maria Hudson
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Policy Studies Institute

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Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 349

Ethnic minority perceptions and experiences of Jobcentre Plus

Maria Hudson, Helen Barnes, Kath Ray and Joan Phillips

A final report of research carried out by the Policy Studies Institute on behalf of
the Department for Work and Pensions

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First Published 2006.

ISBN 1 84712 019 9

ISBN13 978 1 84712 019 9

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

Printed by Corporate Document Services.

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Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Department for Work and Pensions. We are grateful to David Drew, Stephen Munn and other members of the Department for their support during the course of the research.

We are particularly indebted to the various customers and staff of Jobcentre Plus, and employers, who gave up their time to be interviewed and the team of associate researchers who helped with the customer interviews. We also thank Darren Packer, Hilary Salter, Jim Tyson and Jenny Yip for their administrative and IT support.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ACAS	Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
BTEG	Black Training and Enterprise Group
CLAIT	Computer Literacy and Information Technology
DSRM	Diversity Sector Relationship Manager
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ECDL	European Computer Driving Licence
EDM	Employer Diversity Manager
EMEC	Ethnic Minority Enterprise Centre
EMFF	Ethnic Minority Flexible Fund
EMO	Ethnic Minority Outreach
EO	Equal opportunities
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
HR	Human Resources
IT	Information Technology
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LMS	Labour Market System
ND25plus	New Deal for Twenty Five Plus

NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NDYP	New Deal for Young People
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
ONS	Office of National Statistics
PCV	Passenger Carrying Vehicle
RES	Race Equality Scheme
RR(A)A 2000	Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000
SEA	Specialist Employment Adviser
UK	United Kingdom
VSM	Vacancy Service Manager

Summary

Background and aims

Ethnic minority communities experience discrimination and disadvantage in the United Kingdom (UK) labour market. Jobcentre Plus has a role in working to integrate ethnic minority communities into the labour market and, in so doing, help address disadvantage. To this end Jobcentre Plus needs to understand local differences in the experiences of ethnic groups. This research sought to increase understanding of the processes and ways of working within Jobcentre Plus and adult employment programmes and how they may differentially affect ethnic minority participants.

The organisational and policy context of Jobcentre Plus action on race equality

This research was conducted during a period when a range of race equality initiatives were bedding down in Jobcentre Plus. Many of these initiatives seek to contribute to a closing of the White-ethnic minority employment gap and achievement of parity of outcomes for White and ethnic minority customers in Jobcentre Plus and its mainstream services. Developments include Ethnic Minority Outreach Services, the Jobcentre Plus Race Equality Scheme, the Faith in the Communities Toolkit, Monitoring of Parity of Outcomes, the Additional Job Entry Points Scheme and Ethnic Minority Flexible Fund.

The research design

A qualitative research method was adopted. The research was located in four Jobcentre Plus districts across Scotland, Wales and England. Depth interviews were undertaken with a variety of stakeholders across each area. These included a total sample of 84 ethnic minority and 31 White customers, 27 Jobcentre Plus district office and front-line staff and 16 employers. In the early stages of the research depth interviews were undertaken with a small number of Jobcentre Plus key informants to help make topic guides relate to the current context of Jobcentre Plus.

Customer biographies: trajectories and aspirations

The customers interviewed were, with a few exceptions, generally poorly qualified, and their work experience was mostly limited to unskilled or semi-skilled work. Most, however, were keen to work, and some had succeeded in finding jobs, although most were unemployed at the time of being interviewed. Some respondents were keen to change direction in their employment after earlier periods of doing work that they found unsatisfying. In some cases, respondents wanted to enter or re-enter employment but had significant barriers to achieving this and were not receiving the support they required. Those with higher qualifications were also among those who needed help in order to progress in the labour market.

Customer experiences of looking for paid employment

The respondents reported very mixed experiences of Jobcentre Plus use, suggesting considerable inconsistency in the level of service received by customers across districts and offices. Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the services of Jobcentre Plus did not appear to be shaped primarily by ethnic group, but more by customer grouping, with New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) customers, who primarily interacted with Jobcentre Plus via their Personal Advisers, expressing the most favourable views. New Deal for Young People (NDYP) customers expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services, which was related to their need for greater personalised help with job search, because of their relative labour market inexperience. Respondents expressed almost overwhelmingly negative comments about their interactions with staff during the period in which they did not have access to a Personal Adviser. Concerns ranged from lengthy queues in offices, to insufficient time for interaction with staff. Some customers had little need of support for job searching, and valued innovations, such as computerised job points and the Jobseeker Direct service. Others required more personalised interaction with staff regarding the career options open to them, and the lack of time for this often resulted in an alienating experience for the customers. A significant level of confrontations between advisers and customers in jobcentres was also felt to have a negative impact on staff-customer interactions generally.

Customer experiences and perceptions of New Deal

Respondents' experiences of New Deal were very varied. In general the one-to-one support of a Personal Adviser was highly valued, while New Deal training provision had a much more mixed reception. There were exceptions to this though, for example, some respondents had very positive and close relationships with their advisers, while others felt that advisers were busy, rushed them during appointments and failed to contact them in-between appointments. Heavy adviser workloads appeared to be leading to a lack of time for pro-active work with customers; however, it did seem that on the NDLP programme, ethnic minority respondents, particularly Black lone parents, were more likely than White customers to voice these

frustrations. A small number of customers, primarily but not exclusively on one of the mandatory New Deal programmes, reported relationships with advisers characterised by a considerable amount of conflict. Respondents rarely attributed conflictual relationships to ethnic differences per se, however occasionally relationships that had become very negative could become racialised by respondents. With respect to New Deal training, many customers – particularly those new to the labour market because they were not long out of education or new to the country – valued assistance with job search, job applications and interview techniques. At the other end of the spectrum, there was considerable dissatisfaction with unstructured and unsupervised courses that offered little individual attention and support. One response, particularly among Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African young people on the NDYP was to exit the system and thus lose their entitlement. Variation in customer experiences of New Deal training was related to different factors, including the type of provision available for the different New Deal programmes, and variability in the availability and quality of provision within and across districts, as well as by the backgrounds of customers and their aspirations. Those with higher educational qualifications tended to find the provision available least useful, and customers with qualifications and experience from overseas were another group who felt that they were not supported by Jobcentre Plus in utilising their previous experience.

Ways of working with ethnic minority customers

Jobcentre Plus is working with a very diverse range of customers, with a wide range of needs. Where there is diversity in the staff profile this can make a positive contribution to meeting these needs, but both staff and customers feel that there can be advantages to working across ethnic boundaries. On the whole, both advisors and customers signalled culturally sensitive interactions between Jobcentre Plus staff and ethnic minority customers. In some cases, outreach provision, particularly where provided by someone from the same community, is successful in reaching groups not making use of services, or failing to benefit fully from the range of training and employment opportunities available. There is clearly scope for service improvement. While most of those attending English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes were generally positive about them, there is evidence of gaps in ESOL provision and a lack of flexibility in meeting customer needs. Jobcentre Plus lacks advisers who speak ethnic minority languages. Some advisers are making use of the Language Line service and are satisfied with it, while others find it challenging to use. A range of interviewed staff reported that there were resource constraints on drawing on formal types of interpreting support. In all of the fieldwork areas, Jobcentre Plus staff were found to be utilising informal interpreting support of customer family and friends, sometimes in a context that was a cause of particular concern to advisers.

Ensuring fairness in the Jobcentre Plus system

The majority of customers, ethnic minority and White, reported that they had been treated fairly by Jobcentre Plus and its staff. However, there was a gulf between customer and staff satisfaction with the Jobcentre Plus complaints procedure and there were signs of customers having a lack of faith in the system and being without a means of expressing their frustrations and concerns. Customers observed a need for greater efforts to raise awareness of the procedure; some customers lacking understanding of how to take forward a complaint. Customer perceptions of discrimination in the labour market spawned some graphic accounts of labour market experiences in which race discrimination was in evidence. Respondents often presented a complex picture of access to paid employment, with labour market experiences being shaped by a range of factors, reflecting multiple identities and a range of barriers to paid work. While most of the advisers interviewed perceived that ethnic minority customers encountered discrimination in the labour market, there was a disturbing lack of customer awareness of the Jobcentre Plus discrimination procedure. The advice and support gap that this fuelled implicitly constrained the scope for challenging employers when encountering or suspecting discrimination. On the whole, customers felt that Jobcentre Plus' power to take action on discrimination was a good thing. However, there was some scepticism about whether staff cared enough to support customers, suggestive of a need to increase confidence in, as well as awareness of, the system. Few advisers had used the discrimination procedure or seen any guidance on it. There was some evidence of advisers taking informal action to circumvent perceived unlawful discriminatory barriers to employment.

Employers, Jobcentre Plus and race equality

The employers interviewed in this research showed varying levels of ethnic minority representation in their workforces and various degrees of concern about the issue of diversity. Confirming previous research, larger organisations were more likely to have formal equal opportunities policies and have ethnic monitoring processes in place. This did not mean, however, that the larger employers were those with the best record on diversity. Employer concern for diversity and equal opportunities issues varied and was not characteristic of only the larger organisations. Indeed some larger organisations were unconcerned about an almost exclusively White workforce, while others valued diversity because of a concern for social inclusion or for business reasons in a competitive labour market. A number of examples of innovative ways of working between Jobcentre Plus and employers emerged from the research, such as intensive support for individual employers by Account Managers, networking between outreach advisers and local employers, and participation in the Ambition programme. Employers saw benefits in working with Jobcentre Plus to fill their vacancies, and particularly valued the ability of advisers to 'sift' potential applicants and match them to jobs. However they also voiced a range of concerns about Jobcentre Plus services, including the large numbers of applicants received for vacancies, the lack of suitable applicants, and the quality of adviser job matching for customers.

Recommendations

- Key twin messages of this research are that Jobcentre Plus needs to continue to build on recent efforts to cultivate greater *consistency in standards of service provision* alongside developing *flexibility in provision* to facilitate access and ensure that ethnic minority customers do not slip through the net of Jobcentre Plus support. Access needs include the addressing of gaps in interpreting support, written information in other languages, ensuring that ESOL classes in length and content bear a closer relation to customer needs and women-only courses.
- Some dilution of Jobcentre Plus' duty to promote work first is likely to help more fully meet the interim needs of the hardest to help and better support sustainable labour market outcomes.
- *Building on New Deal* (DWP, 2004) has a core principle of providing more flexibility in the delivery of the New Deal programme and this may provide a useful vehicle for facilitating the greater personalised help with job search needed by some customers.
- Closer monitoring of New Deal training providers, introducing greater quality control into contractual arrangements, may help to alleviate some customer concerns about provision. The nature and extent of customer dissatisfaction suggests the importance of ensuring that all customers have an opportunity to evaluate their programme experiences.
- On-going work to raise awareness and understanding of the customer complaints procedure alongside tightening the follow-up of complaints may strengthen opportunities for customer voice and help improve faith in the system.
- Criticisms of the quality of advisers might be addressed by broadening the recruitment of Jobcentre Plus staff to capacity build, while examining the terms and conditions of front-line staff and considering their access to training and development.
- Jobcentre Plus adviser questioning of employer interpretations of job readiness suggests a need for pro-active work with employers on hiring requirements.
- In tackling unlawful discrimination, there is a need, with some urgency, to raise awareness and understanding of the Jobcentre Plus discrimination procedure, particularly among customers, including those with ESOL needs, but also among staff. Current organisational contexts appear to be inhibiting the individual agency that is often necessary to tackle discrimination.
- There is scope for greater working with employers on diversity issues, perhaps exploring opportunities for Employer Diversity Managers, Specialist Employment Advisers, the Commission for Racial Equality and Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service to share knowledge and experience.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and aims of the research

One of the aims of Jobcentre Plus is to promote paid work as the best form of welfare for people of working age, while protecting the position of those in greatest need (Jobcentre Plus, 2003). The disadvantaged labour market position of individuals from ethnic minority communities in the United Kingdom is well documented. A perception of the need for joined up action to improve the position of ethnic minorities in the labour market is reflected in the remit of the Ethnic Minority Employment Taskforce (Ethnic Minority Employment Taskforce, 2004). As a lead public agency, Jobcentre Plus has a key role in addressing this disadvantage and integrating ethnic minorities into the labour market. While it is not the only institution that needs to take action, in recent years concern has grown that Jobcentre Plus may not be providing sufficient or appropriate help to members of ethnic minority groups. Research examining local delivery agents in employment zones has suggested that Personal Advisers do not view ethnicity per se as leading to labour market disadvantage, and will not necessarily provide additional help on these grounds alone (Hirst *et al.*, 2002:31). While diversity training was mandatory under the previous Employment Services regime, the shape and delivery of training on such issues within Jobcentre Plus is still in the process of development. Traditionally, diversity initiatives have been less of a priority for Jobcentre Plus than a drive to ensure an increasing market share of employer vacancies. However, as a nationwide organisation, Jobcentre Plus needs to understand local differences in the experiences and practices of ethnic minority groups. There was recognition of this in 2004 when ensuring diverse communities have access to services became one of the ten measurable business priorities for Jobcentre Plus.

Latest data on individual New Deal programmes continue to show a lack of parity in White-ethnic minority customer outcomes (Ethnic Minority Employment Taskforce, 2004: 38). Although ethnic minority unemployment rates are high and these high rates have been persistent over time, little previous research has focused on the processes and ways of working within Jobcentre Plus and adult employment programmes and how they may differentially affect ethnic minority participants.

What previous research has been undertaken has shown that ethnic minority customers have tended to have a more negative view of the Employment Service and Jobcentre Plus than the White population. However, ethnic minorities were only a small part of the research (Ethnic Minority Employment Taskforce, 2004). To help fill this knowledge gap, the Department for Work and Pensions commissioned the qualitative research on which this report is based. The research adopts a multi-stakeholder approach to explore Jobcentre Plus programmes and practices and the views and attitudes of participants, Personal Advisers, managers and employers. It includes an investigation of the strategies adopted by key players to address the issue of equal opportunities and the specific needs of ethnic minority participants and the obstacles they encounter in engaging with the Jobcentre Plus system. In a context of new initiatives and evolving policies, this research provides a baseline from which to evaluate Jobcentre Plus progress on race equality.

1.2 The structure of this report

- Chapter 2 considers the labour market position and prospects of Jobcentre Plus customers and outlines the agency's evolving policy and organisational context, providing a snapshot of this landscape during the fieldwork period.
- Chapter 3 describes the research design, examining each of the stakeholders in turn.
- Chapter 4 considers the labour market trajectories and aspirations of White and ethnic minority customers.
- Chapter 5 explores ethnic minority experiences of looking for paid employment as users of general Jobcentre Plus job search support services.
- Chapter 6 takes a critical look at customer experiences of New Deal provision, drawing out the positive and negative dimensions of that experience.
- Chapter 7 discusses ways of working with ethnic minority customers in the Jobcentre Plus system, drawing on the perceptions and experiences of both staff and customers.
- Chapter 8 draws on customer and staff perceptions and experiences to assess the presence and effectiveness of procedures for ensuring fairness in Jobcentre Plus.
- Chapter 9 reviews the themes arising in interviews with employers, including exploration of perceived barriers to recruiting ethnic minority groups and employer experiences of Jobcentre Plus services.

2 The organisational and policy context of Jobcentre Plus action on race equality

In recent years Jobcentre Plus has adopted a range of measures to promote race equality both for its staff and customers. As will be seen later in this report, influencing the practice and experiences of Jobcentre Plus staff and customers are not mutually exclusive processes. Jobcentre Plus has construed the promotion of race equality as consisting of inter-related internal and external processes. The last few years have witnessed the introduction of a range of race equality initiatives across the agency. The research on which this report draws therefore took place in an evolving policy and practice context. The aim of this chapter is to outline key elements of this context, setting the scene for what follows. To this end it considers both the labour market position and prospects of Jobcentre Plus customers, White and ethnic minority, and the agency's wide-ranging action on race equality.

2.1 The labour market position and prospects of Jobcentre Plus customers

2.1.1 The White-ethnic minority employment gap

The ethnic minority employment rate is substantially lower than that of the White population. While there has been some progress, differences between the economic activity and employment rates of minority ethnic and indigenous White groups persist (Modood *et al.*, 1997; Iganski and Payne, 1996; Blackaby *et al.*, 1999; Twomey, 2001; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2003; Strategy Unit, 2003; Barnes *et al.*, 2005). Recent figures from winter 2002/03 Labour Force Survey indicate that 58 per cent of those in ethnic minority groups were in employment compared with 76 per cent of the White population (ONS, 2003). While the White population has an unemployment rate of five per cent, that for mixed ethnic minority employment groups is 15 per cent, Black or Black British 13 per cent, Asian

or Asian British 11 per cent and other ethnic groups 14 per cent. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus, alongside other agencies, has been charged with taking measures to help reduce the White-ethnic minority employment gap.

The picture of labour market position and progress is a complex one. Several ethnic minority groups experience polarised skill and qualifications outcomes, being over-represented among both high and low achievers (Strategy Unit, 2003). Some groups, notably those of Indian and Chinese ethnicity, have experienced significant improvements in their position (Strategy Unit, 2003). Labour market achievements of Britain's ethnic minorities vary by geographical location. Ethnic minority communities are concentrated in major urban areas with high unemployment rates. While research suggests that they have higher levels of unemployment because of the local economic environment they live in (Berthoud, 2000), recent commentators have counselled against giving this too much weight as an explanatory factor. This is due to many areas of high unemployment being close to areas of high labour demand (BTEG, 2003). There is also variation in achievements and disadvantage by first and second-generation immigrants and by gender. Human capital levels are an important supply-side determinant of labour market outcomes and second generation ethnic minorities have experienced improved educational attainment and eroded language barriers. Gender differences in labour market disadvantage are further stratified by age, a theme that recent studies of the labour market prospects for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women reiterate (Dale *et al.*, 2002, Ahmad *et al.*, 2003).

2.1.2 A customer satisfaction deficit

A quantitative survey of Jobcentre Plus customers conducted in 2003 questioned the ability of Jobcentre staff to identify and address individuals' needs vis-a-vis labour market integration (Dowson *et al.*, 2004). Criticisms were also made of the customer complaints procedure in the context of a significant proportion of customers feeling grounds for complaints and not proceeding with those complaints, and high levels of dissatisfaction with the complaints process and outcomes. Awareness of the customer charter was low. Follow-up qualitative research (Dowson *et al.*, 2004) found a substantial degree of variation in customers' perceptions of the degree of respect staff accorded to them, including staff friendliness, helpfulness and politeness. The high degree of variability and inconsistency in customers' experience of the service could undermine their satisfaction. Those with multiple needs were particularly critical of service effectiveness. This research had little to say about White-ethnic minority differences in engagement with Jobcentre Plus and its programmes. However, evidence on White-ethnic minority disparities in outcomes on New Deal is suggestive of ethnic minority customers fairing badly in comparison with White customers.

2.1.3 White-ethnic minority parity of outcomes on New Deal

Persistent inequality in accessing employment for ethnic minority groups is suggested by the experiences of ethnic minority groups on the New Deal. Evidence suggests

that existing employment programmes have had limited success in alleviating ethnic minority labour market disadvantage. Ethnic minority groups on New Deal programmes have been better qualified than White groups, and hence might be expected to do better (Moody, 2000). Despite this their experiences have differed markedly from those of White participants in terms of option entry, length of participation, satisfaction with the programme and job outcomes. Fewer ethnic minorities obtain jobs than White customers across New Deal for Young People (NDYP), New Deal 25plus (ND25plus) and New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). Of the young people from ethnic minority groups eligible for the NDYP, 11 per cent withdrew prior to their initial interview (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2000). They were also more likely to leave the scheme before taking an option (Moody, 2000). Moreover dissatisfaction with New Deal has also been found to be much more marked among ethnic minority groups (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2000).

2.2 Jobcentre Plus action on race equality

2.2.1 The New Deal Next Phase – Ethnic Minority Outreach

Improving the labour market prospects of minority ethnic jobseekers is high on the policy agenda. One element of the New Deal Next Phase that has attempted to address the issues contributing to the disadvantaged position of ethnic minority communities in the labour market is its Ethnic Minority Outreach (EMO) programme. Developed in response to the Government's Green Paper on Full Employment, the initiative commenced in April 2002 to run for two years, in tandem with other new and existing New Deal programmes. The initiative aimed to support jobless people from ethnic minority communities who need help making the transition into employment, contributing to a narrowing of the gap between the overall employment rate and that of minority ethnic groups. The outreach service was initially offered in five regions where ethnic minorities are concentrated (Greater London, West Midlands, West Yorkshire, East Midlands and Greater Manchester). Projects located within communities have worked with local Jobcentres and other providers through a number of approaches, including outreach, training and working closely with employers. The service has subsequently been expanded beyond the original geographical boundaries.

The evaluation of the pilots found creative outreach work to be taking place in communities with provision being closely tailored to local needs. In the later stages of the pilot there were many instances of Jobcentre staff involvement with EMO projects having a positive impact on their awareness of and contact with ethnic minority groups. However, while participants had some positive perceptions of their experience with jobcentres, this was rather patchy and negative encounters with jobcentres were more common.

The supportive services offered by EMO projects highlighted areas where customers felt the need for more attention from Jobcentre Plus (Barnes *et al.*, 2005).

Jobcentre Plus has clearly not seen the introduction of EMO as sufficient to erode White-ethnic minority disparities. Additional measures have been influenced by both recent developments in race relations law and the recent Cabinet Office review on ethnic minority groups in the United Kingdom (UK) (Strategy Unit, 2003).

2.2.2 The Jobcentre Plus Race Equality Scheme and related measures

The introduction of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (RR(A)A) places a general duty on Jobcentre Plus, and other public authorities, to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promoting equality of opportunity and promoting good relations between persons of different racial groups. Public authorities are required to publish a Race Equality Scheme (RES), which is a set of minimum standards for complying with the general duty in relation to policy, service delivery and employment. The Jobcentre Plus RES outlines a commitment to *'understanding and meeting the diverse needs of its customers, developing a workforce that reflects the communities it serves and assessing the appropriateness and accessibility of its information and services'*. The RES aims to inform all activities at national, regional and district levels.

A concern to improve Jobcentre Plus race equality knowledge, behaviour and practices was reflected in the objectives of a conference for Jobcentre Plus ethnic minority staff and their senior managers held in 2002. The objectives included developing strategies for improving the representation of Jobcentre Plus ethnic minority staff at middle and senior management levels to provide input into the new DWP diversity and equality strategy. The conference also sought to identify proposals for improving service delivery to minority ethnic clients and to generate proposals for raising employers' awareness of fair employment practices. Conference workshops organised around these objectives and themes generated a range of comments from ethnic minority staff. Staff noted that middle management appeared to be blocking change by an apparent lack of commitment to, understanding of and expertise to deal with diversity. Management was described as unrepresentative of the Jobcentre Plus workforce and policies aimed at encouraging and supporting a diverse workforce were not trickling down to managers at the district level.

In order to meet the legislative requirements of the RR(A)A 2000, Jobcentre Plus has compiled an action plan. The immediate priority has been to put the necessary *'infrastructure in place to enable race equality to be mainstreamed throughout all tiers of the business during 2003/2004'* (Jobcentre Plus Business Delivery Plan).

While Jobcentre Plus fleshed out its RES, a Departmental Ethnic Minority Working Party was charged with implementing the recommendations of the Cabinet Office review. This has contributed to the introduction of a number of Jobcentre Plus initiatives to help improve the employment rate of ethnic minority groups and narrow the White-ethnic minority employment gap; demonstrating an awareness

of the need to involve a range of stakeholders and build key relationships. At a strategic level, action has included firstly, the establishment, in October 2002, of a Minority Ethnic Target Focus Group, made up of District Managers from areas with the highest concentrations of ethnic minority populations, policy makers and members of the National Employment Panel. The Group's remit includes providing strategic and operational advice for areas of work that may help close the employment gap and achieve parity of ethnic minority performance on all Jobcentre Plus provision. Secondly, the creation of new posts at an operational level including the introduction of Diversity Sector Relationship Managers (DSRMs) in September 2003 and Specialist Employment Advisers (SEAs) in April 2004. The remit of DSRMs is to work with the Human Resources Departments of the top one hundred companies in the UK on recruitment of ethnic minority groups. Specialist Employment Managers have been external appointments, requiring substantial training, with a view to developing networks with agencies and partners in ethnic minority communities to encourage greater programme take-up and job applications. The SEAs are also working with employers to encourage recruitment from ethnic minority groups and promote the business benefits of diversity, their remit including relationship building on both the supply and demand sides of the labour market. A third strand has been the establishment of regional and national Diversity Network Groups, made up of Jobcentre staff, who advise on internal and external race matters in addition to carrying out the functions of their substantive posts.

As part of the RES, Jobcentre Plus managers were required to communicate the requirements of the Race Relations Act to staff, using a briefing pack. Briefings commenced in 2004. In this year work began on a learning and development strategy recognising the array of equal opportunities courses available for staff and a need to evaluate which were appropriate and most effective. Plans were also made to bring representatives of ethnic minority groups into Jobcentre Plus offices, to talk to staff with a view to increasing cross-cultural understanding.

In 2004, Jobcentre Plus Districts had been set a Race Equality Scheme Challenge (RES Challenge). This required districts to take a range of actions by December 2004, including exploring and reporting on where ethnic minority populations lived, their composition, how they were being served by Jobcentre Plus and whether complaints, suggestions or compliments were being monitored.

2.2.3 Faith in the Communities toolkit

Jobcentre Plus has adopted race-related toolkits; again to enhance cultural understanding. This has included the design and introduction of a 'Faith in the Communities' toolkit in one of its districts which was subsequently rolled out to other regions and districts. The toolkit provides information on the cultural traits of a range of ethnic and religious communities. It aims to provide an accessible resource for building the cultural knowledge of those with little or no awareness. It is also a tool for readily plugging gaps in the cultural knowledge of those who are

much more aware. If a jobcentre adviser encounters a customer from an unfamiliar ethnic group, the toolkit can be consulted. An organisation-wide 'Diversity' toolkit has also been made available to staff on the Jobcentre Plus intranet during 2004.

2.2.4 Monitoring parity of outcomes

In the overall context of the development and implementation of a race equality scheme, a number of specific policy measures have also been introduced with the aim of improving Jobcentre Plus performance in respect of people from ethnic minority backgrounds. One of these is the introduction and development of systematic monitoring of parity of outcomes across Jobcentre Plus programmes and mainstream services. Overall, ethnic minorities achieve 0.76 of the job entries of White jobseekers, although this headline figure conceals large variations across areas (DWP internal document).

2.2.5 Additional Job Entry Points Scheme

The awarding of additional job entry points to people living in the 258 wards with the highest unemployment rates and highest proportions of people from minority ethnic groups is a key strand of the Jobcentre Plus Ethnic Minority Business Plan. The 36 districts in which these 258 wards are found cover approximately 75 per cent of the ethnic minority population in the UK. The points scheme applies to all people living in the relevant area, and not ethnic minority jobseekers alone, which would be illegal. However, the wards included in the Additional Job Entry Points scheme have been reviewed, shifting the criteria for ward selection away from overall unemployment levels and towards ethnic minority presence. From 2005 the scheme will involve 272 wards. While the scheme does not, and cannot, allocate job entry points for ethnic minority job entries, the shift in criteria moves Jobcentre Plus as close as legally possible to doing so. Ostensibly, additional resources, consisting of 1,000 advisers, have been committed to these wards. The roll out of EMO is in part being geared to support the ward performance agenda as well as a DWP focus on Black Caribbean, Black African and South Asian groups.

2.2.6 The Ethnic Minority Flexible Fund

2004 also saw the introduction of an Ethnic Minority Flexible Fund for use by District Managers to support ethnic minority employment. The fund recognises that action on ethnic minority employment needs to be sensitive to local needs and districts require a degree of flexibility in meeting those needs in taking action on race equality. The underlying ethos is that one size does not fit all. District Managers are able to draw on the fund within deliberately broad parameters as befits enhancing local provision.

3 The research design

The research project began in November 2003 and fieldwork took place from January to October 2004. A qualitative approach to data collection was adopted, depth interviews facilitating analysis of issues within and across fieldwork areas and by type of interviewee. This chapter describes the case study areas, the range of interviews undertaken and provides a broad description of experiences of race initiatives in each area at the time of fieldwork.

3.1 The case study areas

Fieldwork was located in four Jobcentre Plus districts in different regions of Britain. Research in the area of ethnic minorities and the labour market is often located in the major conurbations in which ethnic minorities are concentrated, to the neglect of other areas of significant ethnic minority presence. For example, there are also known concentrations of ethnic minority groups in the South West of England and areas of Wales and Scotland. Of the four areas selected for fieldwork, two were major conurbations in which the Ethnic Minority Outreach programme had bedded down (Areas one and two) and two were areas with smaller but significant ethnic minority communities that had not been included in the programme (Areas three and four).

3.2 The stakeholder interviews

The selection of a range of key stakeholders for interview was an essential feature of the research methods. They included depth interviews with key informants, customers, Jobcentre Plus staff and employers.

3.2.1 The key informants

In the early stages of the research, interviews took place with a small number of Jobcentre Plus staff identified as having a particular role in relation to the design and implementation of the Jobcentre Plus Race Equality Strategy. These interviews formed an important context to the study as a whole, and also informed the development of interview schedules. Similarly attendance at Ethnic Minority Target

Focus Group and National Race Action Group meetings also helped the research team to obtain a good feel for the evolving nature of Jobcentre Plus policies.

3.2.2 The customer interviews

The ethnic minority customers

There is great diversity in ethnic minority communities around the United Kingdom (UK), changing with new inflows of migrants. While many ethnic minority communities are more diverse than revealed by official statistics, it was decided to focus on the experiences of people from Black Caribbean, Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups for two main reasons. First to obtain a deeper analysis than would be possible if a wider variety of ethnic groups were sampled. Second, while Britain's Black and Asian communities have figured prominently in immigration flows to Britain in the post-war period, these groups '*have experienced significant and persistent labour market disadvantage ever since*' (Strategy Unit, 2003:14).

The aim was to sample 20 ethnic minority customers across the four case study areas. A sample of 84 ethnic minority users of Jobcentre Plus services was achieved by drawing on Labour Market Survey (LMS) records. The sample was made up of customers representative of a range of characteristics. These included gender, a mix of age groups and participation in New Deal 25plus (ND25plus), New Deal for Young People (NDYP) and New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). It was important to sample across a range of programmes to reflect the organisation-wide rather than programme-specific nature of the research issues being explored. While the sample included Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Black Caribbean and Black African customers, the groups sampled were not evenly spread across the areas. This was due to a combination of low numbers of people from the ethnic minority groups that could be identified in LMS records for some areas and difficulties in reaching people. Wherever possible, customers were interviewed by people from the same ethnic group as themselves. For sample customers with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) needs, interviewers conducted the interviews in their preferred language. The achieved ethnic minority sample is summarised in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Summary of ethnic minority interviews across the case study areas

Ethnic group	Case study area			
	Area one	Area two	Area three	Area four
Black Caribbean	14	8	3	0
Black African	4	9	3	1
Pakistani	12	1	2	7
Bangladeshi	3	16	1	0
Total ethnic minority interviews	33	34	9	8

Each interview lasted for up to one hour. Themes explored included employment and non-employment history, short- and long-term aspirations and detailed New Deal programme history. Experiences and perceptions of Jobcentre Plus and New Deal were a core element of the research. Areas explored included access to mainstream support and services, perceptions of fairness of treatment by Jobcentre Plus and employers, and procedures to ensure customer voice and redress in the event of customer complaints and discrimination.

The White customers – a comparison group

In order to assess whether the issues identified in the ethnic minority customer interviews were specific to those groups and not common to all Jobcentre Plus customers, it was also necessary to sample White users of Jobcentre Plus services, again using LMS records. Fewer White interviews were needed to draw comparisons. The total numbers of White and ethnic minority customer interviews per area are summarised in Table 3.2. As with the ethnic minority groups, the sample was constructed to include a range of relevant personal characteristics.

Table 3.2 Total number of White and ethnic minority customer interviews

Ethnic group	Case study area			
	Area one	Area two	Area three	Area four
White	8	8	8	7
Ethnic minority	33	34	9	8
Total interviews	41	42	17	15

3.2.3 Interviews with Jobcentre staff

Twenty-seven interviews were undertaken with Jobcentre Plus staff. In each area the target was a cross-section of six Jobcentre Plus staff per area. The achieved sample of staff interviews across the areas is summarised in Table 3.3. Interviewees included a cross section of local District Managers, Equalities Officers and Business Managers. In each area the remaining interviewees were based at a jobcentre sampled for in-depth case study. Staff sampled from this layer of case analysis included Team Leaders and Advisers on NDLP, NDYP and ND25plus and Vacancy Service Managers. Two areas were employment zones, Areas two and four, and so did not have ND25plus programmes from which to sample staff. In most areas additional local key informant interviews took place. These reflected innovations occurring in each area and included outreach and community workers. Ethnic minority staff interviewees were concentrated in the two areas with a substantial ethnic minority presence, Areas one and two.

Table 3.3 Interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff

Case study area	Number and type of Jobcentre Plus Staff interviewed per area
Area one	Five interviews: District Manager (White, female) NDLP Adviser (White, female) Performance Manager (White, male) Other Advisers, NDYP, ND25plus (Pakistani, male)
Area two	Six interviews: Diversity and Equality Implementor (Black Caribbean, female) District Office and Human Resources Customer Manager (White, female) Team Leader Outreach (Black Caribbean, female) New Deal Team Leader (White, male) NDYP Adviser (British Muslim, female) NDLP Adviser (Black Caribbean, female) Employer Liaison Team members
Area three	Eight interviews: District Manager (White, male) Race Equality Development Manager (White, male) Adviser Manager (White, female) ND25plus Adviser (White, male) ND25plus and NDYP Adviser (White, female) NDLP Adviser (White, female) Employer Diversity Manager (White, male) Community Adviser (White, male)
Area four	Eight interviews: District Manager (White, male) Member of Business Development Team (White, male) New Deal Team Leader (White, male) NDLP Adviser (White, male) NDYP Adviser (White, female) Vacancy Services Manager (White, female) Outreach Worker (Indian British, male) Black and Minority Ethnic Ward Team Leader (White, male)

Separate topic guides were developed for managerial and delivery staff. They included similar themes, to permit consistent analysis on cross-cutting issues. For front-line advisers there was an emphasis on their day-to-day experiences of organisational policies and practices as members of staff and particularly with reference to their relationship with their clients. For managerial staff there was an emphasis not only on their perceptions but also their views of delivery staff. Themes explored included staff awareness and experience of race equality initiatives, awareness of diversity in the local community and implications for ways of working with different customers. Vignettes were used to explore sensitive issues such as how staff deal with employer discrimination and to probe awareness of cultural issues. Vignettes are short stories, describing a typical scenario and asking respondents to react, for instance by saying what the people involved should do next, or what they would do themselves in the circumstances described (Finch, 1987). They are used in research to explore attitudes to situations which the respondent may or may

not have encountered in their own lives, and to highlight individual and group values by making explicit the rationale underlying certain courses of action. One of their advantages is in enabling respondents to talk about potentially sensitive topics in a 'safe' manner; they may also assist memory recall by providing a trigger to a similar situation that the respondent has encountered. They provide information not only on why a certain course of action might be preferred, but also on the reasons why alternative courses of action would be rejected or not considered.

3.2.4 Interviews with employers

The ability to access employment opportunities and discrimination in the workplace feature among the multiple causes of labour market disadvantage experienced by ethnic minorities. A succession of studies indicate that employers are implicated in inequalities in accessing employment and opportunities for progression (for example Hoque and Noon, 2001). These studies fuel concern that disadvantage is built into organisational structures and practices. Some recognition of the importance of employer initiatives to address racial inequality is embodied in the New Deal Next Phase Ethnic Minority Outreach programme (described in Chapter 2), in its aim of improving employer engagement.

The final, employer, stage of the fieldwork involved an iterative approach. Drawing on information about local employers provided in interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff, the research aimed to interview five employers in each case study area, 20 interviews in all. Cases were sampled to include employers who were known to employ ethnic minority groups, as well as those with a less diverse profile, and across a range of sectors and employer sizes. The aim was to include employers that Jobcentre Plus staff perceived to be 'good' and 'bad' in terms of the recruitment of ethnic minority groups in their areas. Some staff found it difficult to identify 'bad' employers who were not drawing on Jobcentre Plus services, which meant that the employers were not representative of a broad spectrum of practice. In addition, some employers declined to be interviewed. The reasons employers gave for their non-participation included being too busy and having a policy of not getting involved in research. Some were also on holiday during the fieldwork period. The achieved sample of fifteen employers is summarised in Table 3.4. As can be seen, the response from employers in Area one was particularly poor.

It was anticipated that employer time would be an important consideration. Depending upon employer preferences, some interviews were face to face while others were conducted by telephone. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour depending upon how much time employers had to spare. The employer topic guide was divided into four sections to explore employer background, recruitment methods, use of Jobcentre Plus, equal opportunities policies and views on race equality and diversity issues.

Table 3.4 Summary of employers interviewed

Case study area	ID	Type of employer
Area one	SecuriCo	Large private security firm
Area two	RetailCo	Large retail
	CommuCo	Large communications/retail
	ShopCo	Small retail/café
	TrainingCo	Small training provider
	BrokerCo	Large public sector/job brokering agency (local authority)
Area three	StoreCo	Large retail
	CleanCo	Small personal services (cleaning)
	SafeCo	Small security firm
	SalesCo	Large private utility
	AgencyCo	Large public sector/recruitment agency (local authority)
	PoliceCo	Large public sector (police force)
Area four	UtilityCo	Large private utility
	FoodCo	Small hospitality (restaurant)
	UniCo	Large public sector (university)

3.3 Experience of race initiatives in the case study areas

3.3.1 Area one

Area one is very ethnically diverse, and ethnic minority populations make up a substantial majority of the population in some local authority wards. The largest ethnic groups are Pakistani and Black Caribbean. The area is also one which has seen substantial recent growth in the number of refugees and asylum seekers.

Area one is involved in the Fair Cities initiative, which aims to increase the employment of ethnic minority groups, in partnership with major employers. There is also a local strategic initiative, involving the local authority and the Learning and Skills Council, which aims to maximise the benefits of economic development to the local community. There has been a major retail development in Area one recently, and ensuring that minority ethnic groups were successful in obtaining these jobs was established as a priority. Recruitment was carried out in local areas, using a double-decker bus. A large hospital is in the process of being built and this is another focus for recruitment. While outreach of this kind was seen to be important, there was less enthusiasm for the Ethnic Minority Outreach (EMO) pilot, which was seen as less targeted, and therefore less useful.

Area one has developed a Refugee Action Plan, intended to improve the service provided to refugees, which maps the skills of refugees registered with Jobcentre Plus, with an aim of recognising the resources offered by those who are highly qualified. It has also developed its own version of the Faith in the City toolkit pioneered by Area two. It has also obtained European Union funding for a dedicated refugee worker, who acts as an intermediary, to work within jobcentres.

This is an area where there is a strong emphasis on diversity issues being mainstreamed, rather than being viewed as a separate area of work. Area one has a close working partnership with a local voluntary sector consultancy, which provides them with training and consultancy on diversity issues. Briefings on the Race Equality Scheme (RES) have begun only recently. Staff with a diversity brief are located within the performance team, and meeting race equality targets is viewed as integral to performance as a whole. The ward-based points system was also welcomed in this context, as being something which meets real needs in an area, but without creating invidious distinctions between White and ethnic minority customers. Specialist employment advisers have recently been appointed in Area one, but their remit is seen to be slightly at odds with the overall emphasis on mainstreaming race equality.

3.3.2 Area two

Area two also has a substantial ethnic minority population, larger than the White population. Bangladeshi Muslims form the largest group and there are smaller Black Caribbean, White, Chinese and Somali communities. The area is characterised by a high level of poverty and deprivation. There are relatively large numbers of unemployed and economically inactive.

At the time of fieldwork the district was in the early stages of developing a Diversity and Equality Team. The RES Challenge was just getting off the ground, with substantial inputs expected from the Business Development Team, Contacts Team and Diversity and Equality Team. The latter was to be heavily involved in RES, trying to highlight the goals that needed greater attention. There was a perception that collecting statistical information for the area would be the most challenging task, with the high presence of ethnic minority groups across staff and the community having given rise to a high degree of cultural awareness and good practice. The action needed by Area two to meet the RES Challenge was seen as rather less than would be necessary in areas with a lower ethnic minority presence. There were some concerns that there was so much emphasis on race equality issues in Jobcentre Plus diversity work that other issues, such as those relating to disability, would be neglected. While the RES is seen as stimulating a focus on race issues, equalities staff feel a need for more joined-up working.

Following extensive involvement in the EMO pilot the area now has an outreach team consisting of 21 advisers. It has been a deliberate strategy to recruit a variety of ethnic minority groups to this team increasing their representation among staff and trying to better reflect the ethnic composition of the community. Specialist Employment Advisers, whose role it is to target and work with employers, were new to the area and liaising with the outreach team. Area two has also been at the forefront of the adoption of the Faith-in-the-Communities Toolkit.

3.3.3 Area three

Area three has a fairly small ethnic minority population (less than 10 per cent of the total population), composed mainly of a long-established African Caribbean community, Asian communities such as Pakistanis and Bangladeshis and a Somali community made up of both very long-established members and more recent arrivals. The Somali population has very high unemployment rates and tends to be the most 'visibly' disadvantaged ethnic minority group. Most of the ethnic minorities in the district are concentrated in a few wards of the city.

The RES Challenge in this district is being taken forward by a Race Equality Development Manager, in the Business Development Team, who had just started in post when the research was undertaken. He was currently engaged in networking with various statutory and voluntary sector organisations working with the ethnic minority communities in the district, with a view to eventually formalising this network into a consultation forum. However this work was in very early days at the time of the research.

The Race Equality Development Manager also manages the work of an Outreach Adviser based in the one ward in the district which qualifies for the Additional Job Entry Points Scheme (described in Chapter 2). This adviser works within a partnership structure which also includes the Commission for Racial Equality and other government agencies as well as Jobcentre Plus. The adviser works primarily with the Somali community in this area and is physically located in the community, working out of various youth and community centres. The adviser has at his disposal two forms of financial support to customers, funded out of the Ethnic Minority Flexible Fund: an Ethnic Minority Barriers Grant, to address customers' barriers to work, and an Ethnic Minority Enterprise Allowance Fund, to facilitate those wanting to enter self-employment. These funds are available to anyone seeking work, not just those who are currently receiving benefits. The adviser also funds work-related training for customers, and the district is in the process of developing an English into Work course to improve the tailoring of its ESOL provision for ethnic minority customers.

Some work with employers has been initiated by the Race Equality Development Manager in conjunction with the Outreach Adviser and the Employer Diversity Manager for the region, which aims to make a connection between the work of the Outreach Adviser with ethnic minority job seekers and the needs of employers. While this work was in its early days, some innovative schemes with local employers are in the pipeline such as the development of tailored job preparation courses with guaranteed job interviews or work trials. Other employers have used the networks and resources of the outreach adviser as a source of recruitment.

Other community outreach work in the district includes an Ethnic Minority Outreach programme, which was in the final stages of development while the research was taking place and was due to start in October 2004. This will be delivered by Jobcentre Plus in partnership with a voluntary sector training provider who has existing contracts for New Deal provision. Over the last few years, in conjunction

with the local government, the district has also developed a series of Training and Enterprise Centres in the most disadvantaged areas of the district, which offer facilities for job search, as well as specialist advice for work in particular industries, such as construction. Lone parent advisers based in the Training and Enterprise Centres have also been engaged in outreach work with various voluntary sector organisations to encourage cross-referrals and enable the customers to make better use of all existing services.

3.3.4 Area four

Area four also has a fairly small ethnic minority population. The Pakistani community is the largest ethnic minority group, at 2.7 per cent of the total population, followed by the Indian and Chinese communities, each at 0.7 per cent. Refugees and asylum seekers have been a more recent addition to the city. There are 6,000 refugees, 4,000 of whom are concentrated within one jobcentre's catchment area. The community is composed of over 60 nationalities. Area four has one of the lowest employment rates in the UK and one of the highest workless rates.

A member of the Business Development Team was taking forward the RES Challenge. As in the other fieldwork areas, much still needed to be done on this. An early benefit of work on the RES Challenge had been raising the district's awareness of a vast range of ethnic minority organisations as staff have given presentations on the nature and role of Jobcentre Plus. Consideration was also being given to how the RES Challenge might be linked to other local initiatives such as an anti-racist alliance. Race equality issues were not seen as being as high on the agenda as they could or should be, because of other organisational pressures and priorities.

In recent years a small team of Jobcentre Plus staff was allocated to work in the ward that the 1991 census data indicated had the highest concentration of ethnic minority groups and which qualifies for the Additional Job Entry Points Scheme. Jobcentre Plus has been working in partnership with a local Ethnic Minority Enterprise Centre (EMEC). EMEC is an Asian organisation that provides classes in computers and office skills and offers work placements. An outreach worker employed by EMEC, but whose salary is paid for by Jobcentre Plus, has been working with this small ward team, networking in the local community and liaising closely with jobcentre advisers. It is still early days but it is felt that outreach is beginning to increase the engagement of ethnic minority communities, by visiting Sikh temples and holding events in mosques. An aim is to improve ethnic minority access to New Deal across Area four and the ward team had not been particularly effective in doing this. The district had also recently, in 2004, become eligible for resources from the Ethnic Minority Outreach fund, and had secured funds for more outreach workers.

4 Customer biographies: trajectories and aspirations

4.1 Migratory history and household circumstances

4.1.1 Migration history

The research investigated the migration history and ethnic identities of individuals falling into five broad ethnic groups: White British, Black African, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean. With respect to the White British, all but one of the respondents were born and educated in the UK. The exception, Pam, was born and completed her education in South Africa before coming to the UK.

All but one of the Pakistani men had grown up in the UK; Qamal was a more recent arrival and had lived in the UK for three years. Similarly, all but one of the Pakistani women had grown up in the UK, while Nilam had lived in the UK for three years. Four of the Bangladeshi women had been brought up and educated in the UK, while one came to the UK at the age of ten, two as young adults and one in her thirties. The majority of Black Caribbean men and women were born and raised in the United Kingdom (UK), although Ronny had come to the UK with his family from Montserrat in 2001, following the volcanic eruption there.

Of all the ethnic minority groups sampled for this research, the African group was the most diverse in terms of ethnic origin and migration history. The African women interviewed had a range of migration histories. This included a group of women who were fairly recent UK arrivals, here for two years or less, from war-torn Somalia (Leyla, Fathia, Aasha). Two had refugee status in the UK and one was a Danish citizen. A second group, from Nigeria, had been in the UK for more than five years (Khamisa, Jamilah). A third group of women were born and raised in the UK, with Nigerian or Ghanaian parents (Jummai, Ekuwa). One woman (Aminah) was born in the UK but grew up in Nigeria, returning to Britain as an adult, and described herself as Black British. African men had a similar range of migration experiences. Recent arrivals included Changa from Zimbabwe, Othman and Abukar from Somalia, and Din and Lumumba from Congo (although Abukar had lived in Finland for some years previously). Azi, who had Nigerian parents, was born and raised in the UK.

4.1.2 Family and household situation

Only a small percentage of respondents was married or living with a partner. A significant number of the women across all ethnic groups were lone parents, with an average of two children. The age of the female sample ranged from 18 to 56 years. Many of the female respondents were heavily involved in childcare, and to a lesser extent in caring for a parent or other close relative. Caring responsibilities therefore had a significant impact on all aspects of their lives. For example, Sally, a Black Caribbean lone parent, had a disabled son and intermittent periods of caring for him during periods of deteriorating health had punctuated her learning and work history. Joanne (White) had similar caring responsibilities, as her son had a heart condition.

In contrast to our female respondents, the majority of male respondents were single and lived on their own or with their parents. The age of the male respondents ranged from 18 to 50. Only a few were married or living with a partner and had children. Since many of the male respondents lived at home, the level of familial responsibility, in comparison to the female respondents, appeared to be minimal. However, Pakistani men appeared to demonstrate strong familial obligations to the parental household and extended family, in contrast to men from other ethnic groups. For example, Sifat (Pakistani, Area four) was keen to marry and felt unable to do so because of his economic situation. He also felt additional pressure to work because there was a cultural expectation that he should contribute: *'I am the only son and should be looking after my family and supporting them, but I can't do that'*. Kashif, another Pakistani man, also mentioned looking after his niece on a regular basis.

There were not distinctive patterns of household type by ethnicity, with the exception that Bangladeshi and Pakistani women were somewhat more likely than other ethnic groups to be living with extended family.

4.2 Work histories

This section explores participants' education and training, and previous experiences of paid employment.

4.2.1 Education and training

Interview data on education was limited for those who were older, who tended not to have been asked about this in detail. The majority of individuals interviewed, across all ethnic groups, had low levels of education, with significant numbers leaving school with few or no qualifications, although there were others who were graduates. These included two African women, both Nigerian lone parents in their 30s with first degrees and with strong orientations to professional careers. Aminah was born in the UK but had obtained her chemistry degree in Nigeria and worked in the UK as a biochemistry technician until she became pregnant with her youngest child, giving up the job because she did not want to risk exposure to toxins during pregnancy, and it involved a long and tiring commute. She is now seeking similar

work again. Other graduates included a Pakistani graduate on a graduate entry programme (Zaman), and a Bangladeshi man with a masters degree. Badsha had initially been keen to follow a legal career. Although this was not made explicit, it appeared that there may also have been fairly strong family pressure to do so. Having completed his masters degree, he was thoroughly disillusioned with the prospect of legal practice, but unsure as to what else he might like to do. After a brief stint working as a graphic designer, he was now unemployed, but hoping to obtain work in regeneration or a related field, drawing on his community experience:

'...in a situation where I'm making a difference to maybe a community, the whole community. I'm in part of the [whole] mechanism. Anything in regeneration work. Bother politics, I don't wanna get into politics...but anything involved in the public sector development work...that's the sort of job where I'd like to be and obviously may assume a position where I can have the influence...obviously that takes a lot!'

(Badsha, Bangladeshi, Area one)

While most interviewees said that their school lives had been unproblematic, others described problems with particular teachers or subjects, peer group pressure and truanting, and two people had struggled as a result of undiagnosed dyslexia. Carlene, a Black Caribbean lone parent, who described maths as *'one of my biggest no-go areas'* said of her schooldays:

'I didn't always enjoy it, not just because of the teachers but because like of outside...you know like your peer group and stuff like that...'

Some educational problems were directly related to ethnicity and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) issues. Rahism, who had come to the UK as a teenager many years ago, described the problem of fitting in to a school where he was in a small minority:

'I came from another country and I couldn't speak English and at that time there was...when I came to the government schools there wasn't even an Asian in that school where I went. I was in [Northern city]. There was no other Asian people in that school. I mean literally three or four Gujarat boys, that's all.'

(Rahism, Bangladeshi, Area two)

Several older Bangladeshi men had come to the UK as teenagers or young adults, and all or most of their education had been in Bangladesh; people in this group often had current ESOL needs, despite having been in the UK for many years. Some younger UK-born men had also spent extensive periods abroad, which had affected their education. Amjad was educated in Bangladesh between the ages of 14 and 18, and had no UK qualifications. Ziaur was also partly educated in Bangladesh, and had a certificate from an Islamic school there, but no UK qualifications.

Not everyone had been able to complete their education. While this mostly applied to those born abroad, Laurence, an older White man, had done well at school, but

had left school to support the family when his father died suddenly. Among those educated overseas, Kazi had been unable to carry on attending school when he was orphaned, and Qamal and Fathia said that their parents *'couldn't afford'* the costs of their education. Runa had not completed her A-levels because she married at 17. A number of people had started college or university courses (both in the UK and overseas) but failed to complete them for a variety of reasons, including refugees who had been forced to flee their country of origin, women with childcare problems, people with personal problems (poor health or relationship breakdown) and those who had simply chosen a course which they found uncongenial.

Some interviewees had undertaken various forms of training, much of it under the auspices of the New Deal (discussed in Chapter 6). Others had done other forms of training, such as apprenticeships (e.g. in construction), administrative or Information Technology skills training, either via an employer or on their own initiative, and National Vocational Qualifications in subjects such as childcare and business management.

Some interviewees felt that it was now too late to redress the gaps in their education and training, even though they were comparatively young. Agha was considering studying, but felt unable to commit himself into his mid-20s, saying:

'I even went to apply for Uni at [place]. They did give me an application [but] looking at the studying now I was thinking I'm 21 now, 22, 23, 24 I can't do it for so long, it's too late man.'

(Agha, Pakistani, Area one)

For Aasha, who was older, her concern was more about how employers would react, and whether there would be any economic return to studying:

'There's this thing I have, well maybe if I go back to school now and I finish maybe at the age of thirty-five, whatever I want to study, maybe I will be too old to get a job.'

(Aasha, Black African, Area two)

4.2.2 Recent employment

When asked about their most recent employment, interviewees identified a range of jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors, including catering, retail, factory work, call centres, and clerical work. For those who were not currently working, the length of time since they had last worked ranged from a few months to over two decades. Many had left their previous jobs because of pregnancy, redundancy or because the post was temporary and came to an end. Some women with children had left because the hours were too long and they did not feel this was compatible with family life. Joanne had worked in a factory, but said:

'I didn't work there that long 'cause it was night work and I didn't have the right childcare...it was permanent, but because of the hours I had to leave, 'cause I never saw my kids.'

(Joanne, White, Area two)

A few people, most of them White, commented that when younger they had not settled in work and had often been sacked or left jobs they found uninteresting. Connor described leaving one job because *'it wasn't what I wanted to do'* while Trudy said of one job:

'I got bored to death, so I got sacked from there 'cause I was bad time keeping 'cause I didn't want to go and all that.'

(Trudy, White, Area three)

Some interviewees had never had paid work at all (or never worked in the UK), or had only ever had jobs via people they knew. The first group included people with ESOL needs such as Qamal and Nilam (both Pakistani), and younger recent refugees such as Lumumba and Din (Congo), and Fathia (Somalian), although it is important to note that several recent refugees, such as Aasha from Somalia, appeared to have found work without too much difficulty. The second group included Amjad, whose only work experience was in the restaurant owned by a family member, and Andrew, who had worked for a number of small local businesses, but seemed to have lost all of these jobs after a short period, and Russell, who had only worked briefly for his stepfather on a construction site. These young men appeared to have problems in presenting themselves, making contact with employers, and relating to others in the workplace.

4.3 Future plans for work and barriers to paid employment

Some interviewees were looking for similar jobs to those they had done in the past, while others were explicitly seeking a change, either because the work they had done previously was no longer available, or because their own aspirations or circumstances had changed. Not everyone was seeking work in the immediate future, especially where they had childcare or other caring responsibilities. The interviewees' current labour market position can be categorised in various ways. The following groupings summarise experience, barriers to labour market participation and aspirations in a way which represents, broadly speaking, a continuum of labour market disadvantage (Barnes *et al.*, 2005). The customer sample includes interviewees furthest away from the labour market, in terms of both circumstances and attitudes, to those making progress towards, and currently in, paid work. Each category contains members of different ethnic groups, since the analysis has focused on current labour market position, but the routes into this category may vary by ethnicity, and some ethnic groups are associated with particular categories, as is discussed below. Detailed profiles of individuals representative of each category discussed are provided at the end of this chapter.

4.3.1 Work is not a current/primary priority

For this group, paid employment was something which they planned to engage in at some point in the future, but was not an immediate priority. Most were lone parents, and did not intend to return to work until their children were older, and this group

included both White and ethnic minority customers, although African lone parents were more likely than others to be in work. Several lone parents expressed a general desire to work, but raised issues such as the cost of childcare. Caroline, who had three children, and also cared for her disabled mother, commented:

'I feel that you don't get much help as a single parent when you're working. I mean they say they'll give you this and they'll give you that but by the time you've paid out on rent and Council Tax, I mean I've been told like from the person at the Jobcentre that at the moment I'm better off not working.'

(Caroline, White, NDLP, Area one – see Figure 4.1)

Mahek, a young Pakistani woman in Area one, explained that she was the main carer for her elderly grandmother, and was therefore only considering part-time work.

4.3.2 Multiple barriers

This was a category which cut across all ethnic groups. People in this group faced the most significant barriers to work in the sense that they had combinations of problems including poor health or disability, ESOL needs, refugee status, homelessness, no (UK) work experience, or a criminal record. Most people in this category were motivated and keen to find employment, but seemed likely to require significant amounts of help both in order to obtain work and to make a success of it.

Fraser (White, New Deal for Young People (NDYP), Area two) was 19 and living with his mother. He has learning disabilities and no qualifications, and has never had a paid job. Although he is keen to work, the nature of his disability is such that he finds it difficult to travel unaccompanied, handle money, or mix with others in the workplace. He is clearly in need of specialist help, but has not so far received this.

Jummai was a young African woman (NDYP, Area two – see Figure 4.2) who had never worked, except for occasional cash-in-hand jobs in a local hairdresser. She spent some time homeless after her parents asked her to leave when she was 18, had lived at numerous insecure addresses and was staying in an overcrowded flat at the time of her interview. She vividly described the sense of drift that can set in without a stable income and routine, and hinted at involvement in self-destructive and/or illicit activities.

'Not having a job means just not being independent, not being able to get up and go when you want, not really to say vanity to say 'I wanna buy this and I wanna buy that' but there's a lot of things I should be doing which I ain't doing because I ain't working. There's a lot of things I could be doing, you know. Just occupying my time at least. I do a lot of wrong things which I should... I know they are things that I shouldn't do and maybe if I was working I wouldn't do them. But there's nothing better to do than them things.'

(Jummai, Black African, Area two)

Jummai was keen to find work in retail, but her lack of qualifications and experience is a barrier. She also felt that she needed to resolve her precarious housing situation

before she would be able to concentrate on work:

'...all of us in one little shack up apartment and you know everybody has to chip in and every day it's stress because we're walking over one another. Now I want out but I can't do no better, so I have to stay. Council won't help me, nobody won't help me. To me that's my best... my priority, finding somewhere to live.'

(Jummai, Black African, Area two)

Qamal (Pakistani, NDYP, Area four – see Figure 4.3) was 22 and had left school in Pakistan at age 14, without any qualifications, starting work in a textile factory. He came to the UK about two years ago, as a refugee, and has not worked in the UK. He has ESOL needs, and the interview was conducted in Urdu. He said that he was looking for factory work, but recognised that at the moment he was only likely to find work in 'ethnic enclave' employment because of his difficulties with English. He commented:

'I find a lot of things difficult. In the big companies and the official places. Actually talking to people on the phone and asking for things. It is hard because I don't have the correct language and the correct English. So I am finding it hard to ask for things and explain what I want.'

(Qamal, translated from Urdu, Area four)

4.3.3 Stalled

Some of those in this group had dropped out of education, while others had completed it, but had not managed to establish themselves in permanent work. It also includes those who had tired of doing low-skilled work but lacked the qualifications to progress to more satisfying work and who were not in education or training at the time they were interviewed. Younger Bangladeshi and Pakistani men tended to fall into this category. While it included some people with ESOL needs, this category also applied to men born in the UK, and to lone parents who had not established themselves in the labour market before having children. This was a group in need of significant support to make progress towards employment, but this was not always being accessed.

Nazrul (Bangladeshi, New Deal 25plus (ND25plus), Area two – see Figure 4.4) had his own business as a sign-writer in Bangladesh, but worked in textiles factories when he came to the UK and has not worked since being made redundant six years ago. His ideal job would be to retrain to do computerised sign-writing, but he has been advised that this is not possible via the jobcentre, and is therefore seeking retail or factory work.

Fiam (Pakistani, ND25plus, Area one) was in his late 30s, had dropped out of college when younger, and had always worked as a taxi-driver or in other unskilled work. He wanted to retrain as a plumber, or for another construction-related trade, but was also keen to be available to drive his children to school. Abbas (Pakistani, NDYP, Area one) was 22, and had never worked, dropping out of college before he was 18.

Amjad (Bangladeshi, NDYP, Area one) lives with his parents. He has only ever worked for a family member, part time in a restaurant, and this seems to have been largely unpaid. He has no qualifications and says that he wants to work in retail, but has no relevant experience and has now been unemployed for several years.

Dora (White, NDLP, Area two) had left college when she had her first child at the age of 19, and has not worked since. Now 27, she has been on various courses, including a European Computer Driving License course, via the jobcentre, and is keen to work as a receptionist, but has no work experience and has never even been for a job interview. She explained how, although the training course had helped, she could sometimes feel very unconfident in quite routine situations:

'I might have an interview to go to, I'm like "Oh my God!" you know like. I wonder what the person is going to be like or whatever, but I think if I was in employment all the time I'd get used to meeting different people and that. But that's what that course helped me to do that, helped me you know to meet different people and that.'

(Dora, White, Area two)

4.3.4 Older job changers

This category, which was found across all four areas, includes people aged 40 or over who are facing a career change either because of personal choice or owing to redundancy or the decline of an industry in which they have formerly worked, and mothers wanting to return to the labour market now that their children are older. Some had been unemployed for significant periods and doubted that they would ever work again, to the extent that they might be regarded as 'discouraged workers'. Many in this group felt that they faced significant barriers, as lack of recent work experience and age were likely to discourage employers from taking them on, and some were unsure of their ability to change careers at this stage. Most of those in this group were White men, although it also included some Bangladeshis, Caribbeans and Pakistanis.

Salik (Bangladeshi, ND25plus, Area two) was 40 and had come to the UK as a teenager in the late 1970s. He had worked in textile factories for many years, but had been unemployed for over three years at the time of his interview. Although he had passed his Passenger Carrying Vehicle licence on the New Deal, he was slightly unconfident about the prospect of being able to do a driving job, saying '*hopefully it will be all right*' and also feared that employers would discriminate against him because of his age, commenting: 'we can say 'This man is old... maybe he's not very good'. Isaac, a Caribbean former textile worker, also from Area two, was in a similar position, having failed to find alternative work despite retraining in computer skills, and after ten years unemployment, now feared that he would never work again. He also cited age discrimination as an issue.

Laurence (White, ND25plus, Area one – see Figure 4.5) was 48 and had worked for over 20 years doing maintenance in a local cinema, starting his own business when

made redundant, only to see this fail. This was clearly something which had affected his confidence profoundly:

'I lost all my life savings really. Then, I mean that knocked me back quite a bit, you know, as you can imagine. Since then I've just been, just looking for some sort of direction, some area to go into, you know...I'm still searching for it.'

(Laurence, White, Area one)

Laurence was keen to work and described himself as willing to take almost any job. At the time he was interviewed he had been unemployed for over five years and was beginning to wonder if he would work again. He was clearly becoming discouraged, commenting that he now visits the jobcentre much less frequently than in the past.

Sabanna (Bangladeshi, NDLP, Area two – see Figure 4.6) was a 47-year-old widow, with teenage children. Educated in Bangladesh, she came to the UK at age 30, and has only ever had one part-time job. She has done many courses, including GCSEs and ESOL classes, and would like a part-time job. Although she was aware that she had some continuing ESOL needs, she pointed out that she had a number of useful skills, and could do a range of jobs, from cooking to community work and advocacy, but felt that the jobcentre did not take her aspirations to work seriously, and, following the departure of her Personal Adviser, had been advised that her participation on NDLPs had been terminated. She had some sympathy with what she saw as a stereotyped response to her situation, because she also felt that many people in her situation were not really looking for work:

'So many parents who have under-sixteen children, they are not much interested to go out and do anything.'

(Sabanna, Bangladeshi, Area two)

However, she felt that the advisers should have responded more positively to her proactive attempts to find work. She was also very unhappy with the limited amount of support being provided to her son, who had qualifications and was unemployed, and expressed her concern about the impact of very high rates of unemployment in the Bangladeshi community on 'future generations' (see Figure 4.6).

4.3.5 Getting by

Those in this group had jobs but they tended to be low-skilled and low-paid, or in types of work which did not match interviewees' longer-term aspirations, and did not offer prospects of advancement. It included people born in the UK, both White and ethnic minority, in younger age groups, who had not always given much thought to their long-term employment prospects. For instance, Martin, a young Black Caribbean man, had been working in catering for a number of years, and had a job as a courier at the time he was interviewed, but appeared to have no definite longer-term plans or ambitions. Although he had attended courses in IT

and business management as part of the New Deal, neither of these were areas in which he appeared to have a particular interest, and he did not seem to be intending to seek employment in these areas (see Figure 4.7). This group also included recent arrivals to the UK, some of whom were aware that they needed to invest in further training and development in order to find the work they wanted, but had immediate needs for an income which were paramount. Zoreena (Bangladeshi, NDYP, Area one) has ESOL needs but left her class in order to take a job, as she needed the income to bring her husband to the UK from overseas. In the longer term she was hoping to obtain office work, but knew that she needed to improve her English before this was achievable. In the meantime, she was working in a chicken-processing factory, a job she clearly disliked, but found expedient in her circumstances:

'I do not require English there, so I like it (laughs). It is very cold there. Chickens are kept in the ice. I have to wear gloves, cardigan, overcoat, hat before I start my job. You have to wear it.'

(Zoreena, Bangladeshi, Area one)

Marleine, a lone parent from Surinam, was working in a low-paid job as a care assistant. While she had previously worked as a hairdresser, she did not see this as a realistic option for her in the immediate future, because she lacked funds to start her own business and was unsure that there was a local market for her specialist skills in working with non-European hair.

4.3.6 Back on track

Those in this group had been unemployed or economically inactive for a period and had returned to a type of work which they had done in the past and which suited them, or resumed what might be thought of as a natural trajectory after a period out of work. Although not all of these were well-paid or highly-skilled jobs, they were a good match for customers' aspirations. Zaman (Pakistani, NDYP, Area one) had been unemployed briefly following graduation but had succeeded in finding a job with a major IT company through his own efforts. Pete (Black Caribbean, ND25plus, Area one – see Figure 4.8), had returned to work in catering, which was an area he had worked in at various points over the past 20 years. Darien (Black Caribbean, ND25plus, Area three) was now working as a rail technician after a period of unemployment and Patricia (Black Caribbean, NDLP, Area two – see Figure 4.9) had taken a retail job, after several years caring for her children full-time. In many ways these were the most straightforward trajectories, in that people already had relevant skills and experience, and were unlikely to be pursuing goals which were unrealistic or perceived as such by advisers.

4.3.7 Improvers

This group consisted of those who were doing something positive to attempt to realise their job aspirations, whether this was voluntary work, training, education or paid work. In some instances it represented a move away from a previous 'stalled' position, while for others it involved retraining or conversion of existing qualifications

in order to make progress. Jamilah (Black African, NDLP, Area two) had done her legal training in Nigeria, but her qualifications were not fully recognised in the UK, so she was working as legal assistant while studying for the bar. Khamisa (Black African, NDLP, Area two), a 44-year-old lone parent, had been working for Royal Mail for two years at the time of her interview, but had completed a diploma in housing at her local college, and was aiming to obtain work in this field. Tahir (Bangladeshi, NDYP, Area one – see Figure 4.10) was interested in designing computer games. He had started a degree but had not completed this for a number of reasons, including the long distances he had to travel to university, his mother's ill-health, and a lack of enjoyment of the course. After doing various retail jobs, which he had not enjoyed, he had taken a post with a mobile phone company, and was hoping to work his way up into a position where he would be able to pursue his original interests.

Hassan (Pakistani, NDYP, Area one) had an engineering degree, but his only paid job had been as a baggage handler at a local airport while studying, and he had been unemployed for two years since graduating. He was undertaking training in JAVA programming as part of the New Deal, and was hoping to find a job in this field. He explained that one barrier he faced was his own diffidence and lack of confidence in interview situations:

'I'm still not really sort of comfortable yet to meet people like in terms of if I don't really know them. I find it a bit easier if I get to know someone first, then I'm OK with them...But generally I'm a lot better than I probably was.'

(Hassan, Pakistani, Area one)

Kashif (Pakistani, NDYP, Area three) was 24 years old and had recently started a degree course. Having obtained few qualifications at school, done a variety of temporary jobs, and with no clear sense of direction for several years, he had recently decided that *'life is what you make it'* and was hoping to qualify as a teacher.

It was not clear that everyone in this group would succeed in their chosen strategy. In some cases, the gap between the person's current employment situation and their aspirations appeared challenging. For instance, George (White, ND25plus, Area two) had left college aged 20, and had poor A-level grades. Now aged 29, he has now been unemployed for three years. Having found his previous retail and clerical jobs *'monotonous'*, he wanted to retrain, possibly as a teacher. At the time of his interview he was working as a volunteer in a charity shop, but had not done anything about seeking additional training.

4.3.8 Success stories

These were people who had achieved what they set out to do, often against significant odds. In some cases the jobs and earnings were modest, but obtaining them had involved a considerable degree of determination.

Wayne (White, NDYP, Area one) had been offered a place at university but decided not to take this up as he was determined to be a professional musician, saying *'it's all*

I've ever wanted to do'. After working in retail for several years, he had taken part in the New Deal for musicians, but had not been impressed with the quality of training. He had subsequently obtained a business loan, via Jobcentre Plus, from a well-known young people's charity, and at the time of his interview, was earning a living playing across the country, and was about to make his first album. Although he argued that there was little institutional support for musicians in the UK, he described his own advisers as 'helpful', not 'pushing' him to apply for alternative work, and funding some demo CDs when he wanted to publicise his work.

Runa (Bangladeshi, NDLP, Area two – see Figure 4.11), had worked briefly following her marriage, but had spent a period on Incapacity Benefit following an accident at work, and had been bringing up her two children alone for several years. She had obtained a part-time job as a healthcare assistant in a hospital, which she was enjoying a great deal, and continued to study part-time. In common with Sabanna, Runa commented that although she had been sent on an ESOL course, she had received very little support from NDLP advisers in achieving her employment goals:

'They tell me to wait, and when you waiting they will forget you, they won't remember. And when they say "yes, we will..." Sometimes some job they need to contact with them, then they will let us know. But I waiting for them, you know, but they forgot. When I go to, I say "Did you call?" they say "Oh, I forgot, which one are you talking about?" you know. They already forgot. Then when you find these things, you don't feel to go again you know.'

(Runa, Bangladeshi, Area two)

She had eventually found a job by doing voluntary work and by applying for vacancies herself, independently of the jobcentre, encouraged by her supportive extended family.

Dennis (Black Caribbean, ND25plus, Area one) was in his late 30s and having left school aged 16 with GCSEs, had spent many years studying part-time while in employment, before achieving his dream job as a graphic designer:

'It's one of those careers I wanted to do. You don't immediately know that in the beginning, 'cause usually you've got a talent into something and you develop it, and my talent was like doing drawings and stuff. And it sort of built off into you know, sort of took off in that direction, you know because it's one of those industries where there's no really frontiers with it. You know you've got web design, you can have multi media, you know it's expanding all the time so there was no barriers.'

(Dennis, Black Caribbean, Area one)

He felt that the jobcentre advisers he had seen while unemployed, although aware of his goals, were unsupportive of them – *'maybe they saw it as an impossible mission'* – and would have been quite happy if he had taken a factory job.

Morton (White, NDLP, Area two) was aged 22. He had done well at school but had spent several years on Incapacity Benefit after leaving college, due to a severe head injury, which caused memory loss. At the time he was interviewed he was working for a local authority as a housing support worker, a job which he had found via an agency. He was enjoying the job, which he found very varied and interesting, and was hoping that it would become permanent in the near future. In common with other interviewees, he commented that the jobcentre appeared to expect him to take manual work, but that he had held out for a suitable post:

'Like labourer or mechanic, canteen staff and shop assistants, you know I don't need, I'm not going to do nothing if it don't appeal to me, I'm not going to do something just for the sake of money. 'Cause I would if it was that bad and I had bills to pay, but I'm living at home.'

(Morton, White, Area two).

4.4 Summary

This chapter has discussed the labour market trajectories of customers, who were, with a few exceptions, generally poorly-qualified, and with whose work experience was mostly limited to unskilled or semi-skilled work. Most were keen to work, and some had succeeded in finding jobs, but most were unemployed when interviewed, and many of those in work were poorly paid. Some were keen to change direction after earlier periods doing unsatisfying work. In some cases people wanting to re-enter work, despite having significant barriers, had not received the degree of support they required to achieve this. Those with higher qualifications were (or had been) among those needing help to progress.

Examples of the variety of customers and lived experiences sampled, across a range of distance from the labour market, are presented in Figures 4.1-4.11. The report then takes a closer look at customer perceptions and experiences of Jobcentre Plus and New Deal programmes.

Figure 4.1 Profile one

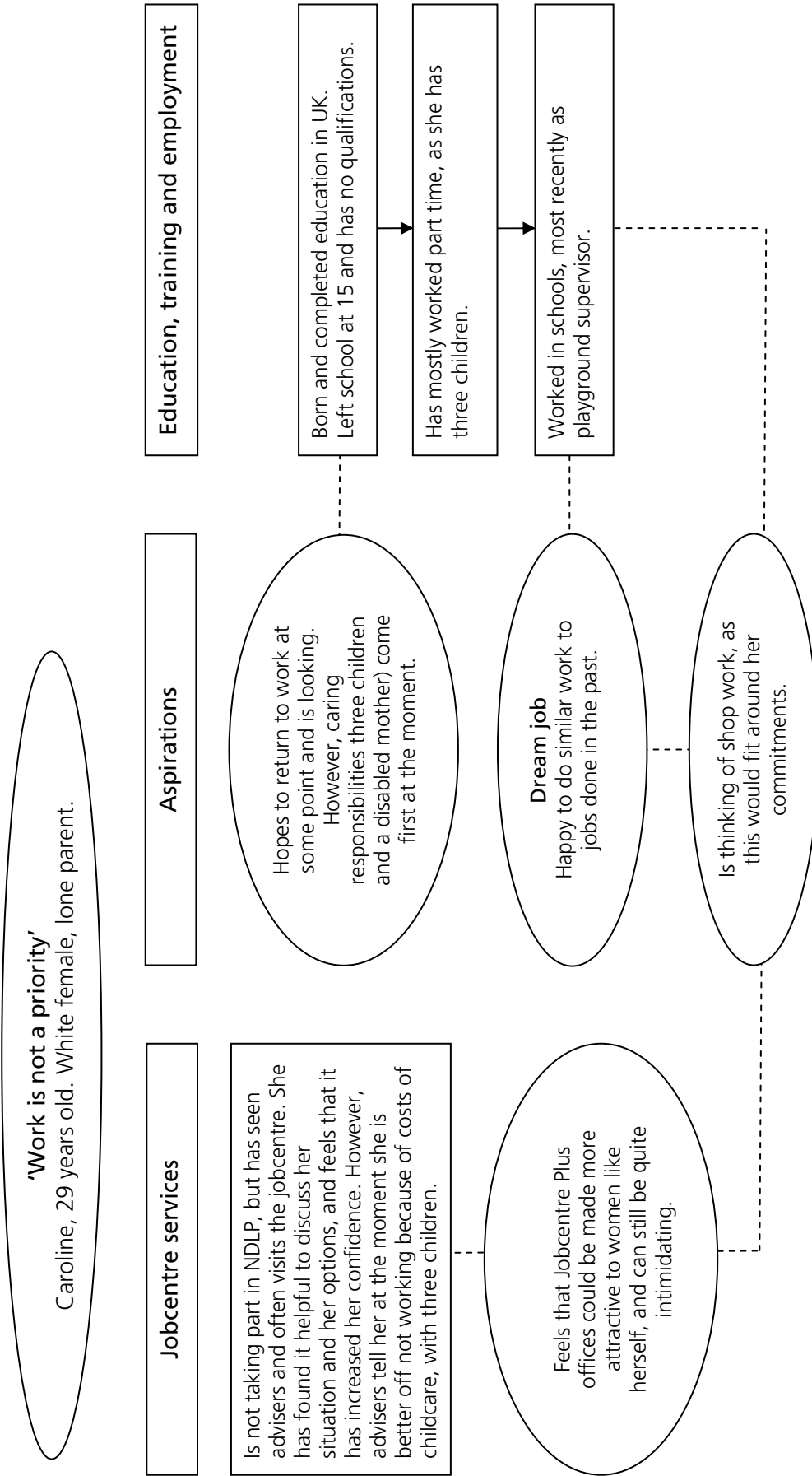


Figure 4.2 Profile two

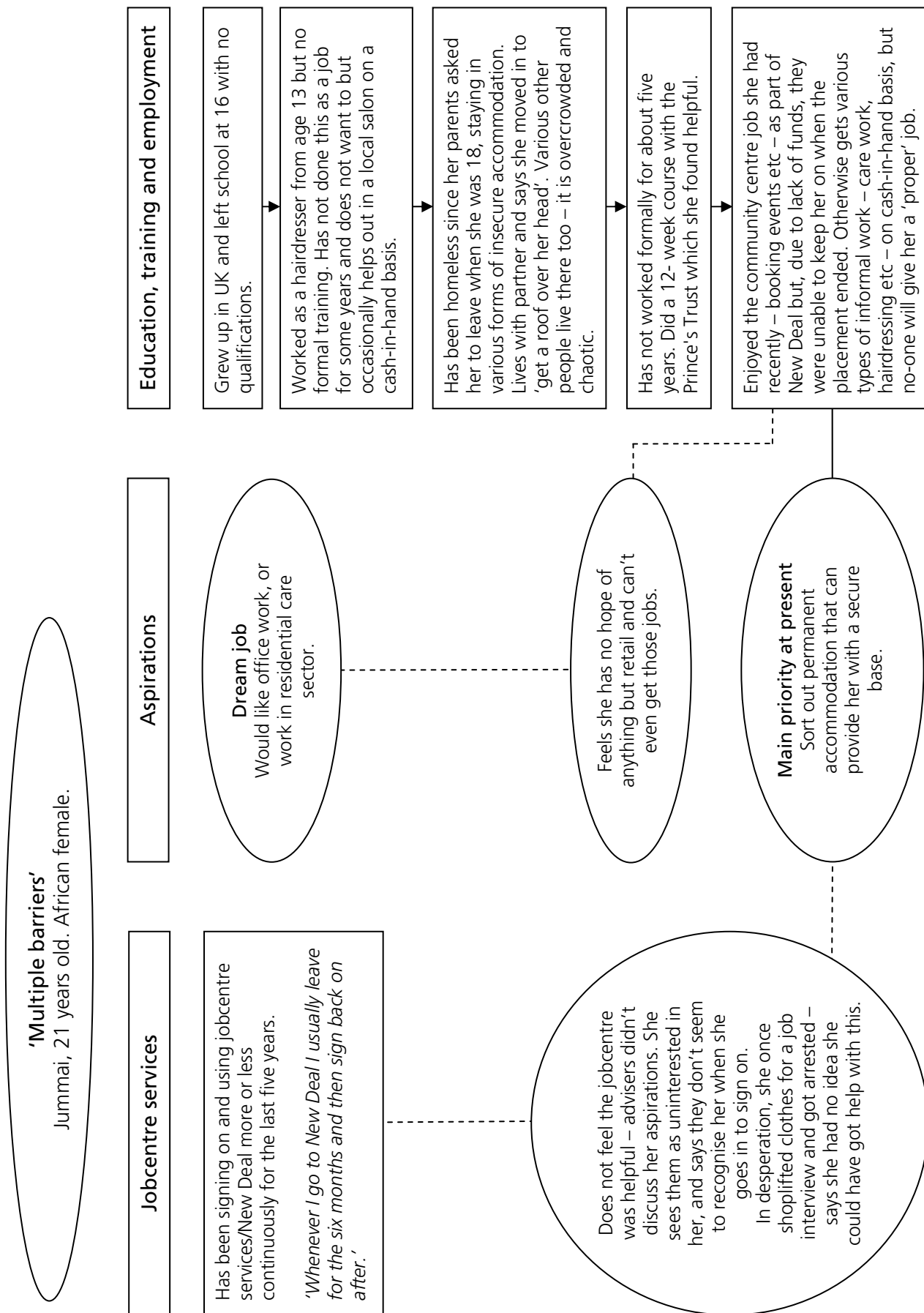


Figure 4.3 Profile three

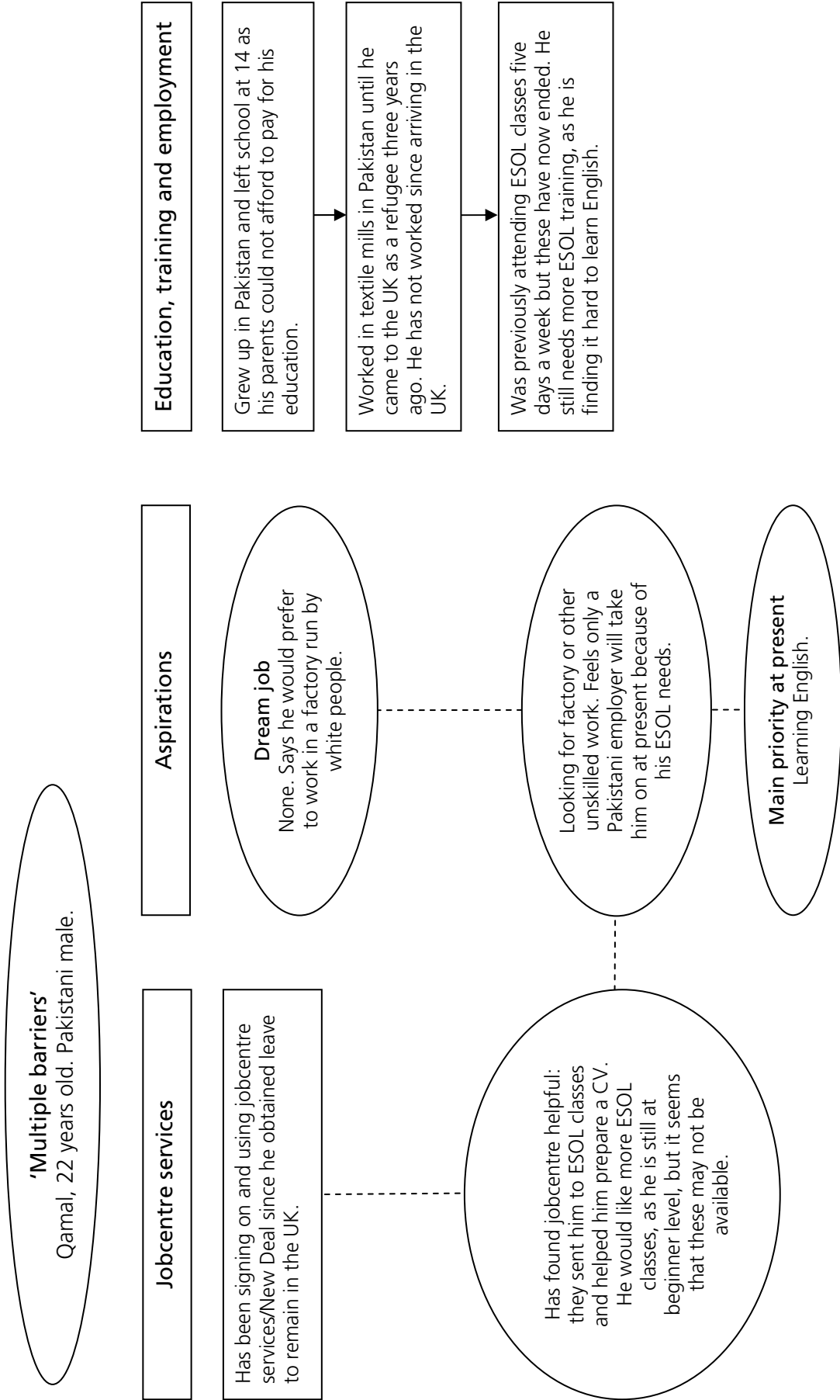


Figure 4.4 Profile four

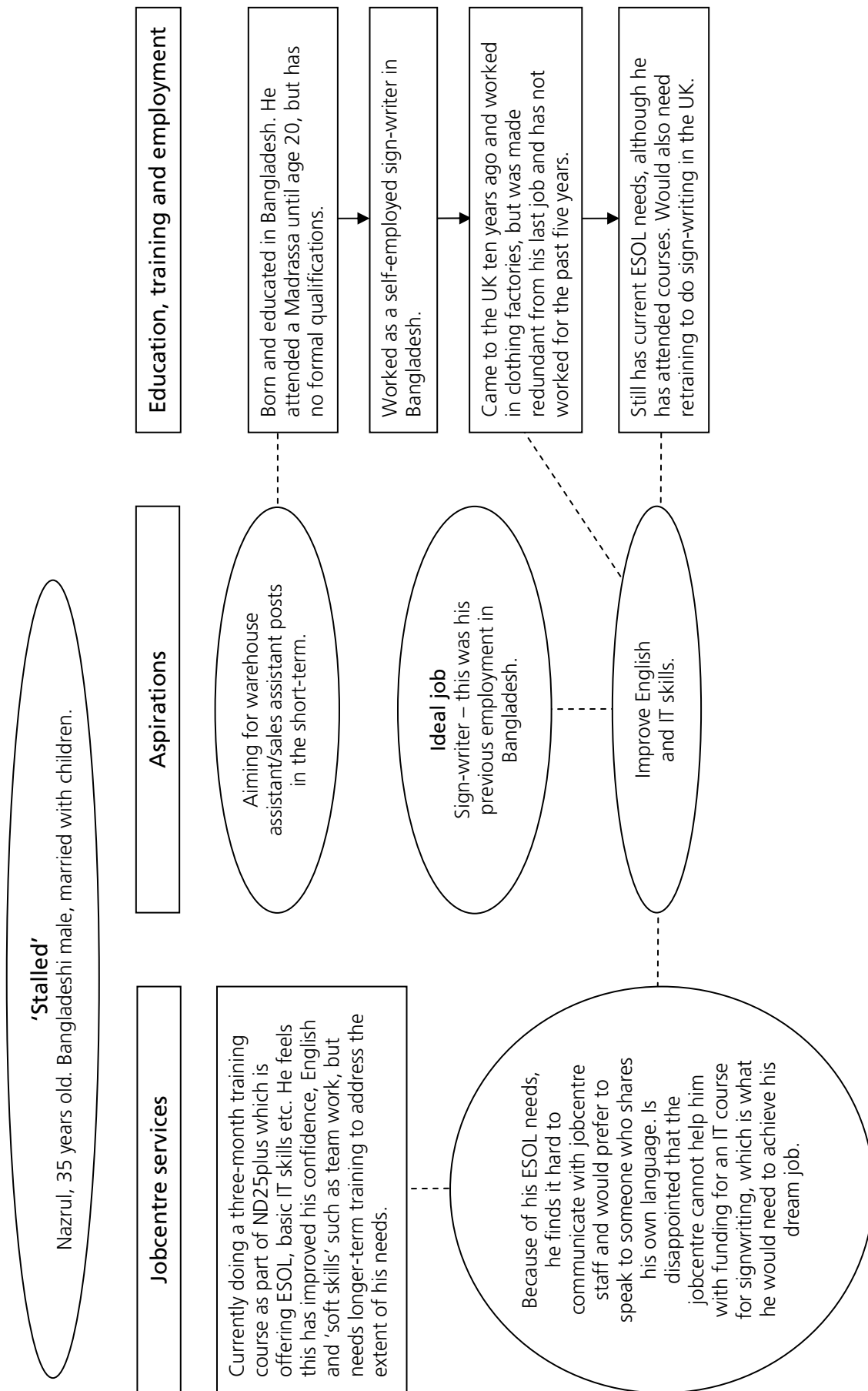


Figure 4.5 Profile five

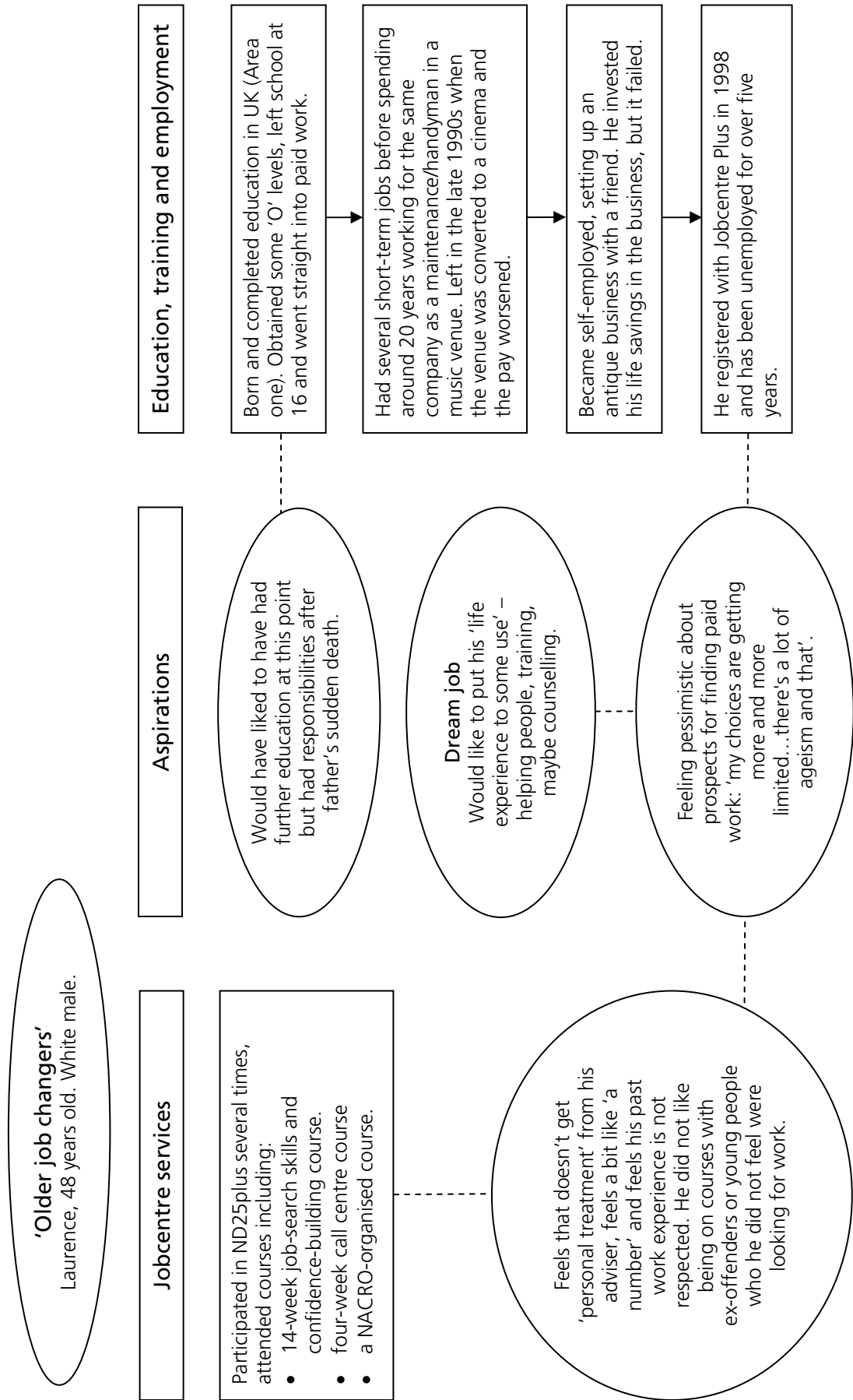


Figure 4.6 Profile six

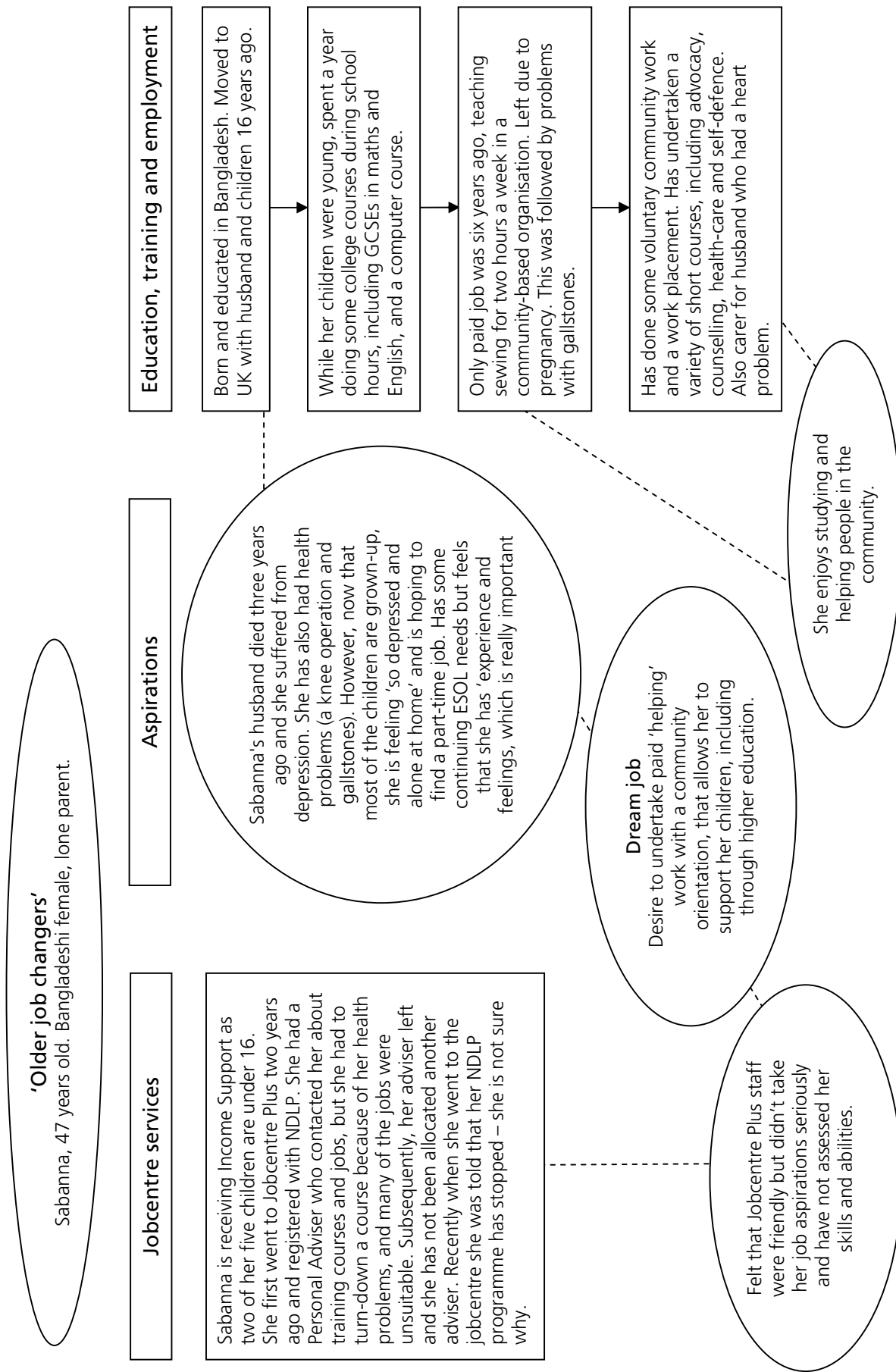


Figure 4.7 Profile seven

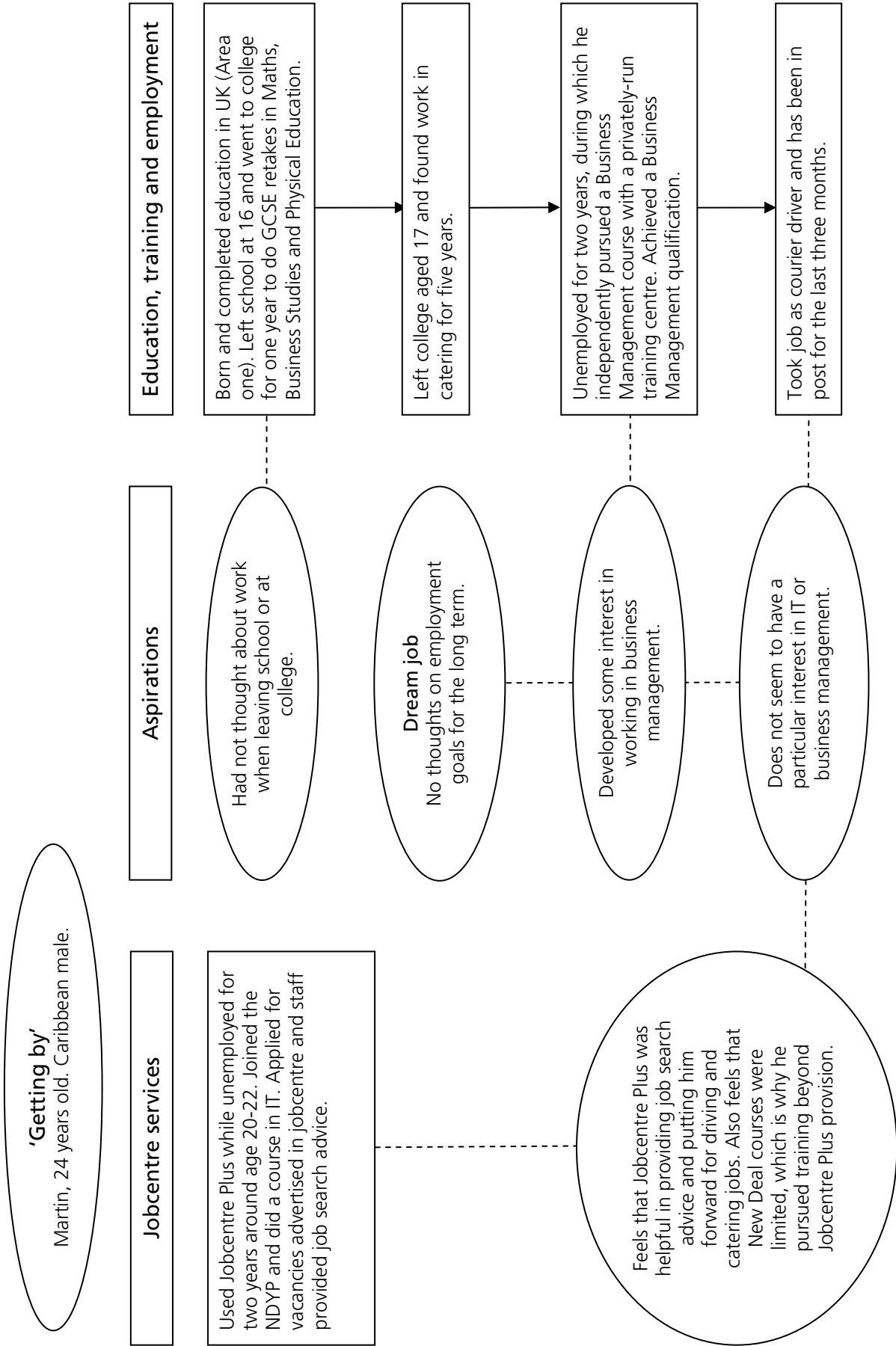


Figure 4.8 Profile eight

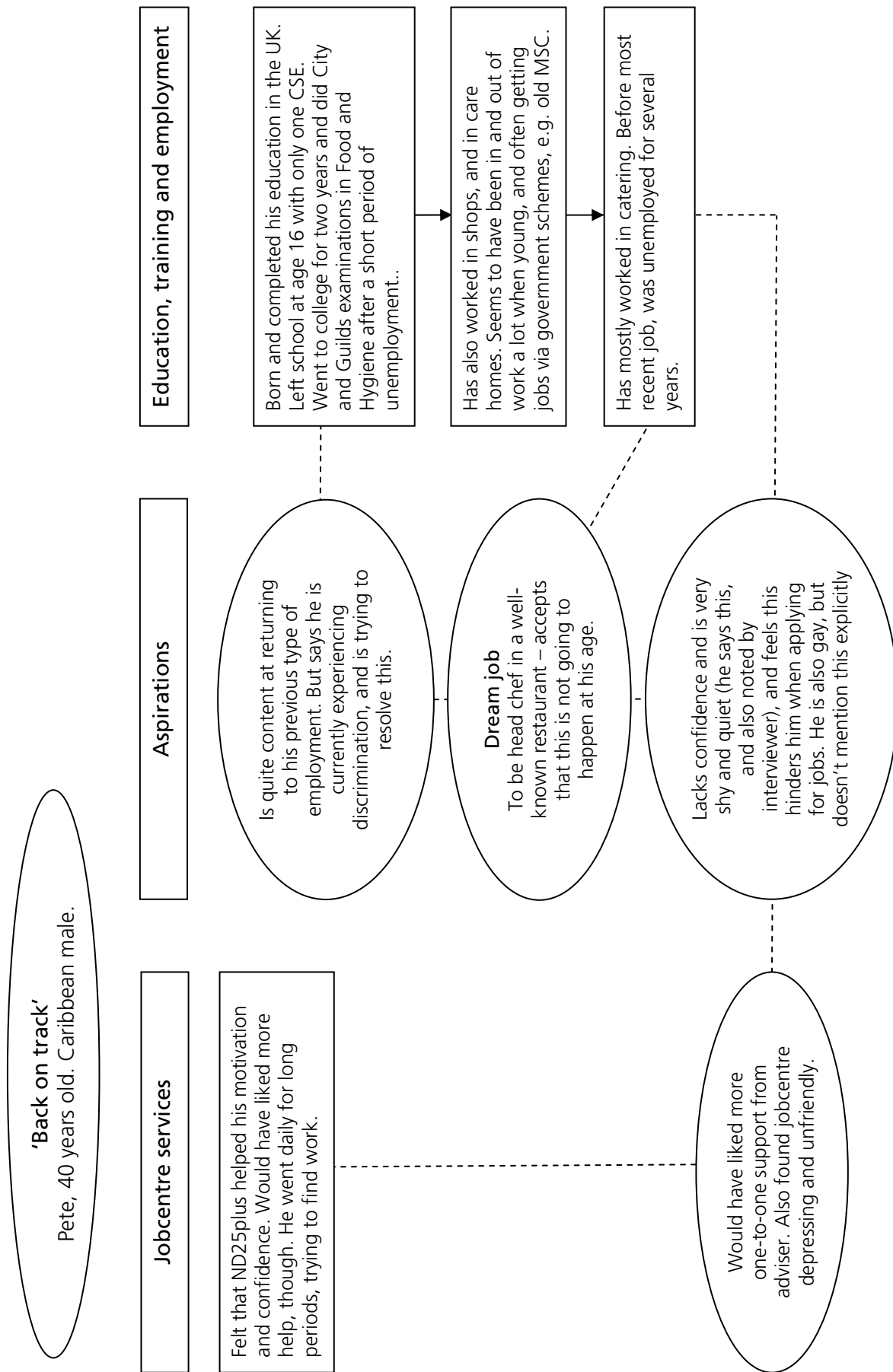


Figure 4.9 Profile nine

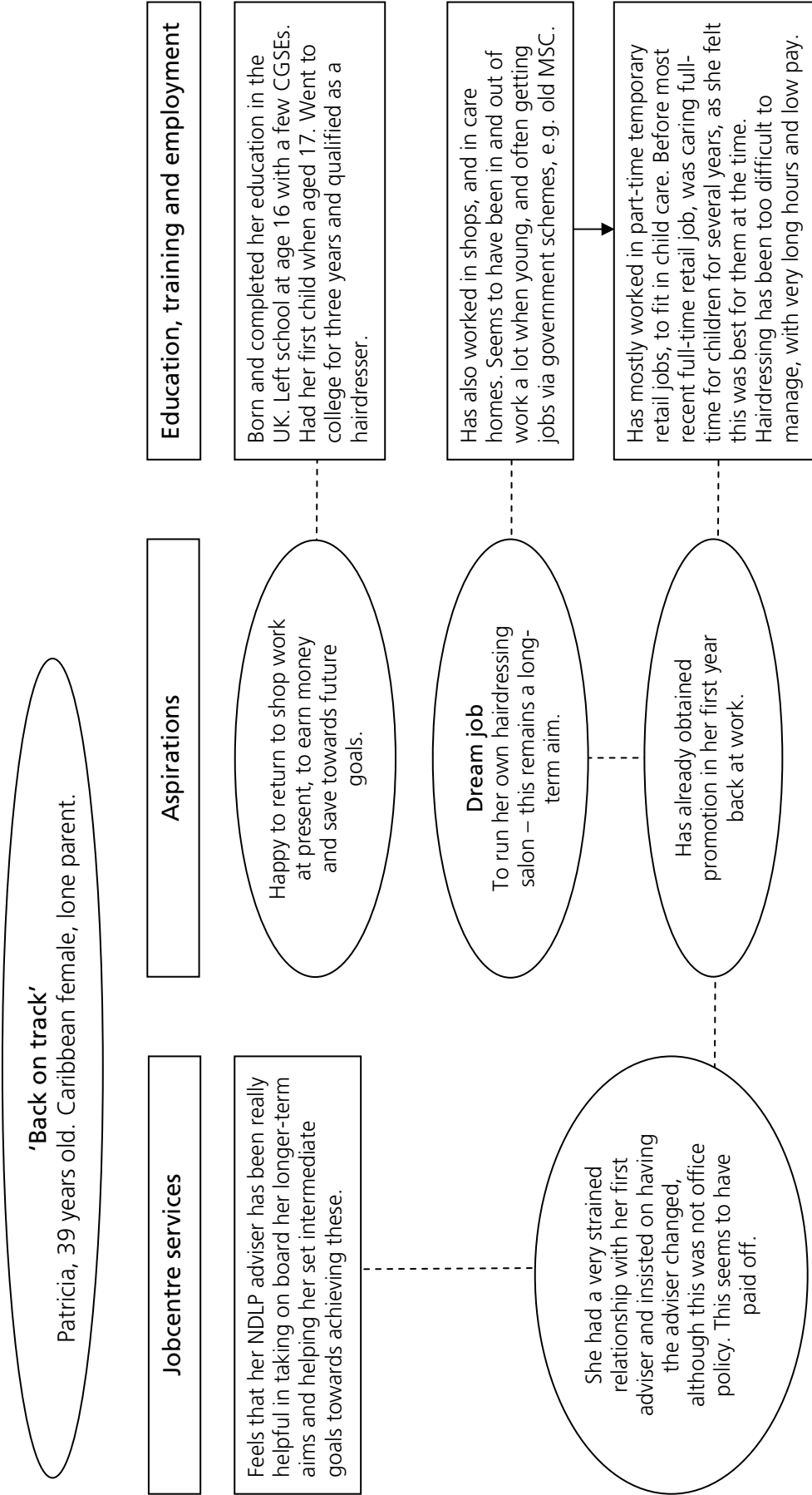


Figure 4.10 Profile ten

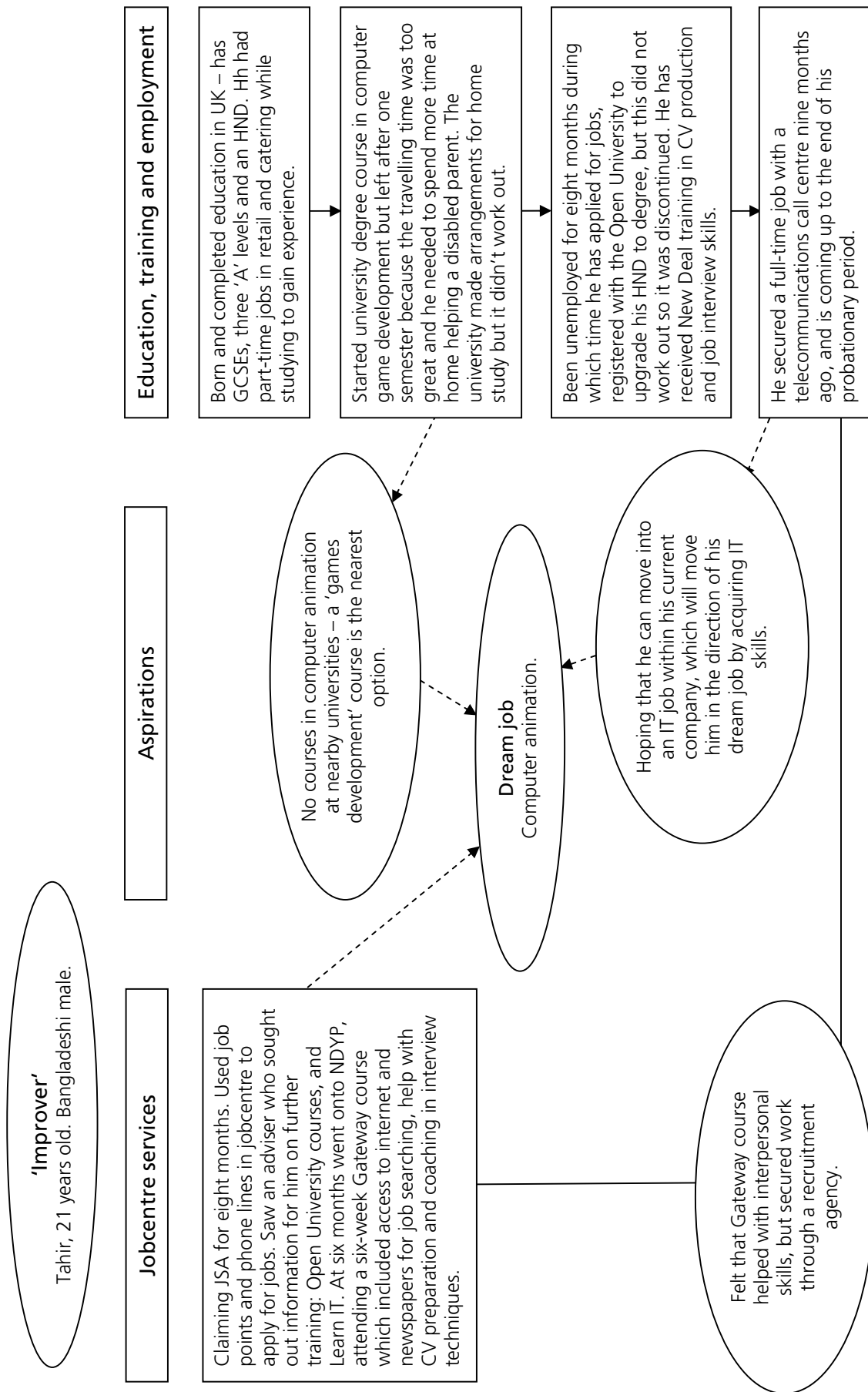
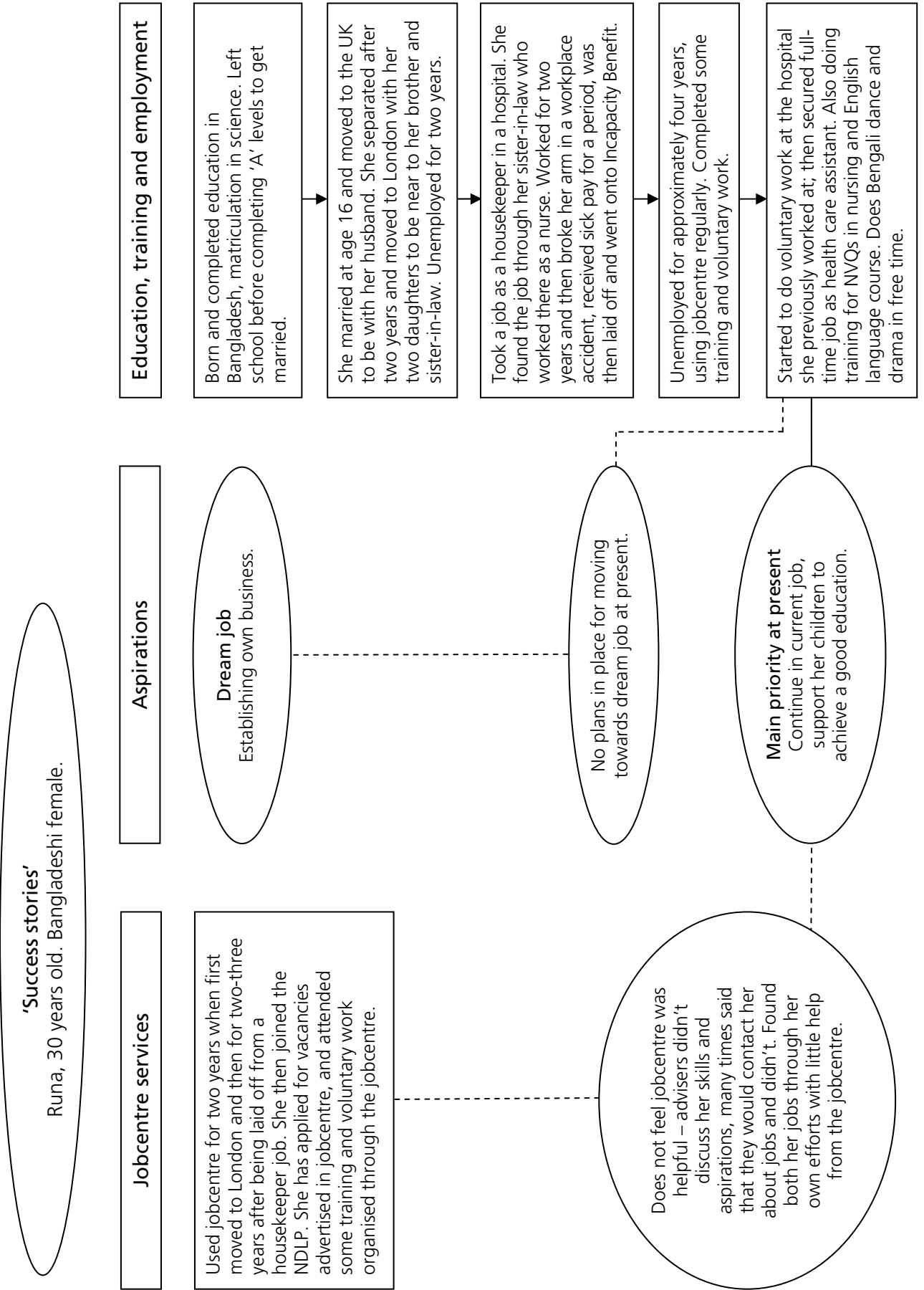


Figure 4.11 Profile eleven



5 Customer experiences of looking for paid employment

This chapter focuses on customers' experiences of using Jobcentre Plus, albeit excluding their experiences of New Deal programmes which are considered in detail in the next chapter. It begins with a summary of customers' experiences of looking for work, then moves on to focus on how customers interacted with Jobcentre Plus and the nature of their use of services. The bulk of the chapter then reports on their perceptions of their Jobcentre Plus contact, focusing on four aspects in particular: the quality of the services received, the quality of staff-customer interactions, the efficiency of the service received, and, lastly, the Jobcentre Plus physical environment.

5.1 Approaches to job search

Respondents were asked about their current experiences of looking for work, or if in work, the experiences they had had in the past. The majority of customers were looking for 'entry level' jobs in services or manufacturing, reflecting the generally low levels of education among the sample. The most common types of jobs sought were clerical and administrative or retail, reflecting the predominance of such jobs in local labour markets. Jobs in factories or warehouses and catering work were also commonly cited, as was cleaning and to a lesser extent, Information Technology (IT), care work and driving jobs. A small number of respondents were applying for more specialist jobs, for example in community or social work, in the emergency services or in the medical field. This was the case for those respondents who had higher level qualifications. One example is Aminah, a 36 year old mother of four of Nigerian heritage, who was born in the United Kingdom (UK) but educated in Nigeria, returning to the UK as an adult. Despite her degree in chemistry (from a UK university), she had so far only managed to obtain casual jobs in the UK in catering or cleaning, plus a six month stint as a laboratory technician which she had to leave because of the birth of her fourth child. She was hoping to take up a post as a trainee

clinical biochemist later in the year. There were also examples of respondents with fewer qualifications and work experience looking for more specialist jobs who were finding it almost impossible to find the work they wanted. For example, Sabanna, profiled in Chapter 4, was a 47 year old Bangladeshi woman, widowed, with five children. She had no experience of paid work in the UK, save for a very small amount of casual work teaching sewing some years ago, but had completed a number of college courses, including GCSEs in maths and English and short courses in advocacy and healthcare, and felt that she had useful skills to offer. However she was not able to successfully compete for jobs in her chosen field. She stated:

'I can do some job like...talking to people, different, older people, advocacy, interpreting, this kind of job I will enjoy, and really I'll be appreciate if I get this kind of job. ...I've filled applications for job,...it was for [a hospital] about a year ago, ...it was doing something like advocacy, I didn't get it, this is because so many qualified persons apply for this,...another two applications I filled, for [different hospital], it was like this, community work,...and Sure Start. ...But I was really keen to do these jobs, but unfortunately I don't know why, so, I have not qualification, but I have other experience, and feelings, which is really important for people.'

(Sabanna, Bangladeshi female, New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), Area two)

The most common reasons given by respondents for their lack of success in finding work were a lack of relevant employment experience, a lack of qualifications, and an inability to make a good application or CV. In particular, respondents referred to excessive competition for those jobs in which they were suitably qualified or experienced, and many told us of large numbers of unsuccessful applications, either receiving no response at all from employers or being unsuccessful at the interview stage. These experiences of unsuccessful job searching had led to a disheartened attitude among a few respondents:

'Finding a job is just difficult, you know, you buy the [local newspaper] there's about, so many jobs in there, but when you phone up there's so many people after the same job it's as though you feel like you're not getting anywhere.'

(Mandy, Black Caribbean female, NDLP, Area one)

Another issue raised primarily by female respondents was an absence of jobs with appropriate hours of work that they could fit around caring responsibilities for children or for other relatives.

Given the nature of the sample, it is unsurprising that the most common means of looking for work cited by the respondents was using Jobcentre Plus services. The nature of this use is discussed in more detail below. However, other means of job search were also commonly deployed, most notably newspapers, personal contacts, speculative visits or telephone calls to employers, employment agencies and job vacancy sites on the internet. Some respondents expressed the view that Jobcentre Plus was not the most useful means of finding a job and several customers stated that they had had more success in finding work through using internet sites, going

directly to companies, through mobilising personal contacts or through using employment agencies. Many customers also expressed frustration at not being able to find the work they wanted through Jobcentre Plus. Sometimes this was because they were looking for specialist jobs which were not advertised in the jobcentre. One example was Ekuwa, a 22 year old of Ghanaian heritage, born and educated in Britain, who had completed a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) National Diploma in fashion and clothing but had only so far been able to secure work in fashion retailing. After doing this type of work for some time, she was getting frustrated with her lack of progress but did not feel that Jobcentre Plus could help her:

'They don't have jobs like that at the jobcentre, it's mainly like if you want office or retail or something, or cleaning or something like that. They don't really have stuff for fashion design, the closest thing to fashion would be retail. ...I mean I don't just want, I don't want to do retail, I wanna do fashion design, and they can't really help me on that, because they don't have anything like that there.'

(Ekuwa, Black African female, New Deal for Young People (NDYP), Area two)

Another similar example was Dennis, a 32 year old Black Caribbean man who had a BTEC Higher National Diploma in graphic design. At the time of the interview he had secured a job in graphic design but felt that Jobcentre Plus had not helped him in this regard and staff would have been happy for him to take 'any job':

'I could have done a factory job, you know it was there, and I think they would have been happy with that, ...maybe they saw it as an impossible mission, ...maybe they saw it as, "Well, we don't have a pool of those vacancies [in graphic design] in abundance".'

(Dennis, Black Caribbean male, New Deal 25plus (ND25plus), Area one)

The feeling that Jobcentre Plus staff would steer customers towards jobs in retail, cleaning, catering and office jobs, regardless of their aspirations, was voiced by many respondents. It was also evident in the comments of some advisory staff. For example, an adviser commented that:

'You're not going to get, I suppose, a doctor or solicitor or football player advert on the system, are you? It's going to be the, I suppose the basic jobs usually. ...When somebody is on New Deal they've come from a, they've been out of work for a length of time, if they're on New Deal. In the past they might have done a particular type of job but...maybe we can't help them with that, but we have to make them aware of the conditions of Jobseeker's Allowance and once any permitted period is gone, then any job is a good job pretty much, as long as they're not going to be any worse off.'

(Adviser, Area three)

Dissatisfaction expressed by customers regarding the extent to which Jobcentre Plus was able to address their aspirations is a theme that runs through this and the following chapter on customers' New Deal experiences.

5.2 Using Jobcentre Plus

5.2.1 Nature of Jobcentre Plus contact

Overall, respondents reported a high level of usage of Jobcentre Plus services, either currently, if they were unemployed, or during periods when they had been previously seeking work. Most respondents who were seeking work used jobcentres on at least a fortnightly basis and around half of these used it weekly or more often. The principal reasons for visiting jobcentres were to conduct job searches using the job points in Jobcentre Plus offices and to sign for benefits. A small number of respondents reported using the Jobseeker Direct service, in conjunction with the job points, to obtain job vacancy details, and a few also reported using the Jobcentre Plus online service to access job vacancies outside of the jobcentre environment. Where these services were used, they were valued as a more efficient way of accessing job vacancies. However, for the majority of customers, visiting the office was their main form of contact with Jobcentre Plus and was seen as the usual way to access job vacancies.

5.2.2 Experiences of using Jobcentre Plus

Respondents reported very mixed experiences of using Jobcentre Plus services which seemed to vary markedly across offices within districts. Differences in satisfaction tended to vary more systematically by customer group than by ethnicity. For example, NDLP respondents were less likely to report negative experiences, which seemed to be because this group primarily interacts with Jobcentre Plus via their Personal Adviser, rather than, as with the other customer groups, experiencing a period prior to entering New Deal where they interact with different members of staff and have less continuity of service. Of the other two customer groups, NDYP respondents tended to report more negative experiences than their ND25plus counterparts. This is possibly because this group, being younger and having less labour market experience, require more help and support from Jobcentre Plus staff, thus potentially leading to greater dissatisfaction. These findings are consistent with other evaluations, for example qualitative research on customer satisfaction undertaken in 2003 (Dowson *et al.*, 2004), which found that customers who interacted with a Personal Adviser and experienced continuity of service from the same member of staff were more satisfied with the service they received; and national customer satisfaction surveys which consistently show lower levels of satisfaction among under 25 year olds (see Sanderson, 2004, Sanderson *et al.*, 2005). The experiences of the different ethnic groups within each customer group did not seem to differ systematically, with positive and negative experiences found in all of the ethnic groups. However there were some issues raised that might impact more negatively on particular ethnic groups. The lack of time dedicated to customers and the lack of individually tailored help offered by Jobcentre Plus staff in the period before customers enter New Deal and are assigned Personal Advisers impacted particularly negatively on those who had more complex needs, and were not looking simply for entry-level jobs where there were typically jobcentre vacancies. One category within this group was those ethnic minorities who had qualifications gained abroad.

Quality of service received

The types of services and support from Jobcentre Plus that customers found to be helpful varied widely depending on individual circumstances. However, in general, customers found Jobcentre Plus services to be helpful where their needs and barriers to work were correctly identified and the appropriate support provided to overcome these. Customers also spoke of instances where Jobcentre Plus staff had been helpful in providing them with information about other services and facilities that they might benefit from, for example, providing information about education and training courses. One respondent who had arrived in the UK with his family in the wake of the earthquake in Montserrat (Ronny, Black Caribbean male, ND25plus, Area one), particularly valued the way that Jobcentre Plus staff had been able to quickly refer him to the appropriate agency for emergency assistance.

Despite a general perception of helpfulness of Jobcentre Plus services among the respondents, a smaller but substantial number of respondents found at least some aspects of Jobcentre Plus services to be unhelpful. The principal problem in these instances seemed to relate to a perceived lack of time on the part of staff for interacting with customers. Accounts of a lack of time, often perceived also as a lack of interest, on the part of staff, were generally recounted in discussions of the process of signing on (that is the period before entering New Deal or between New Deal programmes). Many customers found this process demoralising and felt that they were rushed through the office as quickly as possible. This type of experience was reported most commonly by NDYP respondents, indicating that they might have a greater need for more individualised help from Jobcentre Plus staff. Jummai, a young Black African woman, profiled in Chapter 4 as someone with 'multiple barriers', is an example of a respondent who seemed to be in need of individualised help and support from Jobcentre Plus staff but was not receiving this. She admits that this is partly her own fault as she has left the unemployment register a couple of times in order to avoid New Deal. Jummai has no qualifications and is in insecure accommodation, after being asked to leave her parental home at age 18, and is not seriously looking for work at present due to a lack of motivation. She has attended two different jobcentres and feels that the staff at the first jobcentre were much more friendly. She stated, and her thoughts are worth quoting at some length:

'When I used to go to the old jobcentre in [area], maybe because they were young and cheerful, and it's like a lot better around there...and they dealt with me better as well. And I would come, and they would be, "Oh, how did that interview go last Saturday?" they knew me, so they were interested, "How did that interview go last week?" "Oh it was all right", "You think you bagged it?" "No/ Yeah", you get me? ...you know, and they had a conversation with you, ...but now when I'm standing it's like everybody's uncomfortable, they're just different...it's just so cold and it just feels cold like, "We don't care". When I say nobody don't care, like everybody's just in to sign and run out and the people there working, you know, they just got attitude. ...They're not interested, they don't take time to see how your day is, they don't take time to see. "Why didn't

you do work this week?" Do you understand what I mean? They don't know nobody, they're just doing their jobs and they're not looking at faces or nothing. I'm not saying I want somebody to talk the whole of my life with, but, you know, show interest and then maybe... say to them, "I've been so stressed I couldn't even look for work this week", "Oh, why was you stressed?" then maybe they could help them, you know, sort out that problem so that they can be looking for work again.'

(Jummai, Black African female, NDYP, Area two)

One area where a number of customers, particularly those in the NDYP group, stated that they would have liked more help was with job searching. While these customers were able to access job information themselves, they would have liked a more proactive approach on the part of Jobcentre Plus staff to advising them of new vacancies in their chosen field as they arose, or to identifying, for example, cognate areas of work where there might be vacancies. Their comments suggested that they valued the expertise of staff and would have liked to utilise this better in their job searching.

It was generally customers on NDLP who experienced more satisfaction with regard to job searching, as their primary mode of contact with Jobcentre Plus was through their Personal Adviser who would often take a more proactive approach to identifying jobs to which they might be suited. One NDLP respondent stated:

'If I can't find the job I want sometimes they're very helpful, if they have something similar to what you are looking for. And that's why I like to go to the jobcentre over there, because if I can't find anything, sometimes they give you what they have, and if you're interested they can just give you the number.'

(Fathia, Black African female, NDLP, Area two)

Closely related to the feeling of a lack of time and interest on the part of Jobcentre Plus staff was the feeling of not receiving appropriate help. Previous research on customer satisfaction (Dowson *et al.*, 2004) shows that customers value highly the ability to receive personal advice from members of staff who understand their needs and circumstances. This was a dominant theme among respondents, many of whom felt that they did not receive help tailored to their individual circumstances and experiences or that took account of their aspirations. This was true of customers with a range of work aspirations. For example, some customers who did not have specific kinds of work in mind stated that they would have liked more discussion with staff about the different options that were open to them. This was the case with Zaman, a young Pakistani IT graduate, who had used Jobcentre Plus to look for work after completing his degree. He stated that:

'It would have been nice... for one of the people I go to sign on to actually sit down and spend five minutes of that signing-on period just talking about options, and I never had any of that.'

(Zaman, Pakistani male, NDYP, Area one)

Some customers who had clearer ideas about the kind of work they wanted to pursue found that Jobcentre Plus staff had a less individualised approach, encouraging them to take 'any job'. For example, Jonathon, a 32 year old White man who wanted to get work in carpentry complained that he was made to fulfil rigid requirements regarding the number of job applications he should make, rather than given help in pursuing his goal.

This '*take any job*' approach which did not engage with customer's aspirations was particularly problematic in the case of respondents who had migrated to the UK with skills and qualifications gained abroad. For example, Nazrul, who was referred to in Chapter 4 as being in the 'stalled' category, had migrated to the UK from Sylhet ten years ago and worked in clothing factories in the UK before being made redundant six years ago. He was previously trained as a sign-writer in Bangladesh and would have liked to retrain to do computerised sign-writing in the UK. However he found that Jobcentre Plus staff have been unable to help him in this, and he is currently seeking work as a warehouse assistant. Another respondent, Abukar, was born and educated in Somalia and worked there as a teacher until he had to flee due to the civil war. He subsequently settled in Finland where he retrained in business administration and worked as a bookkeeper. Since arriving in the UK in 1999 he has been unemployed aside from some temporary packing work. He wants to convert the business qualifications he gained in Finland into English and work as a bookkeeper, but again Jobcentre Plus staff have not been able to offer him any advice on this and have instead suggested that he consider taking security work.

The lack of appropriately tailored help provided by Jobcentre Plus was sometimes, though not always, contrasted by respondents to their experiences on New Deal where they had a Personal Adviser who could provide much more individually tailored help. Some respondents suggested that this personalised help should be available sooner in the unemployment process. Other respondents felt that entry on to New Deal should be determined by the individual circumstances and the type of help that they needed rather than by prescribed rules. For example, Tahir, a young Bangladeshi man described in Chapter 4 as an 'improver', had recently found work which he enjoyed in telecommunications. However speaking of his six month period of signing on before entering New Deal, he felt that one of his principle barriers to work was an inadequate CV, and he would have liked the support with this (which was available to him once he started on New Deal) to have been made available earlier:

'It's no help to you six months after you've been - if you had that assistance, if they gave you the option. "Oh by the way, we have these centres, you can pop into them and they'll be able to help you", and so on. That's probably more help than me going to the jobcentre every day and looking for a job, and the reason why I'm not getting it is probably because my CV is not all that good.'

(Tahir, Bangladeshi male, NDYP, Area one)

Quality of staff – customer interactions

Many customers reported that they found Jobcentre Plus staff to be friendly towards them. This was more consistently expressed by female respondents, regardless of New Deal group, than by male respondents. However, a similar number of respondents also reported negative attitudes on the part of Jobcentre Plus staff, and many reported an inconsistency of approach, according to the office they attended or to individual members of staff. For example Runa, a 30 year old Bangladeshi woman, profiled in Chapter 4 as a 'success story', stated that:

'Different ones, you know, different moods, someone is nice and someone is, like, talks to you rudely, say, Waiting, waiting! ... Sometimes someone is nice, sometimes someone is rude to you.'

(Runa, Bangladeshi female, NDLP, Area two)

Some customers related their experience of negative attitudes on the part of staff to an 'office culture' which included a significant level of confrontations between customers and staff. For example, sometimes customers felt that their interactions with staff were detrimentally affected by other bad experiences that the staff member had had that day:

'There's some customers that will be talking for ages and you'll be waiting and waiting, and sometimes like if they're really having a bad time with the customer and then you're the next person to go it's like they're not, it's like their frustration is still there when they're dealing with you, it's like the environment is not cool.'

(Ekuwa, Black African female, NDYP, Area two)

Other respondents felt that this culture of confrontation resulted in a general negative attitude among Jobcentre Plus staff towards their customers. One respondent, for example, referred to staff '*talking down to you*' just because '*you're going in there signing*' (Malcolm, White male, ND25plus, Area three). These views accord with views expressed by customers in previous research on customer satisfaction, which suggested that many customers felt that staff treated them according to '*the lowest common denominator*' (Dowson *et al.*, 2004: 42).

Such experiences of negative attitudes on the part of staff did not appear to be patterned by ethnic group, and were not generally perceived by customers to be related to race or ethnicity¹. However Tahir, the young Bangladeshi 'improver' referred to earlier noted how such situations – which in themselves were widespread – could easily become racialised. He stated that:

'Occasionally you would get some [staff] who are just, they're no help to you, they're more agitated than actually being there for you, and you sit there and it starts agitating you, because you're like, Well really you're not doing me a favour, I mean, yeah, it's your job, I'm here trying to find my job.'

(Tahir, Bangladeshi male, NDYP, Area one)

¹ See Chapter 8 for further detail on perceptions of fair and unfair treatment by Jobcentre Plus staff.

When asked if he had experience of racial discrimination, he stated:

'No, I wouldn't say discrimination, as I say, probably at the time I would have thought that, but to be completely honest it would have just been the person's agitated, it's just that they're White so you take it as racial discrimination, but if it had been an Asian person you would have just dismissed it. It's just because the person sitting opposite you is White, and they're just agitated and it's rubbed off on you, you get ticked off with them, and you take it as racism.'

(Tahir, Bangladeshi male, NDYP, Area one)

Perceptions of a lack of concern for the customers on the part of staff could also have a knock-on impact on customers' perceptions of the commitment of Jobcentre Plus to tackling issues of racism and discrimination. This is discussed further in Chapter 8.

Organisational issues and efficiency

Customer perceptions about the efficiency of Jobcentre Plus services were also very mixed. Some customers reported positive experiences, such as staff who:

'...know about the jobs and anything you enquire about [and are] ...quick to make phone calls and things.'

(Badriya, Bangladeshi female, NDYP, Area two)

Others reported that staff were generally available and willing to help. At the same time, however, other customers reported a catalogue of inefficiencies, including not being able to get through by telephone to leave messages, messages being left with one member of staff and not being passed on to the appropriate person, appointments being changed or cancelled without the customer being told, cases not being picked up by other members of staff if an adviser went on long-term leave, customer letters and files being lost, and so on. Again this mirrors findings from other qualitative research on customer satisfaction (see Dowson *et al.*, 2004). In a number of cases, mistakes could have serious consequences for the customer, such as their claims being shut down, leading to a lengthy process of initiating a new claim. There were a number of instances where customers felt their claims had been shut down unfairly because of mistakes made by Jobcentre Plus.

In addition to these organisational problems, customers also reported a host of problems with benefit payments, including delays in payment and errors with giro's. Some customers found that these problems were dealt with promptly and efficiently once reported, while others had a more negative experience. A particular complaint of respondents' was the procedure of being signed off Jobseeker's Allowance while attending New Deal training and work placements, and the subsequent necessity to make a fresh claim once this had finished, leading to delays in payments. In one case a customer reported that he had not been made aware of the need for him to make a fresh claim and so subsequently had to go without his benefit for a period of time. Such problems, while not the fault of individual staff members, could often increase customers' feelings of frustration with the Jobcentre Plus system in general and have a knock-on effect on other aspects of their interaction with Jobcentre Plus staff. The

relatively high incidence of organisational and administrative errors experienced by customers, coupled with a punitive approach by Jobcentre Plus to applying benefit sanctions to customers, led a number of customers to see double standards in Jobcentre Plus' approach; as one customer commented:

'...they've got their own rules.'

(Jonathon, White male, ND25plus, Area three)

While a few customers reported that they had noticed improvements to organisational efficiency in jobcentres, such as instigating specific times for signing to reduce queues, there were also many tales from customers of lengthy periods of time spent queuing in jobcentres to sign on. This was particularly difficult for those with young children. Some respondents perceived the problem to be due to short-staffing. Laurence, an older job changer, profiled in Chapter 4, noted the irony of this in a place full of job seekers:

'It seems to me that sometimes they're a bit under-staffed, you know, ironic I think, you know! ... You see rows and rows of desks and maybe three people, so you have to sit and wait or whatever. So it seems to me they could probably do with a few more staff.'

(Laurence, White male, ND25plus, Area one)

Tahir, referred to previously, felt that the lengthy waits in jobcentres could also contribute to increases in tensions and thus have a detrimental impact on interactions between staff and customers (Tahir, Bangladeshi male, NDYP, Area one). In some districts the restructuring of offices linked to the transition to Jobcentre Plus had also had a negative impact on some customers' experiences, since they had been required to change office, sometimes more than once. One customer commented that it was like being pushed from:

'...pillar to post.'

(Jonathon, White male, ND25plus, Area three)

The aspect of Jobcentre Plus use that elicited the most positive comments from customers was using the job points to access job vacancies. Most customers that spoke about this issue said that they found it easy to gain access to information about jobs. Customers liked the computer job points because of the ease of use of the touch screens, because they allowed more filtering of jobs by the customer, and because they provided greater privacy during job search than the older system of job vacancy cards on the walls. Customers also spoke positively of the telephone points to access Jobseeker Direct for vacancy details. While the computer job points suited many customers, particularly those who knew the type of work that they wanted and were confident to pursue job vacancies on their own, other customers who were perhaps less sure about the type of work they wanted felt that the process had become too individualised and would appreciate more help from Jobcentre Plus staff. As mentioned previously, a number of customers wanted staff to be more proactive in identifying suitable jobs for them. It is notable that NDLP respondents

were much more likely to say that they found accessing job vacancy information easy, and this group were those who tended to conduct job searches while visiting their New Deal adviser rather than on their own.

Technical problems in using the job points were also raised, for example IT equipment not working, insufficient terminals for the number of customers, and errors in the vacancy information held on the computer. In some cases customers reported that vacancies would have already been filled but remained on the system thus wasting their time in making enquiries. For some customers, the ability to filter jobs in the computerised system also hampered their preference for browsing a broader range of available jobs. There also seemed to be inconsistency in the extent to which staff were available to help customers use the job points; some respondents reported getting help while others felt that staff were too busy to help them.

The Jobcentre Plus environment

Experiences of the Jobcentre Plus environment were also mixed. Those who spoke positively of the environment generally felt that there had been improvements in this in recent years. Positive comments included that Jobcentre Plus offices were clean, tidy, and comfortable. Respondents also expressed the view that Jobcentre Plus offices were now better organised, with reception staff who could direct customers to the appropriate area of the office for their query, and seemed generally more professional. Laurence, referred to previously, reflected this feeling when he stated:

'It's a bit better now because they've made it a bit more officey. I mean they've changed the outlook, the offices are sort of more officey, like in an office-type environment, you're met by somebody at the door, you know, and they sit you down.'

(Laurence, White male, ND25plus, Area one)

On the other hand, a number of respondents reported less positive experiences of the Jobcentre Plus environment. The most common complaint however was about the behaviour of other customers in the office. Respondents referred to customers 'kicking off' (Laurence, White male, ND25plus, Area one), '*shouting and swearing*' (Mandy, Black Caribbean female, NDLP, Area one) or '*screaming*' at the staff (Jackson, Black Caribbean male, ND25plus, Area two). Another common complaint from customers was that Jobcentre Plus offices were often very busy, with long queues for seeing members of staff, inadequate seating, insufficient computer terminals to search for jobs, and inadequate stocks of information leaflets. In addition some customers referred to messy and dirty offices, and some felt that the layouts were confusing, and that having security staff on the doors made customers feel nervous. Again NDLP customers were more likely than others to express positive views about the Jobcentre Plus environment, which reflects the way that they use jobcentres, often going directly to a separate part of the office where the NDLP advisers are located. Some lone parents specifically contrasted this space to the signing areas.

5.3 Summary

Overall the respondents reported very mixed experiences of Jobcentre Plus use, suggesting considerable inconsistency in the level of service received by customers across districts and offices. Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the service was not shaped primarily by ethnic group, but by customer grouping, with NDLP customers, who primarily interacted with Jobcentre Plus via their Personal Advisers, expressing the most favourable views. These customers generally conducted their job searches with the help of a Personal Adviser and visited a specific section of Jobcentre Plus offices, thus avoiding the lengthy queues that many other customers had to undergo. NDYP customers were the least satisfied with Jobcentre Plus services among our respondents, which seemed to be related to their need for greater personalised help with job search because of their relative labour market inexperience. While they enter New Deal earlier than their New Deal 25plus counterparts already, at six months, many would have liked some elements of New Deal services to be made available earlier and would like more flexibility in approach. These findings mirror previous evaluations of customer satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus, which have likewise found that those who interact with a Personal Adviser and have continuity of service are likely to be more favourable, while the under-25s tend to report higher levels of dissatisfaction.

The comments made by respondents about interactions with staff during their period of signing on, prior to joining New Deal, were overwhelmingly negative, with countless comments about, on the one hand, lengthy queues in Jobcentre Plus offices, and on the other, little time for interaction with staff. Some customers were happy to search for job vacancies on their own and had little need for support from staff. These customers valued innovations, such as the computerised job points and the Jobseeker Direct service. However other customers would have liked more personalised interaction with staff, regarding the career options open to them. The lack of time for interaction with staff was often perceived as a lack of interest on the part of staff and resulted in an alienating experience for the customers. In addition, a significant level of confrontations between advisers and customers in jobcentres was also felt to have a negative impact on staff-customer interactions more generally. While ethnic minorities did not report more negative interactions with staff, situations of confrontation could easily become racialised, and negative experiences of interacting with staff also impacted on customers' perceptions of Jobcentre Plus' commitment to tackling broader issues of race equality such as employer discrimination, as discussed further in Chapter 8.

6 Customer experiences and perceptions of New Deal

This chapter discusses customers' experiences and perceptions of New Deal programmes. It begins by outlining the nature of New Deal involvement among the sample, then moves on to discuss respondents' perceptions of their New Deal experience in more detail. This is divided into two sections; the first on adviser support and the second on training and placements. Lastly, the extent to which New Deal was attuned to the needs and aspirations of customers is discussed.

As detailed in Chapter 3, customer respondents were sampled from participant records of three New Deal programmes: New Deal for Young People (NDYP), New Deal 25plus (ND25plus) and New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). However in interviews, many customers had considerable difficulty distinguishing their participation in New Deal from other aspects of their interaction with Jobcentre Plus. This is partly because for some respondents their New Deal participation had been some time ago, or it had been a relatively short experience; however, it was also clear that for many respondents, the nature and boundaries of the New Deal programme were unclear. Lone parents, in particular, were often unaware that they were on a New Deal programme (associating the term with the mandatory programmes, NDYP and ND25plus), although they described experiences typical of NDLP, such as regular contact with a lone parent adviser. Their experiences are therefore included in the discussion in this chapter.

6.1 Customer participation in New Deal programmes

Patterns of participation in the New Deal among our sample varied by customer group, with NDLP customers having a quite different experience of the New Deal to those on the mandatory NDYP and ND25plus programmes. Generally there was less commonality of experience among NDLP respondents, compared to the other customer groups, since NDLP is less structured and more flexible than the mandatory programmes. This difference in patterns of participation by customer group is

important to bear in mind when we report on the quality of customers' experiences on New Deal, since the lone parent customers essentially experienced a different programme to that experienced by the ND25plus and NDYP participants.

NDLP respondents were least likely to have done any training on New Deal, only around a quarter having done so. The most common courses for NDLP customers were in computing or in job search; a few had done courses or placements in retail, while a few had sought out training courses by other providers and secured funding through NDLP. In contrast to the lone parents, around two thirds of ND25plus and NDYP respondents had attended training while on New Deal. These included a variety of different courses: many had attended New Deal courses offered during the Gateway period that included elements such as job search, interview techniques, help with job applications, confidence building, communication skills, basic computing, and sometimes more specialist work-related modules. These courses ranged in length from a few days to 12 months, and sometimes included a residential stay or day trips. Some also involved an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) component, where that was needed, or in other cases, respondents attended ESOL classes before enrolling on these courses. In addition to these basic courses, ND25plus and NDYP respondents were also engaged in a range of other more specialist work-related courses during the Intensive Activity Period of New Deal, including courses in retail, Information Technology (IT), administration, customer services, hairdressing, scaffolding, construction, carpentry, painting and decorating, Public Service Vehicle driving and sports coaching. Short courses were also pursued in food hygiene, health and safety and construction site safety.

Around a third of all respondents had been involved in a work placement through New Deal; only one of these was an NDLP customer and the largest group were ND25plus customers. The most widespread type of work placement was in retail, while another common option was warehouse work which included gaining a forklift truck licence. Other placements mentioned by respondents included carpentry, electronics, computer maintenance in a school, website construction, administration, work in a residential facility for homeless people, events co-ordinator for a charity, and sports coaching in a primary school.

Help with searching for jobs was another common element in the respondents' experiences of New Deal. Often this was in the context of the courses discussed above, but respondents also referred to Personal Advisers helping them to identify suitable jobs and making appointments for interview. For lone parents in particular, getting advice about the economic feasibility of taking a paid job and the availability of in-work benefits was also important. A very small number of customers had received specialist help in establishing their own business while on New Deal.

6.2 Customer experiences of New Deal

There was a great variety in the extent of satisfaction reported by customers with regard to their New Deal experiences. This varied most markedly by customer group, with NDLP customers more likely than ND25plus or NDYP to report positively on their experience and to feel that they had received help that was appropriate to their individual needs and circumstances. As noted above it should be borne in mind that NDLP customers experience quite a different New Deal programme to their ND25plus and NDYP counterparts, one which is voluntary in nature and which is less structured. This difference in perceptions reinforces previous evaluation evidence from NDLP which has consistently found that NDLP customers are very satisfied with the services that they receive (Evans *et al.*, 2002; 2003). Respondents in the NDYP customer group exhibited considerable diversity in their perceptions of the programme, with both strongly positive and strongly negative attitudes represented. We explore some of the factors affecting individuals' diverse experiences below. While only very small in number, those reporting extremely negative experiences, including having benefit sanctions applied against them, were also mostly from the NDYP group. The ND25plus customer group tended to be mostly negative, particularly about the training elements of the programme – which reflects the different foci of the NDYP and ND25plus programmes, with the former having more of a training focus – although there were also some positive experiences too.

There was no overall systematic pattern by ethnic group in the quality of New Deal experiences and the extent of satisfaction, with negatives and positives reported by different individuals within each of the five ethnic groups. Instead, satisfaction seemed to be related to individuals' circumstances, such as expectations of the programme, work orientation, job aspirations and previous qualifications and experience. Nonetheless, it did seem to be the case that within the NDLP customer group, there were fewer ethnic minority customers who were very pleased with the service they had received from their advisers and more who were dissatisfied. It is difficult to disentangle the reasons for this, which are likely to be a combination of the individual circumstances and expectations of customers, as well as features of the advisory relationship, which as an interpersonal interaction, could be influenced by a complex range of factors. Very few customers thought that their negative experiences were related directly to 'race' or ethnicity, but many identified the problem as their relationship with their adviser rather than other elements of the programme. These findings differ from previous research on NDLP which has not identified differences across ethnic groups in satisfaction with the programme. For example, Evans *et al.* (2003) report that NDLP *outcomes* vary by ethnicity, with Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African participants having the lowest relative probability of entering work. However this is attributed to a combination of cultural reasons, language problems and employer discrimination, and there is no suggestion of lower levels of satisfaction with the NDLP programme by ethnic minority customers. A recent qualitative examination of ethnic minority lone parents' experiences on NDLP (Pettigrew, 2003) also reported that the reasons for less successful outcomes from New Deal were not related to ethnicity but to other

factors, and there was no suggestion of a more negative perception of adviser support from particular ethnic groups. It should be noted, however, that in this research there was no White comparison group.

Perceptions of NDYP and ND25plus, as stated previously, were wide-ranging across the ethnic groups, and seemed to be related to aspirations, expectations and previous work experiences. There was a considerable amount of negative feelings expressed about the NDYP programme and a number of customers had responded to this dissatisfaction by quitting the programme (and thus relinquishing their entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)). This seemed to be particularly the case among Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African respondents. Meanwhile, those who had experienced sanctions or conflict with their advisers were mostly from Black Caribbean and Black African backgrounds – although this did not represent the majority experience within either of these groups. Females, though small in number in our sample of NDYP customers, were less likely than the young men to report negative relationships and conflicts with advisers. This might be related to their job aspirations – which were potentially more in tune with the opportunities available through New Deal, in the context of the gendering of the labour market (see McDowell, 2002) – as well as to interpersonal skills in relating to advisers. There is little previous research that systematically explores differences in customer perceptions of New Deal experiences (on the 25plus and NDYP programmes) across ethnic groups, with most research focusing on outcomes rather than the satisfaction of customers. Hasluck (2002) reports an under-representation of ethnic minority groups on New Deal 25plus options with a work or employment content, as well as among those exiting ND25plus to work, while Wilkinson's (2003) review of evidence on ND25plus reported that Black Caribbean customers had the highest rate of exit to JSA.

6.2.1 Adviser support

In general, adviser support was the element of New Deal that was most highly valued by respondents, and again this accords with previous research evidence from NDLP and ND25plus (Hasluck, 2002; Evans *et al.*, 2003). Many of the respondents in this study reported that they found the support received from their New Deal Personal Advisers to be very beneficial, and this element of New Deal was often compared favourably to the process of signing on, before entering New Deal, when customers did not have access to the continuity of a Personal Adviser but saw different members of staff whenever they attended a jobcentre. Despite the general positive perception of New Deal Personal Advisers, however, there were also some problems reported, which tended to be around dissatisfaction about the level of support received, either because they felt rushed in their meetings, or because advisers were not proactive in getting back to them with information. This is likely to be related to time pressures on adviser workloads, but led to considerable dissatisfaction on the part of customers. These problems were more likely to be expressed by participants on the mandatory New Deal programmes, where dissatisfaction with other elements of the New Deal programme could spill over into relationships with advisers. In a small number of cases there were problems related to disputes about compliance

with New Deal requirements, which sometimes led to benefits sanctions being imposed, and in occasional circumstances to a complete breakdown of the advisory relationship. There were some concerns about inadequate support expressed by NDLP customers too and this seemed to impact most negatively on those who were furthest from the labour market, partly because the NDLP programme is more customer-led, and so in cases where customers themselves were not proactive in requesting help they sometimes seemed to 'slip through the net' of adviser support. This is supported by findings from the national evaluation of NDLP which reported that NDLP '*is less effective in engaging with those who need or who would value more intensive support to help them move closer to the labour market*' (Evans *et al.*, 2003: xiii). In our study, some of those 'slipping through the net' in this way were participants with ESOL needs, and in particular older Bangladeshi lone parents.

Job search and facilitating access to information

One aspect of adviser support that customers particularly valued was assistance with job search. Respondents welcomed advisers conducting job searches on the computer, which saved them having to queue to use terminals in jobcentres; they also appreciated advisers telephoning employers for application forms and arranging interviews for them, particularly if they had less experience of, and confidence in, interacting with employers. The advisers' ability to identify jobs that would be appropriate for customers as they came up and proactively contact customers about them was especially valued. Younger respondents with little labour market experience also valued the expertise of the advisers in elucidating the different employment and training options open to them.

Customers who had a firmer idea of the type of work that they wanted also valued advisers who gave information about options available but did not attempt to influence their choices.

Respondents spoke positively of the Adviser Discretion Fund available on New Deal to purchase clothing, either for training, job interviews or for employment, and to pay for travel to attend training or interviews. A few customers had also received funds for other purposes, for example, two customers trying to become established as self-employed had received financial help with business stationery and equipment, and one customer who needed to convert his driving licence gained abroad had received funding towards driving lessons. A small number of respondents, however, complained that advisers were not proactive in providing them with information about all of the financial benefits available on New Deal. This is perhaps related to the discretionary nature of these awards; customers did not always understand this and felt that these were entitlements that they were not being informed about.

Customers also appreciated Personal Advisers who would facilitate their access to other relevant information and services, for example training courses or other services and facilities. Lone parents, in particular, valued the 'better-off calculations' advisers performed, which informed them about the economic feasibility of taking up particular jobs as well as advice about in-work benefits. For lone parents who had

been out of the labour market and reliant on benefits for a long time, moving into work was often a daunting prospect and they were appreciative of the advisers' expertise in informing them of what they would be entitled to in a comprehensive and accessible way. Advisers not only informed customers about in-work benefits, but also provided invaluable assistance in negotiating bureaucratic systems that customers often found difficult to access, such as Council Tax and Working Tax Credit.

Quality of relationships

The elements that respondents particularly valued in their relationships with Personal Advisers included receiving one-to-one support and the continuity of seeing the same adviser each time they attended the jobcentre. Being able to interact with an adviser with whom they had built up a relationship was very important to many of them. Continuous, one-to-one contact with a single adviser was particularly important for the hardest to help customers with multiple problems and labour market barriers, since having to change adviser could sometimes destroy the trust that had been painstakingly built up. One example of this was Evette, a 20 year old White woman, who had left school aged 15 with no qualifications following negative experiences of bullying in school. On her first spell of New Deal she got on very well with her adviser, but on finishing New Deal she had been required to change offices, because of a reorganisation of the office structure in her district, and was now visiting a new jobcentre and seeing a different member of staff each fortnight. She stated:

'They're not helpful at all...they don't give me no time to talk or nothing. ...They give me forms, they say, "Fill it out yourself", ...don't get no help at all. If I went down to [old jobcentre] and I see my old adviser, he'd definitely help me, I know for a fact he would. I wish they'd just change me back to there. ...I had a lot of help when I was at the last jobcentre, I had a lot of help. But [at the new jobcentre] they haven't got to know me that well, so I think that's what the problem is, they don't know me, they're seeing so many people they don't know who's who.'

(Evette, White female, NDYP, Area three)

A number of NDLP customers reported very close, supportive relationships with their advisers, and most, although not all, of these customers were from the White ethnic group. For example, Alison, a 40 year old lone parent with a 10 year old son who had special needs, had been a professional dancer in the past, but after having time out of the labour market to bring up her son had joined NDLP in order to get help to retrain as a teaching assistant. After having negative experiences of jobcentre staff in the past, she stated of her current NDLP adviser that he:

'really supported me... [and] ...seemed to be a different type of jobcentre person.'

(Alison, White female, NDLP, Area two)

Another respondent, Joanne, a 26 year old White South African, with two children aged ten and nine, currently looking for part-time office work to fit around school hours, also had a very good relationship with her adviser and described her as:

'..like a mum almost.'

(Joanne, White female, NDLP, Area one).

While for many respondents the one-to-one support from a Personal Adviser was the most positive feature of their New Deal participation, a number of respondents spoke of advisers who were not proactive in helping them with their job search, who were unwilling to spend time finding information or making phone calls for them, or who rushed them through appointments with little discussion of their needs. This was true of Othman, a Black African man on NDYP in Area two, who stated of his appointments with his adviser *'I can see him, he's telling me to hurry up'*. Similarly, Laurence, a 48 year old White man, profiled in Chapter 4 as an 'older job changer', also felt that the adviser support he received on New Deal could have been more personally tailored. He stated:

'I had a one-to-one person supposed to, you know, deal with me specifically, then she went off sick with depression or something and then somebody else came along. It was OK, but I mean I don't know if I really, yeah it was OK, I mean you do get a bit more personal treatment but, you know, I think there's ways it could be improved basically, you know. They have so many clients, each person on the New Deal has so many clients to deal with, you sometimes wonder if you're just, you know, not really given that personal treatment are you, you know, basically I think you are another number there. I don't think they, you know, I think you're a number for them to get off the, you know, there's no, ...[they're not] probably like expected to be that personal with people, but you sometimes [you] feel that they're not really bothered about you, you're just a number to them, you know what I mean?'

(Laurence, White male, ND25plus, Area one)

As Laurence suggests, these experiences may result from time pressures on the part of advisers with heavy caseloads, but nonetheless they resulted in customers feeling that the advisers were not interested in them. This was reinforced in some cases by respondents receiving advice that they did not feel was appropriate to their circumstances. A particular problem for NDYP and ND25plus respondents was that they often lost contact with their New Deal Personal Adviser when they started on a training course during the Intensive Activity Period, and in many instances the courses had inadequate staffing to offer individual help to customers.

Problems were not limited to the mandatory New Deals, but were also voiced by some of those on NDLP, particularly by some of the Black Caribbean respondents. One example was Sally, a 25 year old lone parent with a five year old son who had a disability. She had very limited work experience, having had to leave her last (and only) paid job because of her son's condition, but now that his condition had stabilised she wanted to find office work and to this end was pursuing an Open

University course in business studies. At the time of the interview Sally had been on NDLP for around six months but felt that the adviser had little time for her and was not taking account of her individual needs or circumstances. For example, she was not given any help with developing her CV even though she had requested this, and the adviser routinely printed off jobs for her that were not suitable hours or which were not in the field she wanted. When asked what kind of help she would like, she stated:

'I think more contact with my advisor and more understanding, or more time when I go, like if she can't make the time to fit me in to like discuss things proper then arrange another day so that she can take the time to go through with me. So I think that they could help in...and have like something where you can...like for people who have been out of work long, or whatever, if they need to like, I don't know, build up on some of their abilities that they think they've lost out on, like confidence or interviews, things like that.'

(Sally, Black Caribbean female, NDLP, Area one)

Another complaint from some respondents was that advisers were not proactive in contacting them with information that had been promised, for example about training courses or about jobs. This was particularly (though not exclusively) a problem for NDLP customers, whose relationship to their adviser was more customer-led than for those in the mandatory programmes. This meant that in situations where advisers' caseloads were high and advisers busy, customers had to be quite proactive in order to get the help that they needed. Runa, for example, a 30 year old Bangladeshi woman, profiled earlier as a 'success story', who had recently found full-time work as a healthcare assistant in a paediatric clinic, did not feel that her New Deal adviser had been helpful in finding her work, and maintained that whenever she enquired about jobs the adviser did not follow things up for her:

'They tell me to wait, and when you waiting they will forget you, they won't remember. ...sometimes some job, they say they need to contact with [the employer], then they will let us know, but I waiting for them you know, but they forgot. When I go to, I say, "Did you call?" they say, "Oh, I forgot, which one are you talking about?" you know, they already forgot. Then when you find these things, you don't feel to go again, you know.'

(Runa, Bangladeshi female, NDLP, Area two)

Carlene, a 36 year old Black Caribbean single parent also felt that her adviser had not been proactive in following up information she had been promised. Carlene had a two year old son and had worked in retail and catering in the past, but was currently retraining in massage and aromatherapy after taking time out of work with her son. She went to see an NDLP adviser for advice on childcare and about pursuing a computer course through Learn Direct. However she stated that she had to keep on 'badgering' her adviser to get the information from her, and that the adviser 'dragged her feet' for so long about whether Jobcentre Plus would fund her childcare place that she almost lost the place. Subsequently, Carlene has turned to staff at the community nursery, rather than to her NDLP adviser, for help with job

applications, because she feels that they have more time for her. Of her NDLP adviser, she stated, *'she wasn't really helpful with anything really'* (Carlene, Black Caribbean female, NDLP, Area one).

The lack of proactive contact from advisers may have the most negative impact on those customers who are furthest from the labour market since they are least likely to be proactive about getting the help they need. Within the context of this study, one group whom this is likely to impact on is older Pakistani and Bangladeshi lone parents who often have a combination of labour market barriers such as ESOL needs, large families, low skills and qualifications (Evans *et al.*, 2002, 2003). An example in this study is Sabanna, profiled earlier in Chapter 4, a 47 year old Bangladeshi woman, widowed with five children, who was looking for community-orientated work. She had no paid work experience in the UK, but had completed a number of courses. Now that most of her children are grown-up she was feeling 'depressed and alone at home' and was hoping to find a part-time job. She first registered with NDLP two years ago and had a Personal Adviser who contacted her from time to time about training courses and jobs. However, after turning down a number of jobs which were unsuitable, and a training course because of a health problem at the time, she found that the adviser stopped contacting her and when she visited the jobcentre recently she was told that she was no longer on NDLP. She feels that Jobcentre Plus staff have not taken her job aspirations seriously, possibly because of their experience of other people in a similar position to her who are not looking for work. She stated:

'Last year, my Personal Adviser contacted me and said I can go to training, [but] the third time I had knee operation, [so] I said I had problems, I can't do this, and after a bit she don't contact me again. And then I feel good, I go this year [to the jobcentre] and they said, "No, this has stopped, Lone Parents". ... So many parents who have under sixteen children, they are not much interested to go out and do anything. And I, this was only because of my interest.'

(Sabanna, Bangladeshi female, NDLP, Area two)

A handful of respondents in the sample described negative relationships with their advisers, which ranged from not really *'connecting'* (George, White, ND25plus, Area two) or not *'hitting it off'* (Jonathan, White, ND25plus, Area three) to relationships characterised by incessant confrontation and the application of benefit sanctions. Those who described the latter were mostly respondents on the NDYP. The case of Emmanuel, a 24 year old Black Caribbean man, illustrates the way that the application of benefits sanctions could escalate conflicts, leading to a vicious cycle whereby customers feel victimised and react negatively and thus become locked in a constant battle with their advisers. Emmanuel is 24 and lives with a partner and three young children. He has few qualifications and has done little paid work since leaving school, aside from short periods of temporary agency work in factories and warehouses. He has had benefit sanctions applied against him a number of times either for failure to attend mandatory training or for missing appointments with his advisor. The benefit sanctions have caused financial hardship for Emmanuel and his family, since his JSA claim was a joint one, and the family have

also been denied a hardship loan because his partner had previously defaulted on a loan payment. At times, Emmanuel states that he has been unable to attend mandatory training courses because he did not have the bus fare available, and he would prefer to be looking for work than attending courses, often at some distance from his home. However the relationship with his adviser has now broken down to such a degree that there is no communication between them, and Emmanuel feels that the adviser automatically assumes the worst and does not take his circumstances into account. He explains:

'If I got dismissed from training cos I had a couple of days off, I'd go in there and instead of her trying to help me sort out my claim she'd just close it down and tell me to come back in two weeks, and things like that. ... If I was early for an interview and they were late they would just tell me, "OK, come back next week", but I'm late, they stop my money straight away.'

(Emmanuel, Black Caribbean male, NDYP, Area three)

Emmanuel had requested a new adviser a number of times but this had been turned down, even though the relationship was clearly frustrating for him and unproductive.

Given the one-to-one and often long-term nature of relationships between customers and advisers, it is unsurprising that the social characteristics of the individuals played some role in customers' perceptions of these interactions. Emmanuel, for example, thought that his race might have a role to play in the negative relationship he had with his (White) adviser. He also referred to his adviser as *'snobby'*, thus drawing attention to class differences between himself and the adviser. Other respondents made reference to the age or gender of advisers when commenting upon their experiences. For example, Jonathan, a 32 year old man, referred to *'taking offence'* at being told what to do by an adviser whom he described as a *'young girl'* (White male, ND25plus, Area three). Laurence also made an implicit reference to age, stating that:

[the Adviser] should be a person that understands people, you know, we've had a long working career and it's, you know, and it's obvious that they've always been workers and try and tailor jobs towards, you know, towards middle aged people, you know, it's not as if I'm a kid starting off or anything.'

(Laurence, White male, ND25plus, Area one)

An Adviser Manager in Area three also felt that cultural differences might lie behind some of the conflicts apparent in relationships between advisers and customers on New Deal:

'Sometimes when we have, perhaps, I was going to say aggressive, but that's not really the word I mean, sometimes when we have a disagreement with a customer about, you know, "You should be doing this", and the customer says, "Well no, I don't see why you're telling me to do that", and sometimes I wonder whether that is a cultural problem rather than a customer just being difficult or they don't want to agree with us.'

(Adviser Area three)

The issue of ethnic tailoring of services is addressed at greater length in Chapter 7 of this report, however it is important to note here that differences of ethnicity (or gender, class and age) did not invariably lead to conflict, and these factors are likely to be related in quite complex ways to the quality of advisory relationships. However given the personal nature of relationships, it would seem important that customers' requests to change advisers be respected in circumstances where relationships had broken down, something that had not always happened for the customers in this study.

6.2.2 Training and placements

Customers' experiences of New Deal training provision tended to be more negative than their experiences of adviser support, primarily because they often perceived training as limited and inflexible and therefore not capable of providing them with a tailored service. Nonetheless there were also many respondents who had found New Deal training provision, or at least certain elements of it, beneficial. Gateway courses that offered help with job searching and making job applications were welcomed by many, particularly younger respondents on NDYP who had little prior experience of the labour market. Some NDYP respondents also found these courses useful for motivating them and giving them direction in their job search. However there was a diversity of opinion about such courses, which may be related partly to customer attitudes and expectations, but which also suggested variable quality in these courses both within and across districts. A large number of respondents complained of courses that were unstructured and unsupervised, and which were widely perceived as '*a waste of time*'.

Respondents' experiences of more specialist work-related courses and placements were also uneven, with some, primarily NDYP and NDLP customers, experiencing good quality courses that they felt had made a positive difference to their employment prospects, but with many others, particularly those on ND25plus where there is less emphasis on training and more on speedier job entry, finding a lack of choice in the training provision available. Many respondents in both the ND25plus and NDYP groups also criticised the apparent inflexibility of the scheduling of training throughout the New Deal period.

Gateway provision: job search skills

Most respondents on ND25plus and NDYP, as well as a few NDLP participants, had attended some form of job search provision on the Gateway period of New Deal, which included activities such as help with preparing a CV and completing application forms, coaching in interview techniques and providing access to resources such as computers and newspapers for individuals to carry out their own job searches. Many respondents found these courses useful, particularly if they were new to the labour market, with little experience of making job applications. These participants said that the courses had enhanced their skills in making job applications and doing successful job interviews. Help with preparing a good CV was particularly valued by respondents. Fizza, a 22 year old Pakistani woman who had missed her

GCSEs because of spending time in Pakistan, and who had worked in a factory for six years until being made redundant recently, stated of her jobcentre experiences:

'They have been very good to me and shown me all the different options which are available to me. They have helped me to build up my CV and also told me about a computer class which I have been attending to update my skills. ...As I had been working in a factory for the last few years, it meant that although I had some very good skills in some areas, some other skills needed focusing on and looking into.'

(Fizza, Pakistani female, NDYP, Area four)

Some of the participants who were recent migrants to the country, with little experience of the United Kingdom (UK) labour market also found these courses useful. For example, Changa, a migrant from Zimbabwe who had been in the UK for 18 months, stated that:

'They helped me...to learn about the system of applying for jobs, job searching in this country, I think they helped me a lot in that area because job search, I think it's a little bit different from what I know back home.'

(Black African male, ND25plus, Area four)

However some recent arrivals to the UK had benefited less from this provision because their ESOL needs were too great. For example, Qamal, a young Pakistani man who had been in the UK for three years, and who was profiled in Chapter 4, as someone with 'multiple barriers', valued the assistance he had received through New Deal in constructing a CV, but felt that despite attending English classes his language ability was still not sufficient for him to start looking for work. We will revisit Qamal when considering customer experiences of ESOL classes in Chapter 7 (Section 7.4.2).

A number of the NDYP and NDLP participants who attended Gateway courses pointed to their value in inculcating 'soft skills', such as interpersonal and communication skills, confidence building and so on. Khaleda, a 19 year old Bangladeshi woman who came to Britain aged ten and had had no paid work experience since leaving education, stated that:

'I wasn't that confident before, I was really nervous, afterwards I just got my confidence back and I can talk to everyone now. Before I used to be really, I don't know, I couldn't talk to everyone properly, [now] I can just talk to anyone without feeling embarrassed.'

(Bangladeshi female, NDYP, Area two)

Amjad, a 23 year old Bangladeshi man who had gone to live in Bangladesh at the age of 14 and thus missed his GCSEs, and had no paid work experience apart from working in a family restaurant business, stated:

'If I did go for an interview, like I know how to like talk to the employers, yeah, that's what we learned, how to, like when you go for your interview, yeah, how to talk, what to do and that, I learned that and it did really kind of help me because before when I used to go I used to be a bit nervous.'

(Bangladeshi male, NDYP, Area one)

Similarly, Azi, a 23 year old man, born in Britain of Nigerian parents, felt that the New Deal course that he attended had been motivational for him:

'Jobcentre sent me to some New Deal thing, they give me a New Deal person, everything, and like you had to go to that place to do your CV, which was really, really good, yeah, because there I met some people that used to help me with my CV, and like people that are – really, really made sure I stayed out of trouble, ...people that helped me get to uni as well, so they've been, they've been really, really good about my CV and everything...like when you go to a place, yeah, and certain people stick up for you and that's it, nothing special, it's just probably the way we got on, like a one-to-one thing.'

(Black African male, NDYP, Area two)

Subsequently, Azi has enrolled at university to study National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) levels three and four in internet engineering. Azi's comments highlight the importance of the relationships established between participants and the staff running the courses. Participants on the NDYP, in particular, seemed to value these courses most highly when there were tutors who were capable of inspiring them and providing them with some individually-focused attention and support.

While many respondents found job search provision useful, there was something of a polarisation in the opinions expressed by respondents, with both very negative and very positive attitudes expressed (within each ethnic group). While this may relate to customers' expectations and aspirations to some degree, it also suggested considerable variation in the quality of the provision offered. Where participants were negative about the provision they had attended, they tended to describe courses that were unstructured, which lacked individualised support and assistance from staff, and where customers were simply left alone to conduct job searches. Ziaur is a young Bangladeshi man who was born in the UK but spent two years in Bangladesh learning Arabic from age 13 to 15 and therefore missed his GCSEs. He has no qualifications and little paid work experience. Of his New Deal experience he stated:

'They said it's like couple of weeks training, yeah, where you obtain something and you can improve your interview techniques, how to get a job, how to speak to the interviewers, some things like that. ...I just went there, he said, "Basically, you look for jobs, I'll help you, if you find anything interesting come to me I'll apply for you". That's it, nothing else, and the first week you introduce yourself to everyone, that's it. I think it's all bullshit. ...Just like waking up so early in the morning, going there nine o'clock and coming back five o'clock, it's just waste of time, eight hours waste of time, I mean you might as well sit at home and just look for job, it's much better.'

(Ziaur, Bangladeshi male, NDYP, Area two)

Since leaving the New Deal programme, Ziaur had been doing temporary and mostly part-time agency jobs.

Othman, a 20 year old Somali man who had been in the UK since age 14, also described attending a New Deal Gateway course that was of low quality with inadequate support and tailoring. He stated:

'You'll go to college for two weeks, learn about body language and all about that, and once you've done that you go back to him [adviser] and you're like, I've done that, now what? and it's like, "Oh look through the computer again, there's no work for you", [so] send you back to college, and this time to do another two weeks thing. But this time there was a group, there was about 30 people, and everyone was talking about, "How come you can't get a job?" I mean, so it's kind of feeding off each other...and then you go to do your CV, you go to like do a job search, but the job search was like, they just put you in a room with like week-old papers and they told you like, blah blah blah, to go through them, you know what I mean,... So you should be able to go there and they say to you, Bam! "these are vacancies we've got for you people, you go look through them", and, like that, and have a much, much better, like that, instead of just giving you fucking national papers where people're looking for managers and bloody doctors and that, you know what I mean.'

(Black African male, NDYP, Area two)

Othman managed to find an administrative job through a personal contact and so left New Deal; in the future he would like to work as a youth worker and so he also does some voluntary work for a community organisation. He does not feel, however, that the New Deal programme helped him to move towards these goals.

Work-related training

In addition to job search provision, respondents were also pursuing more specialised work-related courses, which often included a work placement component. The principal complaint that customers had about this provision was that the range of courses available was limited and hence they were heavily circumscribed in the options that were open to them. This concern was more often voiced by ND25plus respondents than respondents on the NDYP or NDLP programmes, which is partly related to the fact that the ND25plus programme is less oriented towards training and more towards job entry, but also partly related to the fact that ND25plus participants were older and many already had a history of work experience in a particular area which they wanted to pursue or to build upon. This often conflicted with the type of options that were available on the ND25plus programme. Respondents undertaking training were most likely to be pursuing courses in IT, retail or office skills, courses which seemed to be readily available through the New Deals, and thus customers looking for work in these areas tended to be better catered for. By contrast, those respondents seeking training in skilled manual occupations such as bricklaying, construction, carpentry, painting and decorating and plumbing, tended to find the availability of these courses was limited, although they were more likely to be available on the NDYP than the ND25plus. This

differentiation in the type of courses available is no doubt a reflection of the labour supply demands of local labour markets, but was reflected in a higher degree of dissatisfaction among male respondents who were more likely to want to pursue skilled manual vocations. Those respondents among our sample who wanted to pursue more specialist types of work were least likely to find the training they were looking for through the New Deal.

Courses in IT and computing were one of the most common forms of training provision pursued by respondents in the sample and were particularly useful for those who needed to brush up on basic workplace skills, such as lone parents who had been out of the labour market for some time, or for young people who had few qualifications and little labour market experience. An example of the latter is Khaleda, referred to earlier, a 19 year old Bangladeshi with no previous paid work experience. On New Deal she undertook training in computing and office skills and is currently on a work placement as a library assistant in a school. She stated:

'I've got more out of New Deal I think, because before I didn't have no experience, and after I went to New Deal I've got experience now because I did voluntary work, and now I'm doing training, doing some IT course, so that's really helpful for me.'

(Bangladeshi female, NDYP, Area two)

The Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT) and European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) computing qualifications were commonly offered to NDLP customers who had been outside the labour market for some time and were often seeking administrative or clerical work. Dora, a 27 year old White single parent with two primary school age children, had successfully completed both the CLAIT and ECDL courses which had improved her confidence in meeting new people and given her new skills, and she was subsequently planning to undertake a course in childminding through a local college, in order to widen her employment options.

However for some customers, for example those who already had some IT skills, the courses offered through New Deal were too basic to meet their needs. For example Martin, a 24 year old Black Caribbean man, profiled in Chapter 4 as 'getting by', attended an IT course through New Deal but did not feel that the level was such that he learnt anything he did not already know from his GCSE study. He stated of the options open to him:

'Actually a lot of the things that you want to do they haven't got available, so you have to just pick what they've got, innit. It's not about what they've got, it's what I want to do.'

(Martin, Black Caribbean male, NDYP, Area one)

Another example is Fiam, a 37 year old Pakistani man, who had been able to find a place on a course in computer maintenance through the ND25plus programme, but the level of the course was not such that it would lead directly into employment without an additional period of on-the-job training, and the training providers were

unable to find him a satisfactory placement. As he explains here, the placement arranged for him at a local primary school was inadequate to him furthering his skills:

'At the time when I went they had just like one computer in one room, ... [the placement] was nothing to do with computer engineering really, it was just like teaching kids the basic knowledge of how to use a computer.'

(Fiam, Pakistani male, ND25plus, Area one)

In contrast however, Hassan, another Pakistani man, also in Area one, was currently enrolled on a New Deal training programme in IT, which had been newly initiated in the area. He was very positive about the provision, particularly because it included placements with 'good' companies. He stated:

'It's only just recently started up in [Area one], we're kind of the first official intake that they've taken, ... they've had a pilot group in, I think they piloted the scheme in [other areas] previously, ... and then they've had quite a good success rate in terms of actually getting people into, getting them training up and into employment. ... They've got kind of a placement scheme as well with loads of companies like IBM and EBS and quite a lot of the local IT companies, so they're able to send people out on placement as well, and obviously the combination of your own job search and with their help you should be able to get a placement with a view to a job at the end. It's quite a good scheme.'

(Hassan, Pakistani male, ND25plus Area one)

The contrasting experiences of these two participants suggests that the training provision available on New Deal is variable and uneven, even within a single Jobcentre Plus district, and it seemed to be often a matter of luck whether customers were able to secure a place on a 'good' training scheme.

Courses in skilled manual areas of employment were popular among many of the male respondents on both NDYP and ND25plus, but customer experiences suggested that places on these courses were extremely limited and mainly confined to the NDYP programme, where there is more emphasis on training than on the ND25plus programme. Those that had been successful in securing places on such courses included two White respondents in Area three. Connor, a 20 year old, had secured a place on a year-long course in carpentry through NDYP, which included a work placement, and if completed would result in an NVQ qualification. He was very positive about the course because it was a job that he wanted to do and he had been unable to secure a place on a modern apprenticeship – another route into the trade – because of a lack of qualifications. Thus he felt that the New Deal programme was providing him with a second chance and he was confident of securing work at the end of the course:

'This carpentry, I get like NVQs out of it, and I've got two weeks left, I finish next Friday on the course, and then hopefully they'll find me a job and just take it from there then.'

(Connor, White male, NDYP, Area three)

Similarly, Andrew, a White 19 year old who had left school aged 14 due to problems with dyslexia, had secured a place on a building course, after getting early entry onto New Deal because of a criminal conviction. While he initially wanted to study carpentry, there were no places left on the course, but he is happy with the option he is now pursuing:

'Cos it gives me a qualification, [and] hopefully employment.'

(Andrew, White male, NDYP, Area three)

Respondents who wanted to work in more specialist fields of employment were least likely to be catered for by New Deal training provision. One example was Ekuwa, referred to in Chapter 5, a 22 year old of Ghanaian heritage, born and educated in Britain. Ekuwa wanted to work in fashion and had a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) National Diploma in fashion and clothing, but had not been able to get a foothold in the industry and had been working in clothes shops for the last few years. She felt that New Deal had little to offer her as there was no specialised training available and she was simply steered towards retail. She left the Gateway programme after a couple of days and returned to work in retail. She stated of New Deal:

'I think they need to broaden it a bit into different fields of what people want to do, and not just office work and retail and cleaning and stuff like that.'

(Ekuwa, Black African female, NDYP, Area two)

In addition to the lack of choice in the training available on New Deal, customers also spoke of rigid rules determining what kind of activities they were supposed to do at each stage of the programme, regardless of their individual circumstances. Some customers felt that they were required to attend training courses when they wanted to continue undertaking job search, others wanted training but were required to undertake a number of other mandatory options first. Omar, a 20 year old Somali man who had been in the UK for three years, expressed a desire to do a practical course, such as forklift truck driving or security work, but was required to do a job search course first, which he felt to be a waste of his time:

'There was one day, one time he put me on a New Deal programme, and the problem is, some of my friends tell me, they have done forklift truck or whatever, and when I ask them, they say, "You've got to be, there's a couple of courses before that". And that's no good, you know, it's rubbish, ...they need you to stay with them for a couple of months, wasting your time, no work. But you know, if they could find me a course, a security course, it will be OK, you know. But like they force the people to do certain things [even though] you may not need it.'

(Omar, Black African male, ND25plus, Area three)

Other customers found that there were inflexible rules regarding when they were entitled to use job search resources. Dennis, a Black Caribbean man, stated:

I actually got into a situation where I attended too many times, they was telling me, "You can't be coming back here", yeah, and obviously I'm there to find work, I'm there to look at the newspapers, and I'm being basically hounded out of the place because, you know, "Your time is up, you need to move on now!".'

(Black Caribbean male, ND25plus, Area one)

Jummai, a young Black African woman with multiple barriers, profiled in Chapter 4, also felt that New Deal rules were too prescriptive to meet individual needs. She had attended a work placement option on New Deal, doing administrative work for a charity, which she had really enjoyed. Once the prescribed period finished she expressed an interest in continuing to do voluntary work there but was not permitted to do this because it was deemed to affect her availability for work. She stated:

'When I went back on to like the New Deal, for example the reason why I don't go back on it is because after I had such a good experience with them I asked them if I could even volunteer and help, they said to me I couldn't do it, I was like, Why? it's my time, if I do it, it was going to affect my benefit. Anywhere I goes it's like no win situation so I just gave up. ... If I wanted to help them I have to tell them how many hours, ... I didn't see why I had to do all of that, it's my time, that time's supposed to be for looking for work, but they were helping me look for work, do you understand what I mean? I didn't have to be in the jobcentre to get work, you know what I mean? ... But to me they just follow the rules till they look stupid, yeah? It's stupid, because if I can better myself in where I am already, why take me out of there? When I was back on the New Deal I asked them if I can go right back to the same place, because the people said they would take me six months after, you know. They said no, so I thought to myself, "Forget you!" and I never went back. That's how I only started signing back on now.'

(Jummai, Black African female, NDYP, Area two)

Like some of the young male NDYP participants, Jummai also responded to her dissatisfaction by signing off JSA. At the time of the interview she was on her third spell on JSA, but had not secured any paid work in between these spells.

6.2.3 Meeting aspirations: expectations and outcomes

Customers were asked to think back to the beginning of their participation in New Deal to what they had expected to get out of the programme. Most respondents recalled an assumption that New Deal would find them work, whether their goal was finding work of a specific type or simply finding any kind of paid employment. Some respondents felt that the additional personalised support provided by a New Deal adviser would assist them in the efficacy of their job search and consequently help them to find work more quickly; others felt that the help they received during the Gateway period, on basic skills and job search courses, would hone their skills in making job applications and thus facilitate their employment. In addition, some were looking for training in specific work-related skills.

There was something of a mismatch between customer expectations at the beginning of New Deal and their perceptions of how they had benefited. While most people had expected that New Deal would assist them in finding paid work, only a very small number felt that they had acquired paid work as an outcome of their participation. These were primarily customers who had done a work placement and had been subsequently taken on as an employee, or in the case of one NDLP customer, had pursued a training course with a guaranteed job interview at the end. Many participants felt however that New Deal had enabled them to be more 'job ready', either through acquiring new work-related skills and experience, through assistance with making job applications or through advice from advisers on future work options. In addition, a number of primarily NDYP customers felt that they had developed useful 'soft skills' such as confidence and motivation. However many also expressed frustration that their perceived increase in 'employability' had not resulted in their ultimate goal, which was to get a paid job.

The extent to which respondents felt that their New Deal experience had been positive seemed to be related primarily to their prior expectations of the programme and the aspirations they had in terms of employment. These aspirations and expectations were not related directly to ethnicity but they were shaped by prior labour market experiences which are themselves partially shaped through ethnicity, as well as migration trajectories, age and gender. One contrast, for example, was that those new to the labour market, for example young people on NDYP with little prior work experience or recent migrants to the UK, often found job search courses quite helpful, while older respondents with more of a work history and firmer ideas about the nature or quality of work they wanted were less likely to find the New Deal training provision useful, especially if they were seeking work in a more specialist area. This was particularly the case with respondents on the ND25plus programme, where there was generally less emphasis on training. An adviser in Area three made this clear:

'If somebody came on to New Deal mandatory, they've been out of work for a length of time and then asked me to put him on a carpentry course, I'd wonder if he was so keen to get on a carpentry course why did he wait 18 months to do that? You know, ...we're looking at jobs aren't we, maybe not a career, a dream job, but a job, and then the fellow can find his dream job when he's in work perhaps. ...It's limited, basic training, you know, ...there is a training element but that's not the main focus of it, it's getting into work basically. There's a short course in retail, catering, hospitality, all the different areas of work are covered, but you know a fellow who's worked many years in plumbing will come up on New Deal and say, "Can I become a carpenter?" it's not really suitable.'

(Adviser, Area three)

In the light of this, it is unsurprising that those customers who were not willing to compromise on the area of work they wanted to go into were less likely to be positive about their New Deal experience. This was particularly true of ND25plus customers who often had long histories of work in a particular area that they wished to

continue pursuing, or who wished to retrain in a new area, rather than obtain an entry-level or low-skilled job. One example was Isaac, a 50 year old Black Caribbean man who had worked as a cutter in the textile industry for many years, until being made redundant ten years ago. He now wanted to retrain and pursue work in computing and electronics. Having completed a diploma in electronics and courses in computing at his local college, he now wanted to do a course in computer maintenance; however there was nothing available to him through New Deal. Isaac expressed his frustration at not being able to pursue a relevant course at a local college and receive funding for this through the New Deal programme:

'I would like to have my skills upgraded to help me find work, and I've told them how I can go about it by going to college, the same place where I got my electronics and computer diplomas, I could go back to the same place and upgrade my skills cos that's what those places are for, right? They're there to upgrade your skills, they specialise in computing and electronics right, now why would I want to go to somewhere along the road, who I don't believe is even recognised internationally, you know, when there's a perfectly good college down the road, where I could go to if I could afford to? You know, this is what I'm talking about, they refuse to help me do those things you know, upgrade myself, and that's what they're supposed to be there for to help you upgrade yourself, you know. ...How can I get closer to my aims or my goals right if I can't get any way of upgrading my skills. I can't afford to go full-time to college cos I ain't got the money right, I certainly can't afford to go part-time, cos part-time you pay everything yourself yeah and on my dole money I can't afford to go part-time.'

(Isaac, Black Caribbean male, ND25plus, Area two)

Respondents who were migrants to the UK and had skills and qualifications gained abroad also often found themselves in the position of not being able to build on these skills on the New Deal programme, but rather being encouraged to take up unskilled work. For example, Nazrul, profiled in Chapter 4 and referred to in Chapter 5, is a Bangladeshi man who was made redundant from a clothing factory six years ago. He would have liked to update his sign-writing skills gained in Bangladesh but was unable to do so through New Deal and is currently seeking work as a warehouse assistant. Abukar, also referred to in Chapter 5, a Somali man who had been in the UK for five years, had trained as a bookkeeper in Finland but was unable to convert his qualifications through New Deal and has instead been told to consider taking security work.

Among younger respondents, as suggested previously, there was something of a polarisation in attitudes, which is again partly related to aspirations and expectations and how this matched the jobs and training provision available locally. Agha, for example, was a 21 year old Pakistani man who wanted to work in the area of IT and administration. He had started a business studies course after leaving school but had not completed it because of family reasons. His New Deal adviser had suggested that he take an entry level job in office work and subsequently work his way up from there. Agha had followed this advice and taken a job in a call centre, and he was confident that he would be able to get promotions in the future. He stated:

'My adviser did tell me, the one at New Deal, 'cos he was saying, "... Why don't you jump into admin or something like that", ...really helpful this guy was, Why don't you just jump into admin, and then basically if you got the reference from there, then move on to something bigger. That's why I'm doing this, I'm working my way up now. '

(Agha, Pakistani male, NDYP, Area one)

There was also some evidence that women on the mandatory New Deals were generally (although not exclusively) more satisfied with their New Deal experiences than men. This may be partly related to different labour market aspirations – potentially more attuned to current labour market opportunities given the gendering of the labour market – and perhaps also to different strategies for dealing with negative experiences. An adviser in Area two, with a large Bangladeshi clientele, also reinforced this point about gender differences:

'There are differences in the way that the young men that we deal with approach employment, to the young women. ...I do find by the six month period that the young women are far more, how shall I word it, not, even though they will have lost their confidence, well they're more focused, they are more willing to take up sort of programmes and just try and sort of get themselves on an even keel, get the skill base they need to sort of go out there and find a job. I think we do tend to find that a lot of sort of younger males come into this office, and there's like a quite a gang culture as well, and you do find that they'll have four of their mates sitting behind them, and it's a laugh and it's a joke, ... they're on a line to nothing basically because if they don't do what we ask them to do, um, they'll lose benefit. And the most common thing is, "I don't really need to do this, What's it going to do for me? How's it going to help me find a job?" Well, you've not found a job in six months with the skills you've got, so perhaps you do need your skills improved. And that's the line we take.'

(Adviser Area two)

Leyla, a young Somali woman who had been in the UK for around four years, was an example of a respondent who had shown a willingness to take up the New Deal training on offer, and had a successful outcome to the extent that she was now in paid work. However, she felt that she was no nearer to securing her 'dream' aspiration, to be a nurse. Before gaining leave to remain in the UK, Leyla had studied ESOL at a local college and planned to follow this with an Access to Nursing course. However, when she was given leave to remain she became eligible for JSA and was no longer eligible to attend the class full-time, and then when she joined New Deal she was required to choose from one of the limited training options available:

'Because the training, they haven't got many options, I mean they've got only like office work maybe, and they've got factory workers or the shop assistants, that's all they did, if they had more you know options it would be easier for me to get the, even care jobs, something like that, I would have more choice to go there, but they haven't got it, so that's why I choose shop assistant.'

(Leyla, Black African female, NDYP, Area one)

The retail option that Leyla pursued included a six month placement with a shop and Leyla was subsequently offered a permanent job there. She is now working there on a permanent basis, albeit only for 16 hours a week as the shop does not offer full-time contracts. While she would still like to pursue her aspiration to be a nurse, she now finds it difficult to attend college, as her manager has told her that he requires the staff to be flexible and be able to provide cover outside of their normal working hours when requested. Of her aspiration to be a nurse she now states:

'I still...didn't give up, but the way I'm going I will give up anyway.'

(Leyla, Black African female, NDYP, Area one)

This example illustrates the gap that sometimes exists between successful outcomes in terms of job entries on the one hand and meeting respondents' aspirations on the other. Those who have a more positive experience on the New Deal programme are those whose aspirations and expectations are in accord with what is available on the programme. In turn this is related both to the type of provision available, which as we have shown, varies for each of the New Deal programmes, and is also variable within and across districts, as well as to customers' previous labour market experiences – which feeds into their aspirations – which are shaped by a multitude of factors such as age, gender, migration trajectories, and family work histories.

6.3 Summary

Respondents' experiences of New Deal were very varied. In general the one-to-one support of a Personal Adviser was highly valued, while New Deal training provision had a much more mixed reception. However, there were also exceptions to this. For example, although some respondents had very good and close relationships with their advisers, others felt that advisers were very busy, rushed them during appointments and failed to contact them in between appointments. This is likely to be an indication of heavy adviser caseloads leading to a lack of time for proactive work with customers, however it did seem that on the NDLP programme, ethnic minority respondents, particularly Black Caribbean lone parents, were more likely than White customers to voice these frustrations. A lack of time for proactive work is also a cause for concern for those NDLP customers who are furthest from the labour market. Because the NDLP programme is more customer-led, in cases where customers themselves are not proactive in requesting help they may 'slip through the net' of adviser support. This is likely to apply particularly to older Pakistani and Bangladeshi lone parents.

A small number of customers reported relationships with advisers characterised by a considerable amount of conflict. These customers were primarily, but not exclusively, young men on the NDYP programme from Black African, Black Caribbean or Bangladeshi ethnic backgrounds. Once they had broken down, such relationships were very frustrating and unproductive, yet some customers were denied a request to change to a different adviser. Respondents quite often referred to the social characteristics of advisers such as their ethnic background, gender, age and class

when commenting on their relationship, which is unsurprising given the one-to-one nature of advisory relationships. However, differences of ethnicity (or gender, class and age) did not invariably lead to conflict, and these factors are likely to be related in quite complex ways to the quality of advisory relationships. Respondents rarely attributed conflictual relationships to ethnic differences per se, however occasionally relationships that had become very negative could become racialised by respondents.

There was a diversity of attitudes expressed towards New Deal training provision. With respect to Gateway job search provision there was a polarisation of attitudes, with many respondents, particularly those new to the labour market – because they were not long out of full-time education or new to the country – valuing assistance with constructing a CV, filling out application forms and coaching in interview techniques. At the other pole, there was also considerable dissatisfaction with unstructured and unsupervised courses that offered little individualised attention and support. One response, particularly among Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African young people on the NDYP was to exit the system and thus lose their entitlement to benefits. With respect to work-related training, some respondents, mostly on the NDLP or NDYP, reported positive experiences, finding places on courses that suited their aspirations and provided them with work-relevant experience or recognised qualifications. However a common complaint was of restricted choice in the types of training offered – particularly for ND25plus customers – and often a rigid application of rules regarding which courses were available at particular times in the New Deal process, which could conflict with individual needs.

The variation in customer experiences of New Deal training is related to a variety of factors including the type of provision available for the different New Deal programmes, with more focus on training on the NDLP and NDYP programmes compared to ND25plus, as well as the variability in the availability and quality of provision both within and across districts. Variation in satisfaction was also influenced by the aspirations and expectations of respondents which was in turn related to their educational backgrounds and previous labour market experiences. These in turn are shaped by a multitude of factors such as age, gender, migration trajectories, and family work histories – and thus have an indirect rather than a direct relationship to ethnic group. Our data reinforces other studies which have suggested that those with higher educational qualifications, such as graduates, or those looking for more specialist areas of work, find the New Deal provision available least useful (Evans *et al.*, 2003; Hasluck, 2002). Given high levels of ethnic minority graduate unemployment, this is a cause for concern (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2002). There were also examples of customers with overseas qualifications and work experience who felt that they were not supported in utilising this experience but instead were encouraged to take up unskilled entry-level jobs.

7 Ways of working with ethnic minority customers

This chapter explores the views of Jobcentre Plus staff on the needs of the communities they serve, and the employment barriers facing them. It also presents the views of customers on how well they feel staff understand and respond to their various needs, including the needs of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and cultural issues regarding employment.

7.1 Information and training on diversity issues

There were a variety of ways in which staff were accessing information on race and diversity issues, including management and team feedback sessions, newsletters, the intranet and word of mouth. A key issue for staff was finding the time to read about new developments or refer to guidance and this was often set in the context of reduced staffing levels. Priorities were often shaped by what were seen as more urgent day-to-day demands. Several advisers commented that they were too busy to look at emails and had no time to use the intranet. Some advisers were particularly demoralised, one Team Leader in Area two indicating that he would shortly return to an adviser role as he was overworked and undervalued. The intranet was also described as difficult to navigate and needing to be more user-friendly. Even those who said that they did make time to check the intranet regularly expressed a preference for issues and initiatives to be discussed at team meetings or briefings, so that everyone heard about them at the same time, and there was an opportunity to develop shared understandings.

There were other ways in which staff felt that Jobcentre Plus could improve on communication, including providing brief summaries of key information, perhaps with each member of staff having a folder for key information and by greater thought being given to how equality initiatives related to advisers' jobs. Few advisers were aware of the Jobcentre Plus Race Equality Scheme (RES) in any meaningful way. Those that had heard of it were unsure of what was involved. This was unsurprising given that the RES Challenge was just beginning to bed down in the fieldwork areas, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Diversity managers in Area two were particularly concerned that a range of race equality networks and initiatives were operating at various levels in Jobcentre Plus and not communicating with each other. A concern was that they might be replicating work.

Training is also an intervention that is used to promote fair practice and awareness and Jobcentre Plus has a Learning and Development Strategy within its RES. District Managers and equal opportunities officers indicated that diversity and equal opportunities training was taking place in their districts. The extent to which Adviser and Team Leader respondents had accessed equal opportunities training varied, as did the length of time since they had done a course. Some of those who had not had training had not given much thought to it. Other advisers questioned whether they needed training because they treated *'everyone the same'*. Several advisers, who tended to be White males, were hostile to what they identified as a focus on difference in race equality policies, rather than sameness.

There were some criticisms of training experiences. For example in Area four concerns were raised about the stereotyping of ethnic minority and White people, the dogmatic approach of a tutor and an *'inappropriate'* training video on how Britain's wealth was gained through the slave trade. A Team Leader in Area three suggested that *'the monsters of political correctness put the fear of God into people'*. Elsewhere there were criticisms of training that was workbook-based rather than interactive and about the relevance of training. An adviser in Area three felt that on her course there was a gulf between what the equal opportunities trainer was saying and experiences in her everyday work.

7.2 Staff awareness of community profile and needs

Advisers in all areas noted the existence of long-established ethnic minority communities alongside more recent arrivals, mainly asylum seekers and people from the former Eastern bloc. At the time of fieldwork, the ethnic composition of Jobcentre Plus districts was being looked at as part of the RES Challenge. When asked about the ethnic composition of their client groups, not all advisers were confident about identifying the main groups living in their local area, and several Jobcentre Plus staff commented that Labour Management System statistics were not accessible to them at local level. Advisers also tended to describe the ethnic composition of the area by reference to their own caseloads, and those of their colleagues, rather than framing it in terms of the general demographic. So for instance in one area, Somalis were widely described as the largest group of non-White customers, their very high rates of unemployment rendering them particularly visible to advisers, while Bangladeshis were in fact the largest ethnic minority group in the area. This potential for skewed perceptions has implications for the ability to identify patterns of under-use of Jobcentre Plus services.

Some advisers felt that Jobcentre Plus services were accessed equally by all ethnic groups, while others identified patterns of under-use by particular ethnic groups, relative to their numbers in the local community. For instance, an Adviser Manager

had noted that while there was a significant Chinese population in Area three, they were not generally users of Jobcentre Plus:

'I'm sure there must be ethnic minorities that don't use our services at all, the Chinese is one that springs to mind 'cause I know there are quite a few Chinese people in [area]. They tend to be very, very self-sufficient, they tend to then depend on one another rather than us, I'd be really surprised if we've got more than five, I'd be surprised if we'd got five, Chinese people registered with us.'

(Adviser Manager, Area three)

She went on to comment *'I think maybe we don't serve women from ethnic minorities very well'*. Others commented on differences in needs between ethnic groups, or by age and their views will be explored further shortly.

These kinds of observations may reflect differences in the extent to which advisers were sensitised to race equality issues, which often reflected greater experience, and in particular, previous experience in working in a multiracial area, as much as objective differences between offices, since staff in the same office sometimes had divergent views on the issue.

Many advisers, when asked about differences in job-readiness between the White and ethnic minority customers they dealt with, felt that these were minimal, as all faced significant barriers to work. Others noted particular issues for certain ethnic groups, which they felt did disadvantage them relative to White customers. Those with ESOL needs were generally viewed as facing more barriers to work, and those who had just come to the United Kingdom (UK) were seen to need *'a little bit more time, to adjust to the way of, how things are done in this country'*. In this regard a community adviser noted the reluctance of Somalis in particular to claim benefits:

'They don't like to claim. A lot of them have a complex of going to the jobcentre and claim. They really don't want to take off the state, that's another thing. Some of them just can't stand jobcentres in general.'

(Community Adviser, Area three)

However, recent arrivals to the UK, while recognised as being unfamiliar with the UK system, reluctant to claim benefit and having ESOL needs, were also viewed by advisers as a highly motivated group, who were eager to find work, as this ND25plus adviser commented

'I don't think it's going to be their race that keeps people out of work. Again, you find that the people who have come across to this country, they are the keener fellows, they want to work.'

These sentiments were reiterated by other advisers. One noted that customers entering New Deal and studying English as a second language would take any job, even at the minimum wage, that gave them enough money to live on compared with White customers who tended *'to think they're above that'*. She emphasised that *'ESOL customers will take work, because they want to work and learn and they seem more keen and motivated'*.

Cultural issues regarding women's employment were raised by several advisers. Some felt that employment outside the home was culturally proscribed for many Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, expressed by one adviser thus:

'I think that with a lot of ladies [from an] ethnic background, perhaps because of the lack of education, as we were saying if they happen to be in a household where it wasn't really agreeable for women to go out, there is a lot more confidence building and also as well I think, it depends on their own parents. I think if their own parents you know have never gone out, spoken English that does make it a lot, lot harder.'

(New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) Adviser, Area one)

Even where Bangladeshi and Pakistani women did make use of Jobcentre Plus services, it was sometimes very difficult to engage them in training or persuade them to take up employment opportunities. Concerns were expressed about the support available for Muslim women, particularly the need for a women-only environment, implying some depth of thinking around service needs on the part of advisers:

'I do think the Muslim thing, and I know Jobcentre Plus here has to try to do something about that, but for Muslim women because they can't mix there aren't many groups that they say could attend that would be solely women. We've got the women's workshop but you know there's, and I don't know how there's a way around that but there's nothing for them out of a male environment.'

(Adviser Manager, Area three)

Women-only training was valued in the areas where it was available, and some advisers said that they did not have enough women-only provision to meet demand. A commitment to gender segregation in employment was viewed as more pronounced in very religious groups and in the older generation. Parents were seen as limiting options for young women in some cases by insisting that they work only in areas very close to their homes. A New Deal 25plus (ND25plus) adviser in Area one was one of several advisers who felt that this was becoming less of an issue over time, at least in respect of younger women:

'I think attitudes are changing... I think the parents are being more, probably, maybe from the media or a lot of other information they're getting, I think they are becoming more sort of broad-minded than they were before.'

(Adviser, Area one)

Similarly, an NDYP adviser in Area one, from an Asian ethnic background, described how in the past she had found Asian women particularly difficult to place in employment because of '*religious reasons*' and '*family tension*', restrictions on geographical mobility or objections to employment. However, again, this seemed to have been less of an issue in the recent past. Several advisers referred to some occupations being unsuitable for religious or cultural reasons. A Vacancy Services Manager in Area four discussed how young Asian girls in particular could avoid working in supermarkets, though she felt that they weren't '*quite as strict now*'.

There were several adviser references to occupations that would be inappropriate to Muslim customers for religious reasons, including non-halal butchery and working in a pub:

'...you discuss vacancies you know, and you discuss circumstances, and when you find a suitable job then refer to it. If I sent that fellow off to a pub job it's no good for me, it's no good for the employer, it's no good for the jobseeker, nobody wins there, do they? It would defeat the object then.'

(ND25plus Adviser, Area three)

The geographical concentration of the ethnic minority population was also seen to be a barrier in Area three. This was partly because the area was known to be disadvantaged, and there was scope for postcode discrimination, a theme that will be revisited in the next chapter. There was also a perception of ethnic minorities not seeing themselves as part of the city as a whole and being reluctant to travel far for jobs.

The Bangladeshi community was noted by advisers as one facing particular barriers to employment. It is useful to revisit the comments of an NDYP adviser referred to in Chapter 6, herself a young Asian Muslim, who commented on gender differences in the Bangladeshi community. Many of the young people she dealt with had grown up in households where no-one was at work, and that there were widespread problems of drug abuse among young men. Her colleague found young Bangladeshi girls more focused than the boys, *'more willing to take up sort of programmes and just try and sort of get themselves on an even keel, get the skill base they need to sort of go out there and find a job'*. The boys were seen as constrained by a 'gang culture' and the advisers were trying to take a firm approach in working with them, taking seriously their responsibility to send these youths on courses.

Older Bangladeshi women were also widely regarded as facing multiple barriers to work. Often with large families, and having not worked outside the home for many years, this was a group for whom ESOL needs were common. They were generally perceived as not motivated to engage in paid work, since this was not a cultural norm. However, as the examples of Sabanna and Runa in Chapter 4 demonstrated, a stereotypical perception that Bangladeshi women were not motivated to work could be wide of the mark, and may lead to poorer service provision, where an individualised approach might bear fruit. An NDLP adviser in Area three had managed to find a suitable job, in a girls' school, for a woman wanting an all-female workplace. Another lone parent adviser felt that older Asian women were not engaging with Jobcentre Plus services, because these largely failed to meet their needs. She was critical of standardised provision that was supposed to meet the needs of all customers, without sensitivity to the cultural context.

Advisers were generally aware of the issue of Friday prayers for Muslims, acknowledging and accommodating their religious and cultural needs. One adviser noted that colleagues responded to such needs in much the same way as she would to a customer with childcare responsibilities:

'If a Muslim man says right I have to go to the mosque on a Friday evening you know obviously they would cut off their work, their hours were, so you know they take that into consideration. The same as if someone perhaps had childcare.'

(Adviser Manager, Area three)

Another adviser emphasised that providers were aware of customer needs during Ramadan and Eid and could make available a room for prayers, again drawing parallels with non-religious requirements for flexibility:

'...if somebody does have a belief or a religion, this can be a vegetarian for example, you wouldn't expect somebody to work in a meat factory! And it's the same with religion. If somebody's got beliefs or views then they can put those across and they wouldn't be expected to do something [unreasonable].'

(ND25plus Adviser, Area three)

There were mixed messages about the scope for New Deal programmes to accommodate prayers. One adviser, also in Area three, spoke of *'an occasional clash with people who insist on praying on a Friday'*, New Deal training not always incorporating any provision to fulfil these religious needs for customers required to attend provision for 30 hours per week.

Some advisers, particularly those working with New Deal 25plus customers, expressed scepticism about Friday prayers, arguing that it could be used as an excuse for refusing to take part in training. One adviser had refused to make allowances for this after seeking confirmation from the local Mosque that this requirement could be met at other times. Another, himself a Muslim, also said that he was in a better position to challenge those seeking to imply that prayers need necessarily consume several hours of the working day. Again, there was some reflexive observation of cultural shifts over time. A vacancy services manager in Area four felt that accommodating prayers had become less of an issue over the last five years, Muslim girls having become more westernised and less inclined to say that they needed to pray several times a day. Implicit, perhaps, was a perception that this made young Muslim women easier to place into employment. Similarly, a Black Caribbean, female adviser in Area two revealed a hint of exasperation at the challenge of placing women wearing traditional burkha in employment.

Only one adviser spoke of racism towards customers among jobcentre staff. He described how a climate of political correctness had driven racism underground, instead of exposing it, giving the example of an external recruit into Jobcentre Plus, coming from the private sector, with negative attitudes about Black people. Implicit in his observations was a need to challenge the offending ethos and individual prejudice:

'And he's been recruited externally and of course hasn't had the public service ethos and about the you know, what's the right, the right thing to do, and he's not had that background. He comes from a totally different set of values really, so you know he'll have to watch his step.'

(Adviser, Area two)

7.3 Customer perceptions of staff profile and awareness of cultural issues

The majority of customers described the jobcentre they used as being ethnically mixed and generally reflecting the make-up of the local community, although this was less often the case in Area four than in the other three areas, and Bangladeshi and Somali customers also noted that there were few staff members from their own communities in Jobcentre Plus. Sometimes customers described examples of ethnically diverse jobcentres alongside others in the same district, and serving similar communities, which had almost all White staff.

Celestine noted that her local jobcentre was *'getting there'* in terms of cultural diversity, and that the issue was *'slowly'* becoming *'more noticeable'*. Some customer respondents gave examples of culturally sensitive practice by Jobcentre Plus staff, such as changing the signing time or day to accommodate attendance at Friday prayers, and being aware that some jobs were culturally unacceptable to Muslims. Qamal noted that although the staff at his local jobcentre were all White, and might have some *'gaps in their understanding'* of cultural issues, they had nonetheless respected and taken account of his religious beliefs:

'They know there are some jobs that I can't do and they will not want me to do them. Like if I had to work in a pub or bar. They did ask me at the start and I said no, they never mentioned again.'

(Qamal, Pakistani male)

Similarly, there was widespread agreement that jobcentre staff were aware of issues regarding religious or cultural aspects of dress. One person, Kashif, however, complained that the all-White staff at his local jobcentre, in common with other local agencies, had only a surface understanding of cultural issues, and tended to make stereotypical assumptions when faced with a woman in traditional dress:

'I know people have gone to them and like they've gone somewhere and they say "I'm applying for this job". And they've said to them "You can't wear that sort of dress at the interview". But they know that they can't wear that dress to the interview, you know, they just dress like that, so you know they jump to things, well that's what I find. They're like uneducated on religions and just dress codes and just bits and pieces, you see.'

(Kashif, Pakistani male)

7.4 Responding to ESOL needs

As noted above, ESOL needs were seen as a key issue affecting employability and they are also a factor influencing access to Jobcentre Plus services. The following sections discuss the views of staff and customers on how these needs are met.

7.4.1 Staff perceptions of needs and practice

Interpreting support and written information

From a jobcentre staff perspective, meeting language needs was often viewed as challenging, especially where there was considerable local diversity in the languages spoken. All Jobcentre Plus staff interviewed were aware of the availability of the Language Line service, which provides simultaneous telephone interpreting, but not all used it in practice. Language Line appeared to be used most heavily for recently arrived groups, and in areas where there were few established community organisations, and mostly for speakers of Arabic, Somali, Kurdish, Czech and Afghan. There appeared to be some area differences in practices. The Language Line services seemed to be most heavily used in Area three where the District Manager described it as being '*accessed quite easily*' by any adviser. One ND25plus adviser was very impressed with the service available; and which he had used for Somali, Arabic and Kurdish customers:

'No problem at all. You just have a word and pass the phone back and forth and the fellow the other end does the business!'

(ND25plus Adviser Area three)

Not only was the Language Line service favoured for its immediate accessibility. Its use also seems to help avoid contravention of data protection regulations. While this ND25plus adviser had known customers to bring a friend to an appointment to interpret on their behalf, he noted that an advantage of Language Line was the familiarity of its staff with data protection issues.

Other advisers were less happy with the Language Line service, saying that they found it hard to establish rapport (*'I find it very hard to speak on the phone, hand it over, they speak, you hand it back'* commented one adviser), that Language Line interpreters were not always familiar with the specific issues involved (*'some of the things that you're telling them they won't understand themselves, although they speak English'*). For some interpreting services there can be a two to three week wait. Customers were not always able to make their language needs known in advance of a meeting; especially as they were often unable to read the initial letter they were sent:

'This is where it comes, when the forms go out, very often when they go back to the Benefits Agency, I'm not being rude but common sense should maybe tell them with some of the National Insurance numbers and the writing that this is somebody that doesn't speak English, but that doesn't seem to be picked up. And they send out a letter and then they say "well it's got please let us know if you need an interpreter". Well if you can't read the letter how can you say I need an interpreter? So I kind of feel a bit dismayed...'

(NDLP Adviser Area one)

She also described how a woman who had been born in the UK only spoke Arabic and had brought her 11 year old daughter to the jobcentre to translate for her. She

felt very frustrated that such customer language support needs were not being picked up by the Benefits Agency. One New Deal for Young People (NDYP) adviser used Language Line for new claimants, booking in advance to use local interpreters for subsequent appointments once she had been able to appraise language needs.

Where local advice agencies existed, these were often the preferred choice for interpreting, and jobcentres in some areas had close links with them. Adviser respondents in Area four, where the largest ethnic minority group is Pakistanis, reported little use of Language Line, though as outlined in Chapter 3, the community is comprised of over 60 nationalities and has seen a fairly recent influx of refugees and asylum seekers. The dominant sources of interpreting support in Area four were other local agencies and staff with language skills. An Asian outreach worker linked to a community organisation was being jointly funded by Jobcentre Plus to work in the district. He spoke Hindi, Punjabi and some Urdu and was providing advisers and their customers with interpreting support in addition to his outreach tasks. Drawing on other agencies for interpreting support was not a problem-free approach, as signalled by an Area one adviser whose language support for Somali women was secured over the telephone:

'...we've got a high number of Somalis, there is a very good Somali centre and obviously a lot of the representatives have come in. So very often if I have a lady come in on her own who doesn't speak and is Somali, I ring up the centre and we'd do kind of a three way interview over the phone which can be quite difficult. But it's a concern because obviously if somebody doesn't understand you and particularly when they're in a vulnerable group and they're got children.'

(NDLP Adviser, Area one)

In Area two, some members of staff were being paid an allowance to be 'named interpreters' and there appeared to be a heavy reliance on informal interpreting support. Access to the Language Line service had been withdrawn for funding reasons and one Caribbean NDLP adviser referred to the interpreting support provided by a colleague who could speak seven languages. An Asian NDYP adviser in the same office noted that no staff members spoke Somali and that the onus was being placed on customers to be accompanied by an English speaker. She described how 80 per cent of her client base came into the office with a friend or son or daughter and was concerned about these practices, feeling that Jobcentre Plus should address interpreting provision. In some cases the lack of suitable interpreting facilities had led to clearly undesirable situations, such as a former partner having to interpret at an NDLP Personal Adviser meeting the day before this respondent was interviewed:

'And yesterday I had a lady as I said who had come from Sweden. And it was really strange because her ex-husband was with her, he wasn't talking to her (laughs) and had an almighty row in the office and of course he, they hadn't been in the UK very long. And it was, it was a horrible interview but the language barrier and the breakdown.'

(NDLP Adviser, Area one).

Concerns about ad hoc and commonplace interpreting practices involving bilingual children and friends reflecting widespread attitudes that even a child could do it has been raised in more general research on public sector service users (McPake *et al.*, cited in Bhavnani *et al.*, 2005). It should be noted that not all advisers felt that they needed to draw on interpreting support. For example the next quotation is taken from an adviser in Area one, who had felt that his Somali and Afghan customers had English language skills proficient enough to get by without interpreting support at meetings:

'I haven't personally used that, because I can communicate with people like from Somalians, I mean I can't speak their language, but they all speak very good English because they come from, most of them come from European countries anyway. I've got, Afghan people they tend, they speak in broken language but I can still communicate with them.'

(NDYP Adviser Area one).

As will be seen below, from the example of Kazi in Section 7.4.2, sometimes customers preferred to draw on the informal interpreting support of a relative or friend because they felt better understood. At least some dissatisfaction with formal interpreting support is implied. Overall, there appeared to be an interpreting support deficit.

Provision of written information in a range of languages can also facilitate customer access. Some advisers reported that they used Leaflet Line, though not all advisers were sure about what written information was available. There was some feeling that the diversity of language support needs meant that it was not possible to have a full range of leaflets in stock, but requested leaflets only took a few days to arrive. One adviser (NDLP, Area one) was very concerned about the lack of support for filling-in forms for people with ESOL needs, feeling that there should be some early intervention at the point of application for Income Support. Commenting on the form she said:

'And I often think sometimes when they apply for Income Support something should be done more there, the form itself, it's a very difficult form and if somebody doesn't speak English we then find that a lot of people don't realise that they have to attend the interview. So as you know now there's this thing that they're only given like five days and if they don't attend within five days it's cancelled. So I do feel that's an area of concern for me because I think there is a huge misunderstanding and because of not speaking English.'

(NDLP Adviser Area one)

This NDLP adviser repeatedly questioned whether there might be better links made between Jobcentre Plus and the Benefits Agency to address such issues.

ESOL classes

Jobcentre Plus staff generally described the provision of ESOL classes in their areas as adequate or good, though in Areas two and four there were signs that college

courses were oversubscribed. For example when one adviser referred customers to provision *'half the time ESOL classes are filled up'*. The scope for early entry on to New Deal was valued, but for some advisers, the inconsistency of what was available to those in different groups, in particular the restriction of full-time courses to those under 25, was a cause for concern. One adviser summed up the issue thus:

'There is support for diversity issues in the district as there are interpreting services and ESOL courses at local colleges. One criticism is that there is no uniformity in client provision. There are full-time courses for clients on New Deal but for those aged over 24, all courses are part-time. However, customers could be dealt with twice as fast and more effectively if they could access full-time courses.'

(Senior NDYP Adviser, Area four)

There were some concerns about gaps in provision and sometimes informal measures were being taken to address these, advisers stretching the rules when this was perceived to be in the customers' interests. For example there were reports of a lack of ESOL provision for people of East African origin in Area two where one adviser, a Team Leader, was drawing on the services of an Ethiopian culture centre to try to fill a support gap. The respondent explained:

'Because we have an Ethiopian cultural centre up the road and they're quite good and normally most of the people who come here are already on some sort of ESOL course, so we can't send them onto our ESOL class because we don't [have] provision so we just let it ride you know, just keep them on their course, keep them on their English. And again we shouldn't really do that. But we do that because sometimes it's common sense has to prevail.'

(Team Leader, Area two)

An ND25plus adviser had also stretched the rules 'slightly' to support the ESOL needs of a Pakistani customer:

'...one of my success stories was an illiterate chap. He was illiterate in his own language and in this language from Pakistan, he's one of my success stories. Took him onto New Deal twice in fact, once to do a six month English course and then I think we bent the rules slightly we had to get him back on again so he could carry on, his English was improving.'

Yet another adviser explained how he had just arranged for a customer to attend ESOL classes through work-based learning rather than New Deal because of the greater scope of the former:

'Especially for 25plus now. It's very little training, it's more work experience and getting into a workplace to try and prove you can do the job. If you can't speak English and they're trying to put you in a place where you need to, then New Deal isn't the best. But he's doing that through work-based learning programme, he's got enough time to continue at the [place] to do his English lessons and do [work experience] at the same time.'

(NDYP Adviser, Area three)

Customers were sometimes seen as reluctant to take up ESOL provision, and as needing a lot of persuasion. An ND25plus adviser in Area one had found it difficult to motivate customers and mainly used a local community provider as take-up was greater at this centre than at nearby colleges:

'It's very difficult to motivate people and they say "Oh we don't want to go back into a classroom environment again or sitting in a classroom and being told, being told how to speak". Some people find that degrading.'

(ND25plus Adviser, Area one)

As discussed in Chapter 4, customers could also face financial and other pressures to find employment, which led them to prioritise finding a job, rather than tackling their ESOL needs.

Although ESOL provision helped people make progress, and one NDYP adviser noted that for most people completing a full-time course *'their English has improved enough for them to work'*, others noted that this was a slow process in many cases, and that people often had significant problems even after completing training. An ND25plus adviser in Area one felt that many people's skills were *'still in their infancy'* after their first course, while a District Manager in another area said:

'How successful they are, I don't really know, my anecdotal stuff is that people attend language training for months and months and years and years and never progress very far.'

(District Manager, Area three)

This respondent also referred to the district introducing a short course on functional English language for work, in response to a perceived need, although take-up had been lower than anticipated.

7.4.2 Customer perceptions of needs and practice

A minority of the customers interviewed had ESOL needs; of these most could speak at least some English, but many struggled with the communication of complex information, or in particular situations such as interviews or form-filling. Most customers who had ESOL needs were from the Indian subcontinent, and were of Bangladeshi ethnicity. Others included Somalis and francophone Africans.

ESOL classes

Those who had attended ESOL classes were generally positive about them, but a number described themselves as still being at a 'beginner', 'intermediate' or 'medium' stage, often finding conversation harder than written tasks, such as competing forms. Learning English was easier for those who were younger on arrival in the UK, and for those who had studied some English in their country of origin. Those who had left school at a young age were at a disadvantage. Where people were mixing mostly with others from their own community, they noted the lack of opportunities to practise English as was the case for Qamal, the young Pakistani man

profiled in Chapter 4. We explored in Chapter 6 how he is someone with 'multiple barriers', who valued the assistance he had received through New Deal in constructing a CV, but felt that despite attending English classes his language ability was still not sufficient for him to start looking for work. Conducting his research interview in Urdu, he emphasised that although he had attended daily ESOL classes at a local college, he was still at a beginners level and needed both further lessons, which his New Deal advisor had helped him access, and to mix with local people if was to find paid employment.

Interpreting support and written information

The majority of those needing an interpreter to communicate with Jobcentre Plus staff described using a family member to help, although some had used interpreting services provided by the jobcentre. Zoreena, who described her jobcentre interview experiences as 'good' said:

'They usually call me every three months for interview. Then I tell them I do not know English. They write the date for me. They bring Bengali interpreter on that day. They phone me usually.'

(Zoreena, Bangladeshi female)

However, she also commented that she would like to be able to communicate with staff outside these three-monthly interviews, but that this was not possible in the absence of an interpreter. Kazi explained that while he had sometimes used an interpreter or been helped by a member of staff, 'they do not understand me' and said 'I usually take someone with me, like my wife'.

The availability of leaflets in other languages appeared to vary widely. Some customers described these as being readily available, while others commented that these were not provided in the jobcentre they used, or that there were not enough to go round. Customers also suggested that Jobcentre Plus complaints procedures and powers to deal with discrimination by employers needed to be publicised in other languages, as they were in one jobcentre visited, and not only in English.

Speaking in Bengali, Nazrul explained that although his jobcentre had an ethnically diverse workforce, this did not automatically meet the needs of his community, as leaflets were only available in English, and interpreters were not routinely provided, so it was difficult for people with ESOL needs to make themselves understood:

'Sometimes it is very hard to understand them, as well as to make them understand my point...somehow I manage to make them understand my point. Others face tremendous difficulties.'

(Nazrul, Bangladeshi male)

It was obvious from his account that the limited degree of communication possible was restricting Nazrul's use of the jobcentre to signing on, when he was in fact anxious to find work, and would have benefited from greater discussion with the adviser:

'If someone could provide good advice in Bengali then people may get a job. I can tell you my situation. Sometimes I am not able to make them understand. What they are telling I also sometimes don't understand. So how can I work? ...Sometimes if they have got Bengali staff, then they can explain to me in Bengali to understand that "This job is suitable for you, you go there", like that.'

(Nazrul)

7.5 Ethnic tailoring of Jobcentre Plus services

This section explores staff and customer views on the diversity of staff in local Jobcentre Plus offices, and assesses its importance to meeting the needs of ethnic minority customers.

7.5.1 Staff views

Offices varied in the extent to which their staff profile reflected the ethnic composition of the local community. Offices in areas with large proportions of ethnic minority customers generally had staff from larger and more established communities but not from those which were smaller (e.g. Somali, Chinese) or more recently arrived (e.g. Kurdish). An exception to this general rule was the Bangladeshi community, which was not always well-represented even in areas where there were large numbers of Bangladeshis. Diversity in the staffing base was generally viewed as positive, as it was representative of the multi-racial society in the UK, would make customers feel more *'comfortable'*, provide *'familiarity'*, and increase access to and take-up of services. One adviser's comment was typical of the general view:

'Yeah, so people coming in, I think it's good for them to see that there are people that are from different backgrounds, the same as a woman, if I went in somewhere that was all male I think I'd find it slightly intimidating. And I think the same for anyone from a different ethnic background to come in and see all, a sea of, you know, people, you know, who are all White must be the same.'

(Adviser Manager, Area three)

Some jobcentres had made an active effort to increase the diversity of their staff profile, but this had not always been successful, and there were some problems of retention. An office which had successfully recruited Somali staff had found that some of them had struggled with language issues in the workplace, many had disliked the work, and all of them had left within a short period. In one area, a large number of ethnic minority staff who had initially been recruited by Jobcentre Plus had been attracted to work for another government employer.

A Diversity Manager in Area two argued that staff diversity made for improved levels of cross-cultural understanding, and that this was something which happened without needing to try too hard:

'But I think you can say because of the make up of the staff it's something that we do naturally, as opposed to "Well, we've done the diversity and equality". I think it's just something that the awareness is already embedded in.'

(Diversity Manager, Area two)

Having a diverse Jobcentre Plus workforce was also seen to have some important practical benefits in terms of meeting language needs, as implied earlier in Section 7.4.1.

Jobcentre Plus staff expressed ambivalence about the idea of ethnic tailoring, in the sense of matching advisers to customers of the same background. Some felt that this would improve the service to ethnic minority customers, while others felt that there were potential problems associated with this approach. An Adviser Manager in Area four who commented *'I'm more interested in the quality of service'* was critical of the idea, suggesting that by *'categorising people'* it could be *'divisive'* and do more harm than good. Advisers also argued that there could be some positives associated with having an adviser from a different ethnic background. A White NDLP adviser in Area one commented that this reduced stigma, and had allowed some customers to reveal domestic violence, which might not have been disclosed to someone from the same community:

'Particularly some of young Asian ladies they, I think sometimes if they feel they're being seen by another Asian person they may feel there's still a stigma, and I've had two or three Asian ladies who have really come out to tell me about things their family have done and we've ended up getting refugees involved.'

Outreach services, often involving flexible service provision, and additional support and advice, are, however, an important element in meeting the needs of ethnic minority customers. Area three has a community adviser who is White but is based in the community where most ethnic minorities live. While the primary focus of his post is to draw new people into the service, he also deals with many ethnic minority customers who are signing on but prefer to go to him rather than use the main office. Area four has a peripatetic ethnic minority outreach worker, from an ethnic minority community himself, who provides one-to-one and intermediary services both within and outside Jobcentre Plus premises. Both Area one and Area two have provision as part of Ethnic Minority Outreach, but the advisers interviewed for this research had little experience of it, since it was the responsibility of a dedicated adviser or team.

7.5.2 Customer views

Although customers felt, like staff, that jobcentres should be representative of multi-racial society, the majority did not express a strong preference for ethnic tailoring, especially where they already used jobcentres with a diverse staffing base, saying that they were *'not fussed'*, *'didn't mind'* and that they were happy to deal with *'anybody'* *'as long as they provide a good service'*, arguing that it was more important that advisers were skilled and knowledgeable than that they came from a shared background. Carlene's comment was typical of these widely-held views:

'It doesn't really matter, you know, who they are, it's just the help that they can give and how they actually come across to you, and that kind of thing.'

(Carlene, Black Caribbean female)

Another customer, Amjad, who was fairly critical of the service provided at his local jobcentre, was equally forthright in acknowledging that none of the problems he had encountered were due to discrimination, saying *'They're not racist, I'll tell you straight'*.

The need for ethnic tailoring of services was mainly argued in terms of meeting the needs of people with ESOL needs. Zaman's comments were typical:

'I think it would be useful for other people, especially people with language or, I don't know...probably for other people, but not for me.'

(Zaman, Pakistani male)

Similarly, Othman, a young Somali man, explained that he had no problems, but that his father needed to be able to speak to someone in his own language, and argued that it was inequitable for these needs not to be met, when those of other groups were, by virtue of their representation among the staff group:

'There's no Somali person there. Obviously it's not really that much of an issue for me or my brothers and that 'cause we all speak good English and that. But just in case my dad had to go down there by himself you know what I mean, and he not being able to speak proper English, you know what I mean, and he wouldn't be able to.'

(Othman, Black African male)

Customers expressing a strong desire for ethnic tailoring in terms of their own needs tended to be those using jobcentres with a largely White staff, and those from communities with ESOL needs and distinctive cultural issues, such as Bangladeshis and Somalis. Again, this was mainly expressed in terms of overcoming language barriers. Some customers also felt that being dealt with by people from the same background as themselves could increase confidence in the advice being given or simply increase rapport and take-up of services:

'I think it makes it easier, you know...like someone like you was working there, you know what to expect. And like he knows how you feel, and it makes it easier to go.'

(Leyla, Black African female)

As discussed in Chapter 6, several Caribbean interviewees identified instances where they had wondered if race had been a factor in poor relationships with an adviser. An African customer, Changa, felt that he had faced repeated discrimination in the local labour market, and said that it *'would be great'* having an adviser from a similar background to support him, and help him to challenge this:

'That's what I thought and the reason why everybody got a job except Black people it's because the management is...they are all White. That's what I thought and I do need to keep on thinking about that, so if I get somebody of my...or no, somebody like me, to help me that would be good. It helps me to stay away or stay out of those thoughts you know, but maybe I'm thinking the wrong way. But it's because there's nobody who is putting it straight for me.'

(Changa, Black African male)

Some people, however, highlighted potential problems in ethnic tailoring of Jobcentre services, both on an individual level, and in terms of managing the Jobcentre Plus service as a whole. A minority of ethnic minority interviewees commented that they had found it more difficult dealing with someone from their own community when unemployed, that it personalised the experience and made it more stigmatising. Patricia had much preferred seeing the White NDLP Personal Adviser to her previous adviser, who was Caribbean like herself:

'Because I find that when your own race is in a job and you're not in a job they want to treat you totally different. I find when you go to a different race they actually give you the service what is there to give to you. They don't show no difference, i.e. "I've got a job, you haven't got a job".'

(Patricia, Black Caribbean female)

Others argued that any service which was obviously tailored to one group rather than another could potentially be divisive in an office situation, for instance if a particular adviser served one community, and this resulted in people having to queue for a shorter time, or receiving advice from a more experienced adviser.

7.6 Summary

This chapter has shown that Jobcentre Plus is working with a very diverse range of customers, with a wide range of needs. Diversity in the staff profile makes a positive contribution to meeting these needs, but both staff and customers feel that there can be advantages to working across ethnic boundaries. Understanding cultural differences, and their links with ethnicity, gender and age, and making provision for ESOL needs, are an important part of providing an appropriate service to people from ethnic minority groups. On the whole, both advisers and customers signalled culturally sensitive interactions between Jobcentre Plus staff and ethnic minority customers. In some cases, outreach provision, particularly where provided by someone from the same community, is successful in reaching groups not making use of services, or failing to benefit fully from the range of training and employment opportunities available. There is clearly scope for service improvement. While most of those attending ESOL classes were generally positive about them, there is evidence of gaps in ESOL provision and a lack of flexibility in meeting customer needs. This is epitomised by examples of advisers stretching rules in order to do their best to meet those needs. Under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Department for Work and Pensions is responsible for ensuring that ethnic minority

language needs are met. There is a lack of Jobcentre Plus advisers who speak ethnic minority languages. Some advisers are making use of the Language Line service and satisfied with it, while others find it challenging to use. A range of interviewed staff reported that there were resource constraints on drawing on formal types of interpreting support. In all of the fieldwork areas, Jobcentre Plus staff were found to be utilising informal interpreting support of customer family and friends, sometimes in a context that was a cause of particular concern to advisers. However, there were instances of customers reporting that they preferred to receive language support from a family member who understood them rather than the formal interpreting support available.

8 Ensuring fairness in the Jobcentre Plus system

There is a range of Jobcentre Plus procedures geared towards ensuring fairness of treatment, most notably the complaints procedure and the discrimination procedure. This chapter explores the extent to which customers, and staff, have experienced these procedures as mechanisms for ensuring or promoting fairness of treatment by Jobcentre Plus, its providers and employers. Against a back-drop of customer and staff accounts of employer discrimination, it emphasises the importance of understanding lived experiences, within and beyond the jobcentre, to support fair practices in considering what more could be done to ensure fairness in the Jobcentre Plus system and wider labour market. Organisational processes, attitudes and behaviour are all integral to providing an appropriate and professional service to people whatever their colour, culture, or ethnic origin.

8.1 The Jobcentre Plus Charter and complaints procedure

The Jobcentre Plus Customer Charter outlines the standards of service that customers should expect to encounter when engaging with Jobcentre Plus and its mainstream services. This includes delivering an efficient and quick service, access to information and a welcoming office environment. The charter implicitly sends a signal of the parameters of customers' broad rights within the Jobcentre Plus system. Should customers feel that Jobcentre Plus is failing to deliver on the commitments outlined in the charter they should be able to access a complaints procedure, which ostensibly provides them with a voice within the Jobcentre Plus system. The procedure requires customers to convey their complaint by phone, fax, by visiting the jobcentre, in writing or by email. Customers should receive a response to their complaint within seven days and Jobcentre Plus aims to learn from complaints to improve services. A leaflet about the complaints procedure should be available in a range of languages from any jobcentre office. The leaflet explains that if a full reply is not given within seven days, customers will be told who is dealing with the complaint, what has been done so far and when a full reply can be expected.

8.1.1 Staff perceptions

Jobcentre Plus staff considered the Customer Charter to reflect their responsibilities to customers. When staff were asked whether they were serving all their customers equally well, this engendered a mixed response. This varied from perceptions that the majority of customers were satisfied, though it was difficult to please everyone, to criticisms of the standard nature of provision when some groups, such as Bangladeshi women, would benefit from more flexibility. It was also suggested that when caseloads were high, the quality of customer service could fall, service improving again once caseloads became more manageable.

On the whole, members of staff were positive about the operation of the complaints procedure. Advisers indicated that the procedure was publicised in posters, leaflets and on Jobseeker Agreements. Several noted that much customer feedback was positive and complimentary. On the whole Jobcentre Plus staff felt that the complaints were being actioned, being referred through the jobcentre management structures, responded to and monitored. Monitoring of complaints by ethnic group was not in evidence.

8.1.2 Customer knowledge and awareness

There was a widespread lack of knowledge and awareness of the Jobcentre Plus Charter across both ethnic minority and White customers. More customers indicated some knowledge of the complaints procedure. The ways customers had found out about the complaints procedure included seeing signs or posters in the Jobcentre, receiving a letter or leaflet. Few seemed aware of the range of ways in which a complaint could be made. Though customers had many criticisms to make of their experiences of Jobcentre Plus and mainstream services, as seen in Chapters 5 and 6, just one customer indicated that they had been given an opportunity to evaluate their experiences of New Deal at the end of their participation in the programme:

'...we always have a review and they always ask you at the end do you have any comments about any of our staff or do you have any complaints against you know. If you have then you can talk to you know one of us or the person who's been, you want to make complaints about, you can talk to the other person as well.'

(Khaleda, Bangladeshi female, New Deal for Young People (NDYP), Area two)

8.1.3 Customer perceptions of fairness of treatment by Jobcentre Plus staff

The majority of customers, when asked directly, felt that they had been treated fairly by Jobcentre Plus staff. However there were exceptions that included dissatisfaction with treatment by advisers, for example feeling unsupported in their goals and that their aspirations were not taken seriously, and perceptions of racism among staff. While there are too few exceptions to draw out comparisons between ethnic groups, the following examples, for the most part from Areas three and four, are

indicative of customer concerns across all ethnic groups featured in this study. Dhuha, a young Bangladeshi woman, described how she and two other participants in NDYP felt that they had been *'lied to'* by jobcentre staff. They had taken jobs on the understanding that doing so would result in movement to permanent status, but the jobs had lasted for only three months. She approached their adviser who emphasised that he had been misinformed too.

Emmanuel, a young Caribbean man from Area three who we met when discussing the quality of customer relationships with advisers in chapter five, felt that he was racially discriminated against by his NDYP adviser:

'Well I used to always tell everyone she don't like me cos I'm Black in a jokey way, but in my heart I felt it was true.'

(Emmanuel, Black Caribbean male, NDYP, Area three).

As noted in the discussion of ethnic tailoring in chapter six, one or two ethnic minority customers had negative experiences of engaging with staff from their own ethnic minority group. Jummai, the young African woman profiled in chapter three, described how nearly all the staff at her jobcentre were Black. Conveying how Black jobcentre staff had a tendency to look down on customers, implying class differences, she identified a problem with Black-on-Black relationships:

'...they're just stuck up. Do you understand what I mean....they feel that they're better than everybody else... they don't make time to see how you're day is...I'm not saying I want somebody to talk the whole of my life with, but, you know show interest and then maybe will make somebody say to them "I've been so stressed I couldn't even look for work this week" "Oh why are you stressed?" Then maybe they could help them, you know, sort out that problem. So that they can looking for work again... Come on, a Personal Adviser, get personal.'

(Jummai, Black African female, Area two).

At Sylvia's jobcentre, in Area three, all staff were White and Sylvia anticipated that Black staff would have more understanding of her needs as she was a young Black Caribbean woman. She found White staff unsupportive, underestimated her and tended to be unwilling to spend time with her; and felt this was because she was Black. As seen in chapter six, Patricia, also a young Black Caribbean woman had a very different experience. She found that her adviser, also Black Caribbean, was very unhelpful and described this adviser as looking at her *'in a totally different light'*, because of her ethnic group. While these examples send conflicting messages of ethnic minority experience, this is indicative of the complex dynamics that can surround relationships with jobcentre staff; as suggested in Chapter 6.

In Area four, Changa and his partner, both African, were involved in Jobcentre Plus Programmes. His partner went on a training for work programme and he was upset to find out from her that a job search coach had said that they were applying for the wrong kind of jobs. His dream was to work as an engineer and the comments of the coach had a negative impact on his aspirations:

'...and they said you're applying for these nice jobs but you will never get them, you have to apply for...working in the night clubs, something like that. I just felt that it wasn't good on my part because it was like somebody looking down at somebody. ...So I lost hope in applying for those jobs.'

(Changa, Black African male, Area four)

Chapters 5 and 6 indicated much commonality in experiences of ethnic minority and White customers in their use of Jobcentre Plus and mainstream services. Sometimes, ethnic minority customers were not sure whether or not they were encountering racism. Sifat didn't find staff at the jobcentre very helpful and wasn't sure if they were unhelpful to everyone or just to him as a Pakistani. Tahir expressed this thus:

'It's just that they're White so you take it as racial discrimination but if it had been an Asian person you would have just dismissed it.'

(Tahir, Bangladeshi male, Area one)

As was briefly noted in Chapter 5, some negative interactions with Jobcentre Plus staff related to respondents' perceptions of staff unwillingness to address race discrimination and this will be considered further later in this chapter (see Section 8.3.2).

8.1.4 Experiences of using the complaints procedure

In Chapters 5 and 6 it was seen that there was a variety of ways in which both ethnic minority and White customers were dissatisfied with their experiences of Jobcentre Plus and New Deal programmes. Nevertheless customers who indicated that they wanted to complain about services were in a minority. Fewer still had made an actual complaint. Examples of customers who had used the complaints procedure emerged in Areas one, two and three.

In some instances an informal complaint was made to an adviser and not followed up. Kashif described how he had made a verbal complaint to his adviser, but the adviser had not followed it through:

'No it wasn't followed up really or anything, so that's why I just left then and thought forget it.'

(Kashif, Pakistani male, Area three)

Several customers had made verbal complaints, and it was not always clear whether the complaint had been formalised. One young White customer, Connor, had filled-in a complaints form about poor treatment from staff. He had been unable to visit the jobcentre to sign on due to poor health and felt that he was not being taken seriously by staff and denied opportunities. Another had not known how to complain, asked about how to go about it and was provided with a complaints form to complete, but received no feedback on what happened to the complaint.

Customers were not always clear on how their complaint had progressed in the organisation and lack of follow-up of complaints was a recurring theme. Several

customers had made complaints about training providers that were not followed through. For example Hassan, a Pakistani man on New Deal 25plus (ND25plus), had complained to his adviser about a provider, a private training company that provided very little training. He wrote a detailed report outlining his concerns about the company's practices. He thought that the report had been sent to a Jobcentre Plus Regional Contracts Manager, but wasn't sure. In any case Hassan received no personal response from a manager. Rahima had also made a verbal complaint about a training provider. She had been sent to a college for training but had not received any:

'Though they told me for training. But actually it was not a training. They used to send young people like me to a class and we used to spend whole day there to look for jobs through newspaper. It was a waste of time. I was there for three months and then I left.'

(Rahima, Bangladeshi female, NDYP, Area two)

When no action was taken following Rahima's complaint she did not try to take it any further.

8.1.5 Reasons for not using the complaints procedure

An adviser in Area one noted how clients often came into the jobcentre to make verbal complaints, but they were reluctant to formalise them. Across customer respondents, there were variations in orientations to complaining. While some said that they would only complain about a major issue, others described themselves as *'not one of those kind of people'* who would complain or said that nothing would put them off complaining. A Bangladeshi man, though sceptical about whether it would come to anything, felt that there were occasions when a complaint should be made, in so doing describing the jobcentre environment he encountered quite graphically:

'They say they got short of staff you know so I think they put proper staff there and give them a good salary is what they need. You know if somebody goes there don't need to wait so long, it doesn't mean if you got no job you have to wait all day there.'

(Salik, Bangladeshi male, ND25plus, Area two)

Several customers indicated that they had wanted to complain but did not. Some customers feared exacerbating the existing situation. Customer comments also revealed how a lack of faith in the system could be a deterrent to complaining. Some doubted whether those with responsibility for considering complaints were impartial. Take this example of Zamen who felt that complaining would be ineffective:

'I mean where I used to work if you sent a complaint to my company the probability of one of my friends or someone I know dealing with the complaint is quite high. So the probability of the complaint actually being serious taken is very small, cos they'll write a letter back saying yeah we're looking into the matter blah blah blah, we're sorry, but realistically it will have no effect...so what's the point.'

(Zamen, Pakistani male, Area one)

Other factors that deterred people from complaining included lack of understanding of how to complain, uncertainty about the length of time it could take to get any response, lack of ease of complaining and fears around the impact on job prospects.

As implied in Chapter 6, the relationship between customer and adviser can be a key one within Jobcentre Plus and New Deal programmes. Several customers in Area three, both White and ethnic minority, had made efforts to change their advisers and this action was characterised by verbal requests, pursued with mixed success as illustrated by the following customers in Area three. Emmanuel had not been allowed to change an adviser that he felt didn't have time to listen to him in contrast to a more positive experience with an adviser in another part of the country:

'When I was in [Area one] my adviser always used to try and help me out of my situation, this one didn't have time to listen to it, she just was worried about her next appointment.'

(Emmanuel, Black Caribbean male, NDYP, Area three)

At the time of interview he had been making verbal requests for a change in adviser for the last year. This customer was unclear on the nature of the complaints procedure, had kept asking to see a 'decision-maker', but had not been given the opportunity to do so. Jonathan, a White customer, had made written and verbal requests to change adviser. They had a poor relationship that Jonathan described as a '*poor atmosphere*'. He also indicated that he was being channelled into opportunities that he did not want to pursue:

'...you either do it or your money gets stopped, it's as easy as that.'

(Jonathan, White male, ND25plus, Area three)

There seemed to be area differences in responsiveness to requests to change adviser which are difficult to compare and contrast without further detail on the circumstances of each case.

8.2 Employer discrimination and the Jobcentre Plus discrimination procedure

Discrimination in recruitment is the hardest of all discrimination to tackle (Hoque and Noon, 1999). Jobcentre staff are most likely to encounter employer discrimination when taking vacancy details from employers or arranging interviews for jobseekers. Vacancy Service Managers (VSMs) in each Jobcentre Plus office are responsible for vacancies on a daily basis and advisers are in regular contact with employers and VSMs. Jobcentre Plus has a long-standing discrimination procedure for recording and addressing direct and indirect discrimination by employers. Staff must write a report on all instances of discrimination whether resolved or unresolved and send them to head office. The procedure includes requirements to talk to employers about their behaviour and legal standards. There is a lengthy document providing staff with guidance on the procedure. This is intended to provide quick and easy

access to advice on what staff should do if they come across an employer attempting unlawful discrimination, or if a jobseeker complains that an employer has acted unlawfully against them (*Jobcentre Plus Discrimination Guidance*, 2001). The guidance document is 176 pages long.

8.2.1 Customer perceptions and experiences of employer discrimination

There were a variety of customer views on employer discrimination. Many customers perceived that discrimination was a feature of labour markets, even if they had no personal experience of it. Not all personal experiences of discrimination referred to vacancies advertised in and pursued via the jobcentre. Some related to jobs that customers had sought out themselves, in the recent or distant past. Types of discrimination mentioned included race, sex and age discrimination; and discrimination against those with a criminal record or with a particular postcode covering an area with a high rate of crime, hostility to the way someone dressed and looked and length of time unemployed. Ethnic minority customers were more likely to refer to race in relation to both their broad awareness of discrimination, which was often gauged from the experiences of their family and friends, and their personal experience. Black Caribbeans were slightly more likely than other groups to report experiences of discrimination with a tendency to refer to a range of types of discrimination, relating to race, postcode, being a jobcentre applicant and gender. There is a preponderance of examples from Area one where the bulk of Black Caribbean interviews took place (see Chapter 3, Table 3.1). Pete (Black Caribbean, Area one), drawing on his experiences and those of family members, felt that Black people were tarnished with a negative stereotype: *'because like with Black people for instance, they seem to tar you with the same brush for some reason. I don't know what it is'*. When speaking to one prospective employer on the telephone, Celestine perceived that it had not been realised that she was Black. When she arrived at the workplace to make further enquiries about the job, the member of staff that she encountered pretended that there was a waiting list. In Celestine's words:

'It was not so long ago as well. You could...you can tell. One of the ones I went for, you can sort...you can tell. I know that when they see me they thought "Oh she's a Black girl". Cos I don't talk like a Black girl, like, the accent. You can tell by the way, [name] name's different, "Oh [name]" "Yeah, I'm Maxine. I'm the one you spoke to on the phone. Yeah it was me." "Oh we've got a waiting list and such and such. We'll add your name." Whereas before there wasn't no waiting list sort of thing, you know. ...No, there wasn't one before, but as soon as I get in the office there's one. As soon as I get in the office you know, things like that.'

(Celestine, Black Caribbean female, Area one)

Rodney (Black Caribbean, Area two) also had a gut feeling that he had encountered discrimination:

'I didn't have a go for ages this is for like offices as well I didn't really want to go for this either it was then that I could tell that the lady wasn't really interested in what I was saying, wasn't really that friendly, thought that maybe they expected someone else apply for the job apart from me.'

(Rodney, Black Caribbean male, Area two)

Mandy (Black Caribbean, Area one) felt that she might have come across postcode discrimination when a provider had contacted a potential employer on her behalf. Overhearing the ensuing telephone conversation reference was made to the employer saying:

'...I don't think she can work here because I've had problems with people living with...where I'm living. I think it was an Asian guy...I don't really know what he was trying to imply really.'

(Mandy, Black Caribbean female, Area one)

Negative employer attitudes towards job applicants from the jobcentre was the explanation Dennis gave for why he was struggling to access paid employment. From a Caribbean background, he had been unemployed and studying graphic design part-time and had now achieved his dream job as a graphic designer. Reflecting on his experience, he felt that he had been job ready and unfairly treated:

'And it's not a case of well there's been a big gap so maybe he's lost his skills, it ain't got nothing to do with that, I got all the qualifications, I know what I'm doing, you know the background's there. It's just again the stigma because you're not even long-term unemployed, he's from the Jobcentre, nah.'

(Dennis, Black Caribbean male, Area one)

One or two respondents explicitly referred to gender discrimination, including Carlene (Black Caribbean, Area one) who felt that a colleague had discriminated against her as a woman, alleging that she was not pulling her weight.

Respondents often spoke in terms of their suspicions of discrimination, sensing an adverse employer reaction to their ethnicity, which they would not have been able to prove. Several customers, across the ethnic groups, suspected personal experience of discrimination but were unsure whether this was on the basis of their race or if other dynamics were at play, implying the potential for multiple forms of discrimination. For example, Hassan felt that you would need *'inside knowledge'* to really know what was going on unless discrimination was very overt:

'It's difficult to tell because when we sort of apply for a job...you send your CV off, send a covering letter, you do an application form. So you can't tell if there's any sort of barriers, whether you're being rejected because of your sort of age or because of your race. So it's difficult to tell.'

(Hassan, Pakistani male, ND25plus, Area one)

A Bangladeshi woman, Sabanna, the older job changer lone parent profiled in Chapter 4, felt that age discrimination was the main disadvantage that she was

facing. She described how though she did not have advanced qualifications, she had done some college-based courses and had previous voluntary experience and caring skills that could be applied in paid community work, but felt that negative employer responses to her age might be affecting her opportunities. Age was perceived as the main dimension of her experience rather than race or gender discrimination.

Din, from the Congo, had been applying for jobs as a fork lift truck driver and in a fire department. While he felt that he had English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) needs, he also felt that employer discrimination might be taking place, affecting both his friends and himself, but he wasn't sure:

'...in like in agencies they tell you that there's ...if you just apply you'll start immediately, but when you go there they never like give you a job.... I think that is possibly because of my race...cos I'm Black. In a job, like if there are two people applying for a job, if there is one White and one Black (you think they will give it to the White person?) yeah. ...It's not only me, that's all...many many people, it happens to many foreign people.'

(Din, Black African male, Area three)

Several African respondents, often recent migrants to the United Kingdom, expressed concern about employer recruitment practices, in graphic detail revealing signs of direct and indirect discriminatory practices. Aasha is a Somali woman and fairly recent arrival living in Area three. She spoke of how one local employer seemed to rely on familial and friendship networks in its recruitment practices. Describing how she had tried to get a job as a night-time carer, a job she perceived not to require previous experience, Aasha explained that whenever there was a vacancy those on the inside used their personal networks to fill it:

'...most of them are friends or related or auntie or uncle. ...I've never actually seen that before. ...so there's that weird thing. And then they intend to, you know if you not belonging to that you are some kind of an outsider so there is something going on. I don't know if it's common here or maybe it's only there.'

(Aasha, Black African female, Area three)

Changa, a Zimbabwean and another recent arrival, had worked at a major communications employer on a temporary basis. While he did not have any notable complaints about the job per se, he felt that Black staff had been less likely to have their contracts renewed:

'When my contract ended in October when there with about... 16 people or 18 people. Any were only two Blacks, and most of the people they managed to continue with their contracts, and two of us, the other girl from Cameroon, we were asked to leave. And when we came back as they phoned us, and on the 14th of January only Blacks asked to leave and I could not understand it.'

(Changa, Black African male, Area four)

Along with some of his colleagues who had also been asked to leave, he approached the managers to make a complaint. He asked why none of the temporary staff who were White were asked to leave when most of the Black staff had not had their contracts renewed, even those more experienced than their White colleagues. Almost 100 staff had been asked to remain with the firm, not one of them Black. Changa had pondered on the unfairness of this situation, hinting at direct discriminatory practices:

'To myself I just thought it was all about.. I took it to the other side thinking about discrimination, that's what I thought of... Because to me it wasn't fair because we are doing the same job and we are even better because we knew the job before other people, and we are doing that and I don't know, so it wasn't fair... Because they don't want to be know publicly but they are doing it in a clever way you see so.'

(Changa, Black African male, Area four)

Another young African respondent, Othman, felt that he had experienced discrimination in applying for jobs in the City. Even where he 'dressed the part' he felt that employers used weaknesses in the clarity of his spoken English as an excuse not to employ him. Othman had observed that his interviews were significantly shorter than those interviewed before him. Reflecting on the validity of his concerns that the colour of his skin was influencing his experiences, he noted that a White school friend, with no apparent advantage other than the colour of his skin, had made progress in the labour market while he hadn't:

'So I'm thinking right we went to the same school yeah, I had better grades than he did you know what I mean, so for you to get, come back for another interview and for me not to... He laughs about it, it's cos you're a Black man, yeah he laughs about it yeah, but I think to myself it got to be that hasn't it.'

(Othman, Black African male, Area two)

Respondents often, and sometimes implicitly, presented a complex picture of access to paid employment, labour market experiences being shaped by a range of factors; reflected in the typology of future plans for work and barriers to paid employment presented in Chapter 4. Aminah emphasised that labour market prospects were not influenced by discriminatory employer action alone, illustrated by the example of her sister finding it difficult to get a job because she was Black African but also because of her poor labour market credentials. Some respondents felt that employer feedback on why they were turned down for a job might help them better understand their experiences, but others were sceptical about how useful this would be, even when encouraged to pursue feedback by their advisers.

Bangladeshi respondents were the least likely to report experience of employer discrimination in interviews for this research. There were exceptions notably among younger men and women. One young Bangladeshi woman from Area one, Hasina, expressed the view that ethnic minorities had to be perceived as exceptionally good performers, rather than average, to achieve a successful job application. Tahir, a young Bangladeshi man from Area two, spoke of how the only reason why he got a job in a record shop soon after he left school was because the manager, a National

Front member, was not at work that day. He decided to leave the job a few weeks after starting, feeling uncomfortable with this work context and Tahir did not feel that he experienced discrimination in later work experiences as he set about the task of improving his labour market credentials and position. Dhuha, a young Bangladeshi woman, felt that she had not personally encountered employer discrimination, but the experience of a Bangladeshi friend, who was very religious and would not shake hands at an interview for cultural reasons, underpinned her belief that such discrimination existed:

'One of my friends who...she's very religious so when she's having an interview...usually when you walk in they shake your hand because that's the normal thing to do but she doesn't shake hands because she doesn't want to do that because it's in our religion not to but I do shake their hands but she doesn't. So when she walks into a room and they shake her hand she usually says, "I'm sorry I can't do that". So the second that person hears it, they're already say, "no, I don't want this girl" but it's that kind of stuff.'

(Dhuha, Bangladeshi female, Area two)

Bangladeshi customers, all in Area two, also described how they felt discriminated against because of the standard of their English (Zoreena), because they had overseas qualifications (Nazrul) and because they were Muslim (Jameela).

Striking descriptions of perceptions and experiences of employer discrimination were presented by some younger Muslim customers who reported a growth of employer discrimination against British Muslims since September 11th 2001. For example a young Pakistani man, Zamen, who had recently found employment with an Information Technology firm felt that this had been through pure luck in a climate of intense hostility towards Muslims and Asians in Britain. Even if you were, in his words, *'the best of the best'*, you were going to struggle to make progress in the labour market. Customers also described personal experience of religious discrimination. Several reported negative reactions to their names. Kashif, a Pakistani man aged 37, noted how when employers saw his name they had 'second thoughts' about employing him because the war was not against Iraq or Pakistan but against religions. He had tried to make sense of his experiences by phoning employers using his full name and, when told they had no vacancies, phoning them with a different name; and found he was then invited for an interview. Having left his last job the day after he had gone through the process of getting a security pass, he was uncertain as to whether his minor criminal record had contributed to his ex-employer's actions. Similarly, Zamen spoke of how he could tell in an interview situation that his ethnicity and religion was a factor at play:

Especially in an interview the way they're shocked to see you, cos my name is [Name], it doesn't exactly say Muslim...it's quite hard to define where it's from. So you know employers often, so many times have looked at me and they've been like they still can't figure out who I am, where I'm from. They think maybe he's Arabic, maybe he's this, maybe he's that, as soon as I say I'm Pakistani that just adds a dent straight away.'

(Zamen, Pakistani male, Area one)

Zamen had also experimented with using English sounding names in job applications instead of his own, noticing a more positive employer response, a 'massive difference'.

Not all customers perceived that discrimination was a feature of labour market activity and, unsurprisingly, such respondents were not aware of having experienced discrimination, nor did they know anyone else that had. If a customer suspected discrimination in their contact with a jobcentre office, this did not necessarily lead to a perception that discrimination was widespread among employers in their job search area. While Jummai felt that she had encountered discrimination from Black jobcentre staff, she also felt that, more broadly speaking, Area two was too multicultural for race discrimination to be much of an issue.

'I'm not saying I don't believe in racism and I don't believe in certain things it's not worth it round here is it? [laughs]. Do you understand what I mean, round here this is a mix, it's just like...okay, maybe if you're walking in [place] you know what I mean...; "Wow!" you know, but over here you see Black, Indian, everything, so it's nothing new. I'm not saying there isn't racism here, but somebody working here they wouldn't be able to work here it wouldn't make sense. So if you're racist it must come out.'

(Jummai, African female, Area two)

8.2.2 Staff knowledge and awareness of employer discrimination and the discrimination procedure

Most of the advisers interviewed, across all four fieldwork areas, perceived that ethnic minority customers encountered complex, hidden, covert and subtle discrimination in the labour market. Broadly speaking, larger employers, with Human Resource Managers, were seen as relatively good employers of ethnic minorities with smaller employers posing a greater challenge. An adviser from Area three described how jobcentre staff could act as a facilitator, but that it was really local businesses who would make the real difference for ethnic minority access to opportunities. There was a perception among advisers that some employers had stereotypical views about the types of jobs that were appropriate for particular groups. Staff working with clients on a day-to-day basis referred to discrimination by employers gauging the ability of clients with ESOL needs to communicate, discrimination against people in Asian dress with employers expecting job applicants to conform to their norm, some employer hostility to Asian men and also unwitting discrimination. In Area four a Team Leader referred to a history of sectarian bias that remained a residual element in the everyday lives of communities and so formed part of the context of the experiences of ethnic minority groups trying to access employment. An adviser in Area two was unclear about discrimination among ethnic minority jobseekers trying to secure employment with small businesses as Bengalis form the majority community in the area. He noted:

'I don't know if a White waiter in a Bengali restaurant looks the part. But I don't, can't get into, I don't know the minds of the people, the employers.'

(Team Leader, Area two)

While in Area four, a community adviser praised the record of a large retail business on the employment of ethnic minorities, his counterpart in Area three was critical of the same employer. In his experience, the retailer would not employ a Somali man because it was felt he would take too much time off to pray; and this employer was not interested in the counterargument made by the adviser:

'...phoned them up for a cleaning job for somebody and said the guy's name, he's interested, he's done cleaning job before. The hours are not a problem. Straightaway he said "Is he Somalian?". I said "yeah", he said "don't want him, no chance...because they pray". I said "it doesn't matter, you know. He can pray later or whatever!", he said "no, not having Somalians, too much problems".'

(Community Adviser, Area three)

Several advisers reported that customers had approached them to talk about experiences of discrimination, but few had raised issues related to race, but there were exceptions. A Team Leader in Area one had been approached by Asian customers about employer attitudes to their dress and young Black Caribbean men who some employers found *'questionable'*. He noted that only *'one or two'* customers had felt comfortable having conversations with him about their experiences *'and felt safe to say things'*. However, informally, customers had quite often told him, and his colleagues, that *'in despair'* they had changed their names on application forms and obtained interviews. Another adviser discussed the lack of ethnic minority staff in the construction industry and gave the example of an older ethnic minority customer with ESOL needs unable to access employment, but attending ESOL classes and capable of holding down a job:

'And a lot of the time, it's the same thing that's out there, you know. We'll [phone him] back, and I know they won't phone him back, and I'll chase them up a bit [later on or tomorrow]. And they'll say the same thing, they'll say the jobs gone or what can you do?... Age isn't so much a problem, as it used to be. A lot of employers are not worried about age. I know if that old fella can get some, if he can gets to the interview [...].he doesn't have to speak a lot of English, he should be OK. And with [this] English course. He'll definitely be OK.'

(Community Adviser, Area three).

One of the advisers in Area three downplayed the role of race discrimination in the fortunes of ethnic minority customers, setting the discussion in a broader context of labour market barriers where criminal records, drink or drug problems, long-term unemployment, lack of employment experience and low levels of confidence and motivation to engage in paid work. Advisers in Areas two and four felt that some customers were experiencing discrimination because of their inability to communicate in English impacting on employer perceptions of their job readiness.

In spite of most staff recognising that discrimination was a feature of labour markets and talking about discrimination relating to gypsies, gender, postcodes as well as race, few staff had even seen any guidance on the discrimination procedure. A Team Leader in Area four was not alone in the sentiments he expressed:

'I've not seen the discrimination procedure for a long time, more than eight years, maybe ten.'

(Team Leader, Area four)

However, the vast majority of staff were aware of a requirement to report suspicions and complaints relating to discrimination, through the management chain. Advisers were not always clear on the specifics of this reporting. In Area two a manager noted that there were three Specialist Employment Advisers (SEAs) in the district to whom discrimination could be reported. They could be turned to for guidance and support in the event of discrimination. While advisers mentioned that they could report discrimination to vacancy managers, there was no adviser reference to SEAs. This may indicate that the support role of SEAs, with respect to employer discrimination, remains unclear.

Advisers could sometimes feel that their hands were tied in challenging discrimination. For example the adviser, mentioned above, who had been on the receiving end of the large retail employer's hostility to Somalis had found it difficult to address the issue:

'The thing is, there was I...I obviously told one of the people that deal with the jobs and there's nothing you can do, it's their word against ours. On paper, they've got this... equal opportunities and everything and it's just a case of [we don't][...] how can you prove anything.'

(Community Adviser, Area three)

There was some reference to how the use of call centres in Employer Direct operations might be impacting on the reporting of discrimination, one adviser feeling that unless a member of staff was able to submit many people to the same vacancy, it would be very difficult to identify underlying discrimination. Such comments imply a lack of confidence in the procedures in place to tackle discrimination.

8.2.3 Customer knowledge and awareness of the discrimination procedure

The vast majority of customers, both ethnic minority and White, had no knowledge of the Jobcentre Plus discrimination procedure and many were surprised to learn that Jobcentres had powers to address complaints of discrimination. A few were aware of the discrimination procedure, one or two mentioning that they had seen the procedure on posters at the jobcentre or in leaflets. On the whole, customers felt that it was a good idea that jobcentres had such powers, though there was some scepticism about the willingness of staff to exercise them.

8.3 Tackling employer discrimination

8.3.1 Staff strategies

Few advisers had used the discrimination procedure. Some advisers felt they had not had cause to use it, while others related this lack of use to the nature of discrimination. One or two seemed rather unsympathetic to customer concerns, implying that poor customer attitudes might generate reports of discrimination. A Team Leader attributed a lack of use of the procedure to the hidden nature of sex and race discrimination, discriminating employers hiding their tactics. The changing nature of Jobcentre Plus structures, in particular the move to vacancy centres, was also felt to be contributing to a lack of adviser use of the procedure. It was suggested that this was leading to the more immediate reporting of discrimination and a more pivotal role for Vacancy Service Managers (VSMs) in identifying and tackling discriminatory attitudes and behaviour:

'I think you'd get pressures from advisors in the Jobcentre because we're, we're judged by how many people we get into work, we're not paid any extra but we are judged by that, that's our main target. And if you're sending candidates you know are perfectly good for this, for a position and they're getting knocked back for reasons that, the reason there sounds so dodgy. Sending someone somewhere else for a job that I think probably sounds less qualified, then you would put pressure on the VSM to say what's going on there?'

(Team Leader, Area two)

In staff discussions of discrimination there was some reference to the possibility of referring clients to Citizens Advice.

Previous research has revealed examples of Jobcentre staff engaging in protective channelling, in other words avoiding putting customers forward for jobs where they anticipated discrimination might take place. While some advisers reported that this never happened, others stated or hinted that it was indeed a dynamic in day-to-day interactions with employers and customers. The community adviser in Area three who dealt with a large retailer refusing to recruit Somalis into cleaning posts, discussed in the previous section, felt that he would '*think twice*' about sending Somalis to this employer until the issue was resolved. An adviser in Area four felt that there was a lack of support for tackling institutional racism by employers and tried to place ethnic minority customers in larger organisations. Another adviser's experiences led him to say that sometimes he felt that he served employers better than his customers, in trying to meet employer perceptions of employability and job readiness:

'I've known cases where it is, where employers have been treated better than the client, so yeah, you know we get phone calls from employers "Oh you sent people through and they're all crap" you know they can't speak English, you know. But they've got qualifications like in Business Admin so sometimes I think that if they're able to get these qualifications they must have something about them to do that.'

(Adviser, Area one)

Such processes can be largely hidden from customers. It was shown in Chapter 6 that a gap sometimes exists between successful outcomes in terms of job entries on the one hand and meeting respondents' aspirations on the other. At this juncture it should be noted that customers were also asked whether they felt that jobcentre staff protectively channelled them into certain areas and, on the whole, they did not think this was the case. However, some customers were concerned that they were not being encouraged to apply for certain jobs, such as Changa whose experiences were discussed in Section 8.1.3.

There was some evidence of advisers taking informal action to minimise the opportunity for employers to discriminate. Lone parent advisers in Areas three and four described how they avoided mentioning a non-White sounding name when first talking to an employer on a customer's behalf, preferring to secure an interview first. An adviser in Area one also described how important it was to 'sell' the client before mentioning their name. Another noted that it was easier to get Black Caribbean customers job interviews because they tended to have English-sounding names.

Several of the staff interviewed in Areas three and four commented on further factors that might help to discourage employer discrimination. The two main themes mentioned were an economic rationale, staff shortages in the context of tight labour markets providing an imperative for employers to change their attitudes towards ethnic minority recruits; implying that this imperative would be absent if unemployment rose. A second theme was the importance of taking action to raise employers' awareness, a key feature of the role of an Employer Diversity Manager interviewed in Area three who sought to sell the diversity agenda to employers, and had experienced a mixed employer response:

'Diversity is quite up there in the information that the HR [Human Resources] Managers are currently aware of, and they are all fully aware of the benefits of diversification of the workforce... You'll find that some employers who are doing great things they want it shouted from the rafters, but with other employers maybe they wouldn't welcome you, or even if they did welcome you they wouldn't tell you what the real position is anyway. Unless people sort of "we can be honest with you, within diversity I think it's very difficult to change policies and processes", if people are a bit too canny with you about their current position.'

(Employer Diversity Manager, Area three)

8.3.2 Customer strategies

Just two customers in the sample, one ethnic minority and one White, reported that they had raised concerns about employer discrimination to Jobcentre staff. A Black Caribbean woman, Mandy, had been on a New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) course and had expected to have a work placement in retail. Both she and two other ethnic minority participants did not get placements and noticed that there were no Black people in employment at the placement site. She told her adviser who asked her if she wanted to pursue it but she declined to do so fearing the repercussions:

'I said "No, I better leave it" because I thought if I start mentioning about that place now, it might jeopardise other things because you know they would always deny it or whatever and I didn't really want to get into that.'

(Mandy, Caribbean female, NDLP, Area one)

The second example came from Malcolm, a White man in his 40s, who had been told that he was too old for a job. The employer told him that they were looking for someone in their early 20s and the jobcentre said that there was nothing that they could really do about this; which is true pending age discrimination legislation.

There were several examples of customers who felt that they had encountered employer discrimination and did not report it. Reasons why experiences of discrimination went unreported to the jobcentre included a lack of customer awareness that Jobcentre Plus could take action and a perception that staff would not care. For example, one African man who felt that he might have been discriminated against in applying for jobs was asked if he would consider reporting such instances of discrimination to the jobcentre; he stated:

'I know that they won't do anything [about discrimination] because all the time when they're sending you to find a job they never ask me why, they didn't ask me, "Did they refuse you?" or "why?" like they don't ask you many questions.'

(Din, Black African male, ND25plus, Area three)

Another respondent who was asked about Jobcentre Plus' powers to address employer discrimination also related his lack of faith in Jobcentre Plus procedures on racism to his experiences of staff attitudes to customers:

'Well they don't do it [tackle discrimination], believe me they don't do it, because they see that it's a waste, you know, that's a waste of time, you know what I mean, like extra work, you know. All they're interested in is signing you on or helping you do a quick job search and out, next please, you know they're not really interested in helping you or anything like that.'

(Isaac, Black Caribbean male, ND25plus, Area two)

Some customers felt that when their experiences of employer discrimination related to vacancies not registered with jobcentres it was inappropriate to mention it to staff. Celestine, a young Black Caribbean woman, had responded to an advert in a local newspaper for a job in a school. Those interested were asked to phone or visit the school or send in their CV. When Celestine went to the school she was told that there was a waiting list for the job; and felt that she was told this because she was Black. She did not see this as appropriate to mention to the jobcentre. If the job had been registered with the jobcentre, she felt her experience would at least have been noted down. This incident was not followed up both because it was a non jobcentre vacancy and she did not want the job.

There was no evidence of customers turning to other agencies when suspecting discrimination. If they told anyone about their experiences it tended to be family and friends. Customers can and do develop their own informal strategies for circumventing discrimination. Kashif, a British-born Muslim, no longer uses his Muslim sounding middle name, though this makes him feel like a second-class citizen.

8.4 Understanding experience and supporting fair practices

8.4.1 Improving the climate and scope for complaining

Customers had two suggestions for ways of improving the complaints procedure. One was to raise awareness and understanding of the procedure, for example through making it more visible in jobcentres, perhaps through leaflets. As noted in Chapter 7, customers felt that Jobcentre Plus complaints procedures and powers to deal with discrimination by employers needed to be publicised in other languages, as they were in one jobcentre visited, and not only in English.

Without greater awareness raising customers were not going to be convinced that making a complaint was worthwhile. It was felt that just to have customers complaining about their concerns about services would help to improve services by bringing to the fore what needed to change. The second suggestion centred on a need to introduce more impartiality into the system:

'I think there should be someone external that you send a report to. Sending it internally can make you think subconsciously that what if I send a report here and then they mess about my benefits or stop my cheque for even a week which can have serious consequences on any single individual. So having internal...people inside who are going to handle the report is another government mistake again, it doesn't make no sense.'

(Zamen, Pakistani male, Area one)

Jobcentre staff had few suggestions for improving the operation of the complaints procedure. One or two staff respondents noted the importance of raising awareness of the complaints procedure, including increasing customer understanding of the need to get complaints on paper in order to have them addressed. Some felt that more effort could be made to ensure that customers with ESOL needs were aware of and could access the procedure. It was also suggested that there should be a dedicated telephone line for complaints, in part helping to increase access to the procedure by customers with ESOL needs.

8.4.2 Improving the discrimination procedure

Customers did not suggest substantive changes to a procedure with which they were clearly unfamiliar. However, they generally felt that jobcentres might usefully raise awareness of the discrimination procedure. For example, through displaying posters in jobcentres, printing informational leaflets and distributing a small information pack on discrimination. It was also suggested that people be told about

jobcentre powers to take action before they went for interviews, so that they had a sense of having someone behind them to back them up if anything untoward took place.

Not all customers felt that jobcentre powers in this area were positive and their comments were indicative of a lack of faith in jobcentres. Aminah wondered whether jobcentres would really act on complaints about employer discrimination, *'or just push them under the carpet'*. Othman felt that his experiences of discrimination were not the business of jobcentre staff who he saw as likely to tell him that he had done something wrong in the interview, blaming the victim. Azi saw little point in confiding in jobcentre staff who he saw as not being able to talk to customers properly. These comments, all from ethnic minorities in Area two and also those of Malcolm, a White customer in Area three, laid bare distrust and the dynamics of tensions in a power imbalance between jobcentre staff and its customers that can curtail the individual agency that is often necessary to tackle discrimination, for example by triggering a discrimination procedure:

'I've lost all faith in the jobcentre... Well I think give the power to someone else, the power to take away your money is enough, that does the most damage anyway.'

(Malcolm, White male, Area three)

Advisers had few suggestions of how to improve the discrimination procedure, although removal of discriminating employers' vacancies from the Labour Market System was not always as swift as one adviser, from Area one, would have liked. As Jobcentre staff had either not seen the guidance on the discrimination procedure or not seen it for some time, they were unable to comment on how it might be improved. However, their comments on communication and awareness (see Section 7.1) indicate the importance of making guidance accessible and succinct.

8.5 Summary

This chapter has shown that the majority of customers, ethnic minority and White, felt that they had been treated fairly by Jobcentre Plus and its staff, but there were exceptions. There was a gulf between customer and staff satisfaction with the Jobcentre Plus complaints procedure. Some of the customer perceptions and experiences which have been described suggest a lack of faith in the system. Customers felt a need for greater efforts to raise awareness of the procedure; some customers lacking understanding of how to take forward a complaint. While the complaints procedure in part aims to help the agency make organisational improvements linked to what customers perceive to be going wrong in their day-to-day interactions with advisers and training providers, customer complaints seemed unlikely to be followed up, providing little scope for the agency to learn from customers in this way. Customers lacked a voice in expressing their frustrations and concerns.

Experience of employer race discrimination is part of the racialised labour market experiences of ethnic minority groups and customer perceptions of discrimination in the labour market spawned some graphic accounts of labour market experiences in which race discrimination was in evidence. Respondents often presented a complex picture of access to paid employment, labour market experiences being shaped by a range of factors, often reflecting multiple identities and a context of a range of barriers to paid work. While most of the advisers interviewed perceived that ethnic minority customers encountered discrimination in the labour market, there was a disturbing lack of customer awareness of the Jobcentre Plus discrimination procedure. The advice and support gap that this fuelled implicitly constrained the scope for challenging employers when encountering or suspecting discrimination. On the whole, customers felt that Jobcentre Plus' power to take action on discrimination was a good thing. However, there was some scepticism about whether staff cared enough to support customers, suggestive of a need to increase confidence in, as well as awareness of, the system. Few advisers had used the discrimination procedure or seen any guidance on it. There was some evidence of advisers taking informal action to circumvent perceived unlawful discriminatory barriers to employment.

9 Employers, Jobcentre Plus and race equality

A major theme in the Government's Green Paper, '*Towards full employment in a modern society*', is the importance of looking at the demand-side of the labour market. It stresses the importance of moving the New Deal and the workforce development system from being supply-driven to demand-led. The starting point is the need to engage employers in the design of training and work experience. It is argued that their hiring requirements should be used to define programme content and the basic standards of job readiness clients need (Select Committee on Work and Pensions, 2004). In Chapter 6, it was seen that much of the customer dissatisfaction with New Deal related to a lack of employment outcomes for customers.

The development of employer initiatives to tackle racial inequality, and dissemination of good practice in this area, is clearly an area where more work is required. Dissatisfied with progress to date, the Black Training and Enterprise Group (BTEG) has argued that employer discrimination must be more adequately addressed by policy, with the development and implementation of strategies that can contribute to changing employer behaviour (BTEG, 2003). Employers play a key role in structuring access to local labour market opportunities. Findings from the evaluation of Ethnic Minority Outreach (Barnes *et al.*, 2005) suggest a number of areas in which action is required. People from ethnic minority groups perceive racial prejudice by employers to be widespread. Projects focusing on employers report difficulty in persuading employers to engage with the services offered, such as support on diversity policy and practice (for reasons ranging from an overt hostility to equal opportunities (EOs) issues to a perception that they are model employers already following accepted best practice, and have no room for improvement). Ethnic minority businesses are also under-represented as users of Jobcentre Plus services.

This chapter reports on the third stage of this research project, which involved interviews with employers. As outlined in Chapter 3, the employers were mostly accessed through the contacts of Jobcentre Plus staff, and are thus biased towards employers who use Jobcentre Plus services; however they are diverse in terms of size

of workforce and sector. Table 3.4 in Chapter 3 provides details of the employers interviewed. The varied backgrounds of respondents, from owner-managers to Human Resource specialists, shaped which topics they felt able to cover in the interviews. Nevertheless, the chapter's coverage is wide-ranging, exploring employer understandings of diversity and EOs, EOs and diversity policies and practices, diversity in the workforce, recruitment methods, difficulties in recruiting ethnic minority groups, support drawn on in the development of diversity policies and finally use of Jobcentre Plus services and perceptions of strengths and weaknesses in that service provision. Given the lack of depth of the case studies, each being based on a single employer, the policy implications that can be drawn are somewhat limited. There is a need for further research in this area, involving more in-depth case studies exploring both employment practice, context and stakeholder experience. This need is reinforced not least by the range of Jobcentre Plus customer and staff examples of employer discrimination presented in the previous chapter.

9.1 Employer diversity and EO policies

9.1.1 The extent of EO statements and monitoring

Previous research has shown that larger private sector firms, public sector workplaces, and workplaces with HR or personnel specialists tend to have stronger EOs policies (Hoque and Noon, 2004). These findings were replicated in this research. All larger employers interviewed had a written EOs policy, though respondents were not always clear of the specifics. For example, the respondent from SalesCo, the sales arm of a large private utility in Area three believed there to be an EOs policy in place, noting *'a company this size, they've got to'*. The small employers however tended not to have a formal EOs statement or policy in place and provided a variety of reasons for their informal approaches. These included having little need for a formal policy because of the small workforce size, feeling that their practices were *'fair'* and having insufficient time to engage in Human Resource policy development work. An exception was TrainingCo, a small training provider in Area two.

Ethnic monitoring data was collected in the larger organisations, with small employers suggesting that monitoring data was unnecessary as they could keep a personal eye on who was employed. As our respondents in larger organisations were not always Human Resource Managers, they tended to be unaware of what the monitoring data was used for. The picture was somewhat clearer however for the public sector employers, where monitoring was often a feature of Race Equality Schemes. AgencyCo, the recruitment agency of a local authority in Area three and BrokerCo, its counterpart in Area two were aware that monitoring data was compiled into reports. At AgencyCo, while monitoring was taking place for new recruits and existing staff, self-completion forms from the latter were rarely returned. In PoliceCo, Area three, it was clear that the diversity agenda was driven by the centre of the organisation and applied almost wholly to police officers rather than to administrative and other police staff. The Human Resources respondent for police staff recruitment stated that because the process was not driven centrally, as

was the case with police officers, but organised by local divisions, they had less control over the process. For example, while the ethnic monitoring requirements cover police staff as well as officers, they have to rely on local divisions to collect the information and send it in, so the data for this side of the police service is less adequate than for officers. At UniCo, the university in Area four, monitoring had recently commenced, in 2004, so it was too early to comment.

9.1.2 Staff diversity

Employers were asked whether they had many ethnic minorities in the workforce and the proportion that they formed. While several were vague on the specifics of ethnic minority presence as well as monitoring practice, the organisations in Area two and low wage employers in Areas two and three, such as CleanCo and ShopCo, reported the highest rates of ethnic minority employment in their workforces. Public sector employers indicated that ethnic minority presence in their workforces was less than their representation in the community.

Several, larger, employers voiced a strong commitment to building a diverse workforce, couched in terms of their workforces reflecting community composition or the customer base of the company. These included StoreCo and PoliceCo in Area three, CommuCo and BrokerCo in Area two and UniCo in Area four. Factors driving commitment to this agenda included personal background of respondent, legislative changes and organisational policy and pressure. For example the commitment of StoreCo, which felt that it still had much to do, was driven by the company's head office and also partly by the respondent's background. This respondent also described how diversity meant good business sense and indeed was vital in a competitive market place. The respondent noted that a large number of new retail jobs were coming on stream in Area three because of the redevelopment of a shopping centre and therefore thought that they needed to attract all sectors of the community into the workforce in order to compete. It was clear that the diversity agenda on the police officer side at PoliceCo had been driven centrally by the reforms carried out in the wake of the MacPherson report. Smaller employers who were from an ethnic minority background themselves also noted that this positively influenced their orientation to employing people from ethnic minority groups, often because recruitment occurred at least partly through the personal contacts of the employers.

Employer aims of having a workforce that reflected the local community usually went hand in hand with an emphasis on the need to recruit on the basis of merit, for example in CommuCo and BrokerCo. In BrokerCo there was a mixed workforce, but one that did not reflect community composition, and the view that jobs should be awarded on the basis of merit was somewhat qualified questioning the construction of job entry points and related inflexibility of definitions of job readiness; as will be discussed further in Section 9.2.2. Several, again larger, employers were proactively trying to address identified shortcomings in the ethnic composition of their workforces. Some however were rather pessimistic about prospects. For example, the respondents at AgencyCo noted previous initiatives to improve ethnic minority

representation in the social care area of the Council's work, which included, for example, supported placements, but they felt that overall little had been achieved. They seemed concerned but almost resigned to this situation.

Most respondents did not display any hostility to the employment of ethnic minority groups, the exceptions being interviewees at CleanCo, SafeCo and StoreCo, whose views are explored in the next section. Several employers also illustrated their respect for the cultural needs of their staff. TrainingCo, a Black and Minority Ethnic employer, and StoreCo, provided staff with time and facilities to offer prayers, while RetailCo gave staff time off for Eid, though there were organisational constraints on providing leave for all staff who wanted it.

9.2 Employer recruitment and support for employers on diversity policies

9.2.1 General approaches to recruitment

Most employers sampled used a variety of recruitment methods, of which advertising in jobcentres was one such method. A few, larger, employers had taken extensive measures to ensure diversity awareness in their recruitment. For example, PoliceCo had used an outside consultancy to conduct an equality audit of their recruitment and selection practices and a number of changes had been put into place on the basis of this. These included changes in the wording on the application form, as well as ethnic monitoring of all applications, reasons for success or failure, promotions and retention. The organisation had also moved to competency-based measures of assessment and put into place some positive action measures such as coaching for the selection process. In terms of recruitment they had targeted ethnic minority groups, utilising the links of local Race Equality Councils to distribute recruitment leaflets. They had also tried unorthodox means of recruitment such as direct text messages and advertising posters on public transport.

Several smaller employers relied heavily on informal methods and networks in their recruitment activity, albeit often advertising through Jobcentre Plus as well. The small security and cleaning employers, SafeCo and CleanCo were the main examples of this. The two SafeCo respondents in Area three expressed a strong commitment to employing people from the local community, which was a neighbourhood with a high concentration of ethnic minorities. Both the respondents were from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds, one had a Greek heritage and the other was White but grew up in an African country. The latter had worked in security in the neighbourhood over a long period and so had extensive informal contacts that he drew on for recruitment. The respondents described their main criteria for recruitment to the company as reliability rather than any specific skills or experience, and to this end informal word-of-mouth recruiting was seen as the best approach. The posts offered by the company required few English language skills and were therefore seen as having fewer entrance requirements for ethnic minorities than many other jobs.

9.2.2 Difficulties in recruiting from ethnic minority groups

It was those employers who perceived the low ethnic minority presence in the workforce to be an issue that tended to outline barriers to the recruitment of ethnic minorities. Of these, only SalesCo reported that ethnic minorities were not applying at all for posts in the company. Several private sector employers, both large and small, voiced concerns about the attitudes and work ethic of certain ethnic minority groups. The respondents at CleanCo, for example, who employed a range of ethnic minority groups, including Somalis, Nigerians and Yemenis, elaborated a number of stereotypes about the characteristics of workers from different African nationalities. A large private sector respondent, StoreCo, felt that the attitude and '*poor work ethic*' of some ethnic minorities, principally young males, was a barrier to employing them, giving the example of Somali men who think it is acceptable to spit on the shop floor. This respondent also went on to note a problem with the work attitude of young men generally, and stated '*that has nothing to do with the colour of their skin or their ethnic background, it's something to do with being 17 I guess!*' Similarly respondents at SafeCo, the small security firm, maintained that they employed people that would be unlikely to be taken on elsewhere because they had a poor attitude to work as well as poor language skills. FoodCo, the small restaurant in Area four found it difficult to identify barriers to the employment of ethnic minority groups, though seemed to imply that they were often over-qualified.

AgencyCo, a public sector employer, felt that the lack of ethnic minority representation across the workforce was due to local government, and the public sector generally, not having a positive image as an employer among younger people, and thus they have an '*ageing White workforce*'. In this regard, they are starting an initiative shortly to try and recruit more school leavers into low grades of the organisation. No differences were perceived in the job readiness of ethnic minorities and Whites, but, similarly to the comments from StoreCo above, there was a suggestion of problems of reliability with young males. This was illustrated with the example of three Somali men who had been appointed recently but had subsequently failed to turn up for work. It was emphasised by the respondents however that this applied equally to young White men, and was possibly a function of a lack of work experience and work ethic in jobless families.

BrokerCo, another public sector employer, suggested that more needed to be done to promote and nurture ethnic minorities within the organisation. The respondent indicated a willingness to engage with definitions of job readiness, and to take positive action to ensure that the workforce reflected the composition of the local community. She advocated the development of more training entry points while still holding on to the principal of advancement into posts on merit, avoiding compromising the requirements, competencies and standards signalled in job and person specifications:

'...we need more entry points, we need more like a training level, so that we can actually nurture people through the process so that they can then apply for jobs. I don't think we dilute what we require.'

(BrokerCo, job brokering agency of a local authority, Area two)

It was anticipated, however, that this would not be an easy path to take because of organisational demands and pressures:

'...I think you need a, you do need a massive sign up for managers and its very difficult when so much pressure's put on you to actually deliver your service to have that nurturing side of you as well! And I think that's in most business now, public sector are already about league tables or about competing with other public sectors aren't they? So the more that goes on at that level the harder it will be to get people into that entry points.'

(BrokerCo, job brokering agency of a local authority, Area two)

While PoliceCo respondents did not know the reasons for the lower presence of ethnic minority groups on the staff side compared to the officer side of the service, there was said to be a difficulty in recruiting to the lower grades because of low wages vis-à-vis other administrative jobs available locally.

9.2.3 Support for employers on diversity policies

Unsurprisingly, larger employers tended to have Human Resource Departments providing advice and support on diversity issues. The recruitment officer at RetailCo, for example, had access to a personnel help-line at head office. The most difficult issue she encountered was dealing with work permits and stamps in passports and she used a Home Office Immigration Line to access support for this work. One large private sector employer, StoreCo, had worked closely with a Jobcentre Plus Local Account Manager to develop diversity in their recruitment. This involved positive action measures, such as talking to community leaders about the company and having open days at the store for lone parents.

The small private sector employers tended not to report gaps in their support on diversity issues, but focused more on a lack of support relating to other perceived information needs, such as wage rates and new regulations. The latter were of particular concern to SafeCo, who reported that new regulations for the security industry soon to be implemented would have an adverse impact on their company because they employ a lot of ethnic minorities who do not have English as a first language and might find it difficult to meet the new regulations (requiring all security personnel to undertake a written assessment). This company would appreciate more assistance from the Jobcentre in preparing for the new regulations.

9.3 Use of Jobcentre Plus services

9.3.1 Range of Jobcentre Plus services used

A range of Jobcentre Plus services were being used by most employers. Most sought to fill particular types of vacancies via recruitment from Jobcentre Plus, often for jobs typically viewed as entry level (see Table 9.1). For higher level jobs, organisations either made internal promotions or advertised in more specialist publications. Several employers were using Employer Direct, including TrainingCo, ShopCo, SalesCo and StoreCo. The StoreCo respondent, for example, was using Employer Direct to place advertisements in the Jobcentre, while also working closely with an Account Manager who provided her with applicants for particular jobs and who also worked with her to develop diversity in recruitment. Three employers, TrainingCo and ShopCo in Area two, and CleanCo, in Area three, also had New Deal trainees in the workplace. There was also some employer involvement in Jobcentre Plus organised jobs fairs and other joint initiatives. AgencyCo sought to increase diversity in their recruitment through utilising Enterprise Centres, which were centres that had been established through a joint initiative between Jobcentre Plus and the local authority, and were based in 'disadvantaged areas', including those where many ethnic minorities lived.

Table 9.1 Types of jobs advertised with Jobcentre Plus

Employer	Area	Types of jobs advertised with Jobcentre Plus
BrokerCo	two	Administrative
CommuCo	two	Processing and delivery staff
RetailCo	two	Sales assistants, operations assistants
TrainingCo	two	Reception, administrative assistants
ShopCo	two	Sales assistants
StoreCo	three	Customer service, sales, catering, administration, warehouse work
CleanCo	three	Cleaning operatives
SafeCo	three	Security guards
SalesCo	three	Sales staff
AgencyCo	three	Administrative
PoliceCo	three	Administrative

One company, FoodCo, indicated that they did not use the jobcentre at all to advertise vacancies, since they had historically focused on more informal recruitment methods which they thought worked well, having a steady supply of students to fill posts.

9.4 Innovations in recruitment activity and jobcentre and employer relationships

A range of innovative developments was evident across the four case study areas. In Areas two and three, greater efforts to work with employers on the part of Jobcentre Plus staff were in evidence, as gauged by the comments of both employers and Jobcentre Plus staff. The Jobcentre Plus Employer Liaison Team in Area two was working closely with employers on a one-to-one basis, acting as a 'buffer' between the employer and other jobcentre staff. The overall thrust of the work of this team was to make Jobcentre Plus' work with employers more outward looking, encouraging greater use of Jobcentre Plus to advertise vacancies, and inputting into nationwide campaigns. Three employer respondents in Area two were part of this process and had much to say about the strengths as well as the weaknesses of these evolving relationships. BrokerCo and AgencyCo, in Areas two and three respectively, had a high emphasis on social inclusion in their work. The former was part of the Development and Renewal Directorate of the local authority, providing a job brokering service for residents of Area two, that described itself as imitating a commercial agency. It was in a Partnership Accord with Jobcentre Plus which involved receiving referrals for public sector vacancies with a focus on entry level posts. An aim was to move benefit claimants into council positions. Similarly, Area three's AgencyCo was recruiting for temporary posts at the local authority and were established as part of a social inclusion agenda in order to diversify the Council's workforce. They were also collaborating with Jobcentre Plus to this end.

In Area four, both UtilityCo and Jobcentre Plus staff enthused about progress made under the auspices of 'Ambition:Energy'. Jobcentre Plus has jointly designed the Ambition:Energy programme with major employers, including UtilityCo. Under the programme people are trained for a variety of jobs that lead to appointment into permanent posts. UtilityCo approached the district office in Area four to suggest running a course for lone parents, as it had done elsewhere in the country. A Senior Jobcentre Plus Manager chaired a presentation on Ambition:Energy with external partners, including an ethnic minority provider. This event led to the making of over 60 referrals for a course with 12 places, leading to a guaranteed 'skilled' job and potential for further progression and earnings growth. Eight lone parents and three ethnic minority customers completed the course and secured permanent employment. Jobcentre Plus staff emphasised the contribution that partnership working made to the success of this initiative:

'If it had been 12 lone parents made up of some males, we'd have been delighted. But to broaden it, they brought in ethnic minority customers. We ran a presentation in this room to external partners, a lot of these things we do in partnership, we can't do it all ourselves, the advisers can't do it all. So between [various partners and other initiatives in Area four], we made about 65 referrals for a course of 12 people and then an assessment day and manual dexterity tests. We ended up with 12 on the course, it's a 27-week course, and a guaranteed job at £16,000 with potential earnings mega.'

(Senior Jobcentre Plus Manager, Area four)

9.5 Employer perceptions of Jobcentre Plus service provision

9.5.1 What was working well

As discussed in the previous section, several employers were developing closer working relationships with Jobcentre Plus. In terms of day-to-day service use, employers advertising vacancies through Jobcentre Plus particularly appreciated the time and other resource-saving benefits of having adviser support for 'sifting' applicants prior to their contact with the employer. Other employers adopted a much more 'hands-on' role in sifting applicants within jobcentres themselves. For example, the SalesCo respondent spent four out of five days in jobcentres in Area three directly recruiting Jobcentre Plus customers. Potential applicants had an initial sifting interview in the Jobcentre and filled out an application form and were then invited for a second interview at the company. The employer stated that it had been necessary to develop such a procedure because of 'a very tight' labour market with few jobseekers wanting to enter direct sales. While there were some criticisms of Employer Direct, as outlined below, CleanCo felt that this service worked very well, with adverts being displayed much more quickly than they were previously. The respondent enthused:

'They seem to have got that bit together...that seems to work quite well...I've actually placed adverts at 12 o'clock and had somebody ring up at one.'

(CleanCo, small cleaning company, Area three)

9.5.2 Employer concerns about service provision

Number of applicants

Small employers were particularly concerned about the high number of applicants supplied to them by Jobcentre Plus, sometimes linking these difficulties to the operation of the Employer Direct service. A major problem encountered by ShopCo, for example, was Jobcentre Plus sending applicants, in the respondent's words, '*left, right and centre*', without understanding his requirements or those of his applicants. Having too many people to interview was, he felt, a waste of his time. His suggestion was that Jobcentre Plus staff should be more selective, as he would prefer to interview a smaller number of applicants of better quality rather than a large number. When he started using Employer Direct, he stated that people were telephoning from '*all over the place*', including from distant locations that were not feasible for the part-time work on offer. He felt that this process filled his Employer Direct quota (of 20 applicants) quickly, but does not provide the right kind of applicants, and he consequently felt that Jobcentre Plus did not have employers' or applicants' interests at heart:

'I think it is more like a numbers game for them, a herd of sheep moving them on.'

(ShopCo, small shop/café, Area two)

SalesCo also found using Employer Direct problematic, as they used it to place advertisements but rarely got a response. This employer also complained that Jobcentre Plus advisers rarely put people forward for his jobs (direct sales positions), suggesting that some employers are more favoured by Jobcentre Plus:

'They've got employers who are deemed to be nice jobs if you like, you know, cosy retail jobs, that type of stuff, and you're talking large, large scale.'

(SalesCo, sales arm of large utility, Area three)

Suitability of applicants

Notions of job readiness and employability are contested in theory and practice and many of the employers' comments reflected a dissatisfaction with the quality of job applicants. Employers had a clear idea of what they were looking for in applicants; often they did not require formal qualifications, stressing rather that attitudes and aptitude were more important. For example, RetailCo reported that no formal qualifications were required for sales and operations assistants. Instead, there was a preference for people with some retail and customer service background, and they placed great emphasis on the need for enthusiasm, flexibility and an ability to prioritise. A number of respondents including BrokerCo and SalesCo felt that being able to achieve a sustainable employment outcome was also very important in the recruitment process.

Many employers described in detail the problems they had encountered in trying to secure suitable applicants. The following examples illustrate the range of perceptions of the problem at hand. Some, like ShopCo and CommuCo, described a general lack of sensitivity by job applicants to employer requirements, while RetailCo noted the inappropriateness of candidates with English for Speakers of Other Languages needs being sent for sales assistant posts. The respondent from RetailCo, a recruitment officer, felt that Jobcentre Plus was very helpful in sifting applicants, screening and doing telephone interviews, but that applicants who did not speak sufficient English still came through. CleanCo also felt that while the Employer Direct service was efficient, there was nonetheless insufficient vetting of applicants:

'Well, I mean you can ask for somebody over the age of 35 with a driving licence or previous experience or whatever, when they arrive they've got no driving licence, you know they've never done it before. I think if anybody that walks in and takes a slip off this machine in the corner, takes a slip off the machine and says, "I think I will be interested in this", "OK, I'll just make you an appointment". I don't think anybody actually looks at what they've done and sees whether it matches. They could do, but I'm not very sure that, you know the matching process isn't very good. The last advert I placed I think I had like 60 applicants, and I interviewed for two days and there wasn't anybody in the two days, and it was just a walk-in that actually got the job on the third day, because of, as I said, the lack of vetting on their behalf I think.'

(CleanCo, Area three)

The CleanCo respondent also thought that many candidates were unsuitable because they were not dressed properly, and felt that many were simply applying because Jobcentre Plus requires them to apply for a certain number of jobs:

'They didn't really want the job, no, they just...because they have to go back and say they've been for an interview, you know, and then their dole would carry on...to my mind there should be somebody there, I know they have a lot of people come through their doors, that actually sits and says, and matches them up, and rings Joe Bloggs up and says, "Get your bum out of bed, there's a job here that's totally suitable for you", you know, get along and sort it out'

(CleanCo, Area three)

It is interesting to note that many customers also made very similar criticisms of Jobcentre Plus services, where they felt that they were encouraged to apply for 'any job' rather than one that they really wanted, as discussed in Chapter 6.

Discussing the transition to Employer Direct, the respondent from ShopCo felt that this had resulted in a decline in the quality of the service because more filtering could be achieved through direct contact with Jobcentre Plus staff. This respondent also described how the outcome for him was even better if he approached particular 'good advisers'. He also noted, however, that recruitment was also 'a bit of a luck thing', with employers being dependent on the applicants available at the time that they were recruiting.

BrokerCo also wondered whether advisers were spending too little time with potential job applicants to undertake the process of sifting. Her comments are worth quoting at some length, particularly in the light of staff perceptions of time constraints on their day-to-day activities:

'...in our partnership Jobcentre Plus were meant to be seconding a member of staff and making sure that we get a referral, suitable referral for those opportunities, and that's just, that really just hasn't happened...I mean I have heard that advisers only have like seven minutes to spend with people and I mean that's, it's impossible. I mean we do a 15 minute assessment interview, just to book somebody into an appointment and then we carry out an 80 minute sort of interview going through a registration form, finding out you know what a person's aspirations are and then also testing their ability. Now our job is obviously informing our clients of what they can – giving sort of a realistic view of, with their skill base what they're able to obtain. And that obviously needs to go [on] in Jobcentre Plus as well.'

(BrokerCo, job brokering agency in a local authority, Area two)

To date the biggest beneficiaries of the Partnership Accord between Jobcentre Plus and BrokerCo had been White working class or other White groups that had been in employment before, in an area where the majority of residents were Asian. One of the reasons for the lack of progress, it was felt, was that a member of Jobcentre Plus staff had not been seconded to work on referrals. This interviewee emphasised that the job brokering agency referred people not ready for employment to an

appropriate agency for support, rather than pushing them into jobs with little prospect of a sustainable outcome.

Some comments from employers also revealed experiences and perceptions of inconsistency in standards across Jobcentre Plus offices. CommuCo, the large communications employer working with jobcentres across Britain, found that Jobcentre Plus services varied dramatically around the country. Some jobcentres he felt were *'brilliant'* in making sure applications were filled correctly, with Vacancy Service Managers sifting forms and rejecting unsuitable people; while other offices were *'terrible'*. For this respondent there had been communications issues on a local level, and he felt a need for assurances that communications to Jobcentre Plus were being communicated to all jobcentres.

Some employers have tried to work with jobcentre staff to address their concerns. For example the large retailer in Area two, RetailCo, had relied on the jobcentre for pre-screening of applicants and to interview selected applicants at the jobcentre. However, since this was not yielding the right calibre of staff, the employer had developed store-based activities for screening potential applicants.

Quality of advisers

Chapter 6 revealed a range of customer concerns about their relationships with advisers. There was also some concern expressed by employers about the quality of Jobcentre Plus advisers which was felt to be having a negative impact on service quality. The ShopCo respondent, for example, found that advisers had been unwilling to help when he had had teething problems with New Deal trainees. He would like advisers to form the role of an intermediary but finds them unsympathetic to his concerns. This had led this employer to feel that Jobcentre Plus were interested in *'statistics and not people'*.

BrokerCo was also highly critical of adviser quality, questioning whether they could adequately deal with the challenges of identifying client skills, making appropriate referrals and maximising opportunities to generate sustainable job outcomes for the customers:

'...what needs to happen is people need to be able to identify their [clients'] skills and do appropriate referrals. Now my personal opinion of all that and actually from [the local authority's] point of view is that advisers are not experienced enough to actually cope with that responsibility. If they're meant to be sort of matching people to jobs, and it might be because they've taken in, only really young [advisers] are recruited that don't understand about the world of work themselves. In [Area two] it does seem to be a problem where people are referred for jobs that they don't, in terms of not meeting the criteria, and then obviously the sustainability of the result of that if somebody does actually get a job at the end of the day, isn't very good.'

(BrokerCo, job brokering agency of a local authority, Area two)

Again there was a theme of inconsistency across Jobcentre Plus offices. The practice of SalesCo was to notify a jobcentre two days in advance if he was going to be there, so advisers could tell customers, or preferably make appointments for them. However he found that there were huge variations in the response of staff across different jobcentres in the district, some of whom he felt were not very employer friendly:

'...we get different attitudes from different jobcentres; some have the attitude that, "We're doing a favour to people", and others are actually there to help people into work; one or two of them, after a while, you stop going in them, you're led to think you're a hindrance to them, not anything else.'

(SalesCo, direct sales arm of a large utility, Area three)

SalesCo also complained about the inflexibility of some Jobcentre Plus managers, who were unwilling to have non-Jobcentre Plus branded material around the jobcentre, preventing him from displaying information about his organisation.

9.6 Summary

The employer respondents exhibited varying degrees of ethnic minority representation in their workforces and various degrees of concern about this issue. Confirming previous research, the larger organisations were more likely to have formal EOs policies and ethnic monitoring processes. Nonetheless, this did not mean that the larger employers were those with the best record on ethnic minority representation. A number of small employers located in areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities, and often of an ethnic minority background themselves, sometimes had higher proportions of ethnic minorities in their workforce, although these jobs were often low-wage with few opportunities for advancement. Employer concern for diversity and EOs issues also varied and was not characteristic of only the larger organisations. Indeed some larger organisations were unconcerned about an almost exclusively White workforce, while others valued diversity because of a concern for social inclusion (public sector employers) or for business reasons in a competitive labour market.

A number of examples of innovative ways of working between Jobcentre Plus and employers emerged from this research, such as intensive support by Account Managers for recruitment activity and diversity work, networking between community outreach advisers and local employers and participation in the Ambition programme. While employers clearly saw benefits in working with Jobcentre Plus to fill their vacancies, particularly in the use of advisers to 'sift' potential applicants and the use of Jobcentre Plus facilities for the screening of applicants, employers also voiced a range of concerns. These centred on the large numbers of applicants received for any vacancy advertised, the lack of suitable applicants and the quality of adviser 'sifting'. The employer case studies lacked depth, with their focus on one respondent per case, and there is scope for further research in this area.

10 Conclusions and policy recommendations

A range of race equality initiatives have been introduced in Jobcentre Plus in recent years and are still bedding down across the organisation (see Chapter 3). This is typified by the sampled districts being at the early stages of the Race Equality Scheme (RES) Challenge and by thin awareness of the RES across front-line staff. The agency's work in this area is still in its infancy.

Customers readily shared their positive experiences of Jobcentre Plus and New Deal, appreciating innovations such as the computerised job points and the Jobseeker Direct service. Many New Deal participants valued assistance such as constructing a CV, filling out application forms and coaching in interview techniques. Some had found a place on a course that allowed them to pursue their aspirations in a tangible way; providing them with work-relevant experience or recognised qualifications. This was sometimes, but not always, a contributory factor in the experiences of those identified as 'improvers' and 'success stories' in Chapter 4. However, customers often relayed a number of reasons for dissatisfaction and feelings of alienation, signalling that there exists a substantial constituency of customers who are disengaged from the Jobcentre Plus system in spite of surface involvement.

Ethnic group in itself does not emerge as a key factor differentiating customers' experiences of Jobcentre Plus services, rather negative experiences and dissatisfaction cut across ethnic groups, as indeed do positive experiences. Customers were more positive about New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) than the other programmes, with ethnic minority customers appearing rather less satisfied than their White lone parent counterparts. Age does appear to have some influence, and the research identified a number of weaknesses in meeting the needs of customers participating in New Deal for Young People (NDYP) and New Deal 25plus (ND25plus). While there was no evidence of systematic ethnic differences in satisfaction within New Deal 25plus, differences in satisfaction did seem to relate to aspirations and expectations, which were in turn shaped by qualifications and previous labour market experiences. This would suggest an indirect relationship of satisfaction to ethnicity; in that

people's past work experiences and educational experience are shaped through ethnicity. Overall, women did appear more satisfied with available provision and this seemed related both to attitudes to work and aspirations.

Evidence of inconsistency of standards of service provision across districts and offices in the Jobcentre Plus system has been a recurring theme in this report, reinforcing the findings of earlier research (Barnes *et al.*, 2005). This inconsistency was implicit in the mixed experiences reported by customers as general users of Jobcentre Plus job search support services (see Chapter 5). As shown in Chapter 6, those who have a more positive experience on the New Deal programme are those whose aspirations and expectations are in accord with what is available on the programme. The type of provision available varies for each of the New Deal programmes, and is also variable within and across districts. While aspirations and expectations are also influenced by previous labour market experiences – which in turn are shaped by a multitude of factors such as age, gender, migration trajectories, and family work histories – the extent of customer dissatisfaction with New Deal training provision is disturbing, highlighting as it does the variability in the availability and quality of provision both within and across districts. Employer comments on service standards in different jobcentres around the country reinforce this impression of the unevenness of good practice across Jobcentre Plus and its providers.

Alongside inconsistency of Jobcentre Plus standards, the rigidity of provision has also been a recurring theme in this report, sometimes linked with resource issues. Day-to-day experiences of advisers working on the ground, the 'front-line', in local communities, generated some questioning of the flexibility of New Deal provision in meeting the needs of all ethnic groups, particularly with respect to older Bangladeshi women and other clients with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) needs. Targets with a stronger relation to client base were presented as a fundamental issue in providing broad structural support for this flexibility. Some advisers were particularly reflexive in thinking such issues through, sometimes expressing frustration at a perceived lack of awareness on the part of policy makers of how the dynamics of service provision operated on the ground, and revealing the impact on morale.

Resource issues in the Jobcentre Plus system are shaping customer experiences in a number of ways. In addition to feelings of demoralisation arising from the amount of time spent queuing, lack of time spent receiving personalised support from staff appears to fuel customers' sense of alienation. This can only aggravate the confrontational nature of staff-customer interactions reported on in Chapter 5. Both customer references to busy advisers, employer perceptions of advisers being more interested in numbers than people and staff self-reports of time pressures constraining their day-to-day activities, suggest heavy adviser caseloads. These themes also reiterate the salience of resource constraints and perhaps imply that addressing this area is a necessary condition for improving customer satisfaction. As noted in Chapter 6, this was a particular concern for the NDLP programme where it seemed that those furthest from the labour market would be least likely to get help.

While Jobcentre Plus staff sometimes had a pressurised working environment, impacting on the performance of their day-to-day activities, the quality of advisers was also a theme. In Chapter 9, it was seen that some employers questioned whether all advisers were well equipped for their role. For customers, staff quality issues could involve personality clashes and, for ethnic minority customers, racialised encounters. While only a small number of customers reported relationships with advisers characterised by a considerable amount of conflict, it is perhaps counterproductive to deny such customers the opportunity to change advisers, as was the practice in some areas. Customer-adviser relationships are pivotal in facilitating labour market transitions and weak relationships may be compromising the quality of customer job outcomes, for both White and ethnic minority customers.

As noted in Chapter 7, understanding cultural differences, and making provision for ESOL needs, is an important part of providing an appropriate service to people from ethnic minority groups. On the whole, both advisors and customers conveyed culturally sensitive interactions between Jobcentre Plus staff and ethnic minority customers. Diversity in the staff profile of Jobcentre Plus offices is clearly, for the most part, making a positive contribution to meeting the needs of some ethnic minority customers, particularly those with ESOL needs. In the development of ways of working with ethnic minority groups, Ethnic Minority Outreach is making a discernible contribution to addressing cultural barriers between staff and customers. Ethnic tailoring of staff in jobcentres can be taken too far and, as shown in Chapter 7, both staff and customers feel that there can be advantages to working across ethnic boundaries. There are language support gaps, an issue given great prominence in the *Select Committee on Work and Pensions Fourth Report* (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2005). The present findings reinforce the committee's identification of language barriers and information dissemination as a substantial barrier to accessing Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) services and an area where improvements need to be made. Many advisers appear to be striving to do their best to provide support for customers with ESOL needs, sometimes under difficult conditions (Chapter 7). Again consistency of practice emerges as a theme, for example with leaflets in a variety of languages being available in some offices and not others. Similarly, diversity toolkits were seen as useful instruments where they had bedded down, but in some areas they appeared absent. This is a rather unsatisfactory state of affairs as having dedicated outreach workers has the potential to lead to staff associating ownership of diversity issues with a relatively small team of people.

The Learning and Development Strategy in the RES needs to engage with what appears to be a gulf between equal opportunities and awareness training and the day-to-day work and experiences of advisers. For example, it was unclear from this research whether diversity courses provided staff with an opportunity to explore experiences of dealing with and tackling discrimination, in both its more overt and hidden and suspected guises. It is also unclear whether training addresses some of the issues that arise in working with interpreters, thus helping advisers to make the best of existing language support.

A particularly positive theme emerging from this research is that the majority of customers, ethnic minority and White, felt that they had been treated fairly by Jobcentre Plus and its staff, often in spite of indicating dissatisfaction with various aspects of service provision. However, the lack of awareness, understanding and use of the customer complaints procedures suggests that there is a customer voice gap that needs to be addressed in the spirit of the Customer Charter aim of learning from customer experiences to improve services; a finding consistent with Dowson and colleagues (2004). The pervasiveness of customer dissatisfaction heightens the importance of this issue as does a Jobcentre Plus in-house survey in which ethnic minority customers expressed views on the complaints process that were consistent with other customers. In this National Customer Satisfaction Survey (2004) it was shown that 13 per cent of all respondents had felt like complaining about its service during the previous six months. However, only 30 per cent of these had actually submitted or intended to submit a formal complaint. When asked why they didn't pursue their complaint, respondents said '*they couldn't be bothered*' and felt there was '*no point*'. They felt that their jobcentre could not or would not do anything about their problem, and they worried about the repercussions.

In tracing how racialised encounters with employers are a significant feature of ethnic minority experiences in the labour market, this research contributes to the voluminous evidence of race discrimination in the UK labour market. Lack of customer awareness of the discrimination procedure, and related advice and support gaps within Jobcentre Plus for customers experiencing discrimination, suggests that opportunities to tackle unlawful employer discrimination are being missed (see Chapter 8). A lack of customer faith in the willingness of Jobcentre Plus to address issues of race equality is not ubiquitous but has a resonating presence; all of which raises the issue of what more can be done to ensure fairness in both the Jobcentre Plus system and wider labour market. Some customers felt that when their experiences of employer discrimination related to vacancies not registered with jobcentres it was inappropriate to tell jobcentre staff about it and they shared their experiences with family and friends alone (Chapter 8).

Positive examples of Jobcentre Plus proactively working with employers to meet the needs of job applicants, and to address diversity issues, emerged in the research. However, several employers were concerned about the work ethic of ethnic minority groups, presented stereotypical views of some groups and used informal recruitment networks. These tended to be the employers who were not in receipt of any diversity support, perhaps suggesting further scope for pro-active work. While customers complained that they were not being put forward for suitable jobs, New Deal often channelling both ethnic minority, and White, customers into low wage work, many employers were exasperated with the quality of applicants presented to them by Jobcentre Plus. Some of those customers on the 'stalled' and 'older job changers' trajectories are prominent in this mismatch. There were also numerous examples of customers with overseas qualifications and work experience who felt that they were not supported in utilising this experience and fulfilling their aspirations but instead were pushed into low-paid work.

10.1 Recommendations for practice, procedures and policy

A number of recommendations arise, several of which reflect recent developments in Jobcentre practice at the time of writing:

- The need to cultivate consistency in service provision across the Jobcentre system, fully implementing 'good practices' and maximising customer access. This includes access to leaflets in a variety of languages, interpreting capacity, and perhaps using briefing sessions in offices to remind, or inform, staff of the 'little' things that can make a difference to customer experiences. Jobcentre Plus recognises consistency in good practice across its national network of offices as a strategic goal. In Spring 2005 the agency held a strategic event followed by a series of half-day workshops to promote ethnic minority models of good practice. It has also developed a good practice intranet site. There remains a need for this work to become a routine activity within Jobcentre Plus districts.
- Consistency in good practice can go hand in hand with flexibility in provision to facilitate access and there is a need to address adviser perceptions that mainstream provision is failing some customers. The needs of older Bangladeshi women have been particularly prominent in this report, and may be met more closely by accommodating an increased number of women-only courses. While Jobcentre Plus cannot limit itself to ethnic minority provision of such courses, there may be scope to weight specifications and provide continued support for the National Employment Panel's work with the ethnic minority voluntary and community sector. The findings of the Ethnic Minority Outreach (EMO) Evaluation (Barnes *et al.*, 2005) suggest that this is likely to be a fruitful approach, though resources are likely to be needed to reap the potential benefits of this innovative work. Similarly ESOL courses, in terms of length and content, need to bear a closer relation to customer needs. The new work-based specification for ESOL is designed to allow flexibility to deliver closer to customer needs and its effectiveness should be monitored. Funding issues are restricting ESOL classes to 26 weeks and EMO and an adequately resourced and accessible Ethnic Minority Flexible Fund (EMFF) may be able to provide additional support.
- As one lone parent adviser working with Bangladeshi women commented, consideration should be given to whether some agency targets should be geared to meeting the interim needs of the hardest to help; rather than pursuing a 'work first' approach for all. The potential benefits of having distance travelled measures alongside job entry outcomes was a recommendation from the National Employment Panel's Working Group on ND25plus (National Employment Panel, 2004). The recommendation is given further credence by the findings of this research.
- *Building on New Deal* (DWP, 2004) has a core principle of providing more flexibility in the delivery of New Deal programmes and the pace, as well as scope, of implementation is fundamental to the Ethnic Minority Employment Taskforce's work on reducing the employment gap (Ethnic Minority Employment Taskforce, 2004). The issue of interim needs is a contentious one. Jobcentre Plus has a duty

to promote work first, the first job leading to a second job. In the absence of scope to dilute this duty to fully meet the needs of the hardest to help, the further education sector provides part-time training opportunities and EMO and EMFF can be used to provide support for those furthest away from the labour market. Resources need to be committed to support this action and the scope for better targeting and continuous improvement to facilitate this will need to be explored.

- In spite of the relatively early entry of NDYP customers into the programme they require greater personalised help with job search, because of their relative labour market inexperience. They may benefit from some elements of New Deal services being made available earlier, with more flexibility in approach as envisaged in *Building on New Deal*.
- Closer monitoring of New Deal training providers, introducing greater quality control into contractual arrangements, may help to alleviate and address some customer concerns. The nature and extent of customer dissatisfaction suggests the importance of ensuring that all customers have an opportunity to evaluate their programme experiences. It is essential that evaluations are analysed and the outcomes considered and followed up.
- Raising awareness and understanding of the complaints procedure, and tightening the follow-up of complaints, may strengthen opportunities for customer voice, assuaging the sense of powerlessness and pointlessness in exercising that voice felt by some customers. In response to the findings of the 2004 Customer Satisfaction Survey, Jobcentre Plus embarked on a comprehensive review of its complaints procedure. Improvements that have been made to complaints data collection, staff guidance and how awareness of the procedure is promoted are expected to enhance the workings of the complaints system. Businesses across DWP have been considering the introduction of an Independent Complaints Examiner to address times when a customer feels that their complaint has not been dealt with in the way they would expect. It will be important that customers are made fully aware of this means of redress and how to access it. Future customer satisfaction surveys will provide an opportunity to gauge how effective these developments are.
- Concerns about the quality of advisers suggests a need to broaden recruitment of Jobcentre Plus staff, and for capacity building to develop innovative work with employers and facilitate consistent performance. This process requires examination of the terms and conditions of front-line staff and could usefully be complemented by considering the access that existing staff have to training and development.
- The mismatch occurring between employer hiring requirements and job applicants filtered by jobcentres needs to be explored – it may be useful to have further research with employers and Jobcentre Plus staff – and addressed. On the one hand this may involve working to raise standards in jobcentre matching practice, to which greater time spent with clients, as well as training, might contribute. In addition, adviser questioning of employer interpretations of job readiness suggests that there may be a need for pro-active work with employers on hiring

requirements. There are several options for this more pro-active work, each of which entails a caveat. Firstly, encouragement of more employer 'creative flexibility' in developing positive action in job entry points might be given prominence in the work of Specialist Employment Advisers (SEAs). This might, for example, involve local workshops facilitating critical exploration of how notions of employability and job readiness are operationalised in recruitment practices. However, it should be noted that SEAs are engaged in developing products that will help identify barriers in the labour market and will also be searching for solutions, but they are concentrated in only a handful of locations and their current programme has a limited funding lifespan. Secondly, while the Employer Services Division of Jobcentre Plus does not have jurisdiction over the vacancy matching process, there is scope for it to review the guidance and training given to call centre staff and to consider whether employers should be more assertively challenged to determine what they need rather than what they think they want. Thirdly, the strategic engagement of Employer Diversity Managers (EDMs) could contribute to redefining employer specifications by helping them to understand good practice and legal compliance, but the EDMs are only currently working with the top 100 National Accounts so they will have only limited exposure. EDMs will, however, be developing case studies and products to share their good practice.

- In tackling unlawful discrimination, with some urgency, there is a need to raise awareness and understanding of the Jobcentre Plus discrimination procedure, particularly among customers, including those with ESOL needs, but also among staff. Current organisational contexts appear to be inhibiting the individual agency that is often necessary to tackle discrimination. The recently developed Jobcentre Plus learning and development programme needs to be supportive of the day-to-day experiences of staff. Part of this process involves acknowledging the pressure that people are working under and finding ways to generate the scope for off-the-job training to take place. Staff may be interested to hear about the findings of this research report within the learning and development programme.

There is scope for greater working with employers on diversity issues, perhaps exploring opportunities for EDMs, SEAs, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) to share knowledge and experience. Jobcentre Plus currently draws on ACAS for advice when dealing with an employer who it feels may be discriminating. There should perhaps be more emphasis on Jobcentre Plus working in partnership as diversity advocates and champions, rather than 'diversity policemen', while making it clear in both message and practice that unlawful discrimination is not to be tolerated. This is an area on which internal and external dialogue might be useful in the context of contemporary debate on the role of various agencies in tackling witting and unwitting discrimination. Jobcentre Plus already recognises that more joined-up working between its National Account Managers, SEAs and EDMs provides a potential support base for the promotion of better practice across employers and the starting point is perhaps for these sections to talk about this with a view to exploring the scope for an action plan.

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