



This item was submitted to Loughborough's Institutional Repository (<https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/>) by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.

 **creative commons**
C O M M O N S D E E D

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5

You are free:

- to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work

Under the following conditions:

 **Attribution.** You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.

 **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

 **No Derivative Works.** You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Any of these conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

Your fair use and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

This is a human-readable summary of the [Legal Code \(the full license\)](#).

[Disclaimer](#) 

For the full text of this licence, please go to:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 222

Delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision

Qualitative research with staff and customers (Phase 3)

Vicky Davies, Yvette Hartfree, Karen Kellard and Jean Taylor

A report of research carried out by ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd. and the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University, on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

Corporate Document Services

© Crown Copyright 2004. Published for the Department for Work and Pensions under licence from the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office by Corporate Document Services, Leeds.

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

First Published 2004.

ISBN 1 84123 731 0

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.

Contents

Acknowledgements	xi
The Authors	xii
Abbreviations	xiii
Summary	1
1 Introduction	13
1.1 The policy context	14
1.2 The Jobcentre Plus vision	14
1.3 The delivery of Jobcentre Plus services	15
1.4 The Jobcentre Plus evaluation	16
1.4.1 <i>The qualitative evaluation</i>	16
1.4.2 <i>Research design</i>	18
1.5 Research context	19
1.6 Report structure	19
2 First Contact	21
2.1 Background	21
2.1.1 <i>Role of the contact centre</i>	21
2.1.2 <i>Mode of contact</i>	22
2.2 Establishing customers' benefits needs	22
2.2.1 <i>Establishing benefit claim type</i>	22
2.2.2 <i>Additional benefit advice</i>	23
2.2.3 <i>Identification of Gateway Interventions</i>	24
2.3 Discussions about work	25
2.3.1 <i>JSA customers</i>	25
2.3.2 <i>Non-JSA customers</i>	26
2.3.3 <i>Job searches</i>	28
2.3.4 <i>Job submissions</i>	29

2.3.5	<i>Caseloading</i>	30
2.4	Booking appointments and next steps	30
2.4.1	<i>Additional information offered</i>	31
2.4.2	<i>Deferrals and waivers</i>	31
2.4.3	<i>The mandatory nature of the Work-focused Interview</i>	32
2.4.4	<i>Use of the 'Must Dos' document</i>	32
2.4.5	<i>The appointment booking process</i>	33
2.5	Progress towards the vision	33
2.5.1	<i>Barriers to progress: benefits training</i>	34
2.6	Conclusions	34
3	Meetings with Financial Assessors	37
3.1	Models of delivery	37
3.1.1	<i>Appointment booking system</i>	38
3.1.2	<i>Day two offices</i>	39
3.2	The content of Financial Assessor meetings	39
3.2.1	<i>Checking information on customers prior to the meeting</i>	39
3.2.2	<i>Explanations of the purpose of the FA meeting</i>	40
3.2.3	<i>Customers' completion of claim forms</i>	40
3.2.4	<i>The claim check</i>	41
3.2.5	<i>Day two offices</i>	41
3.3	Providing information and advice	41
3.3.1	<i>Expected amount of benefit entitlement</i>	42
3.3.2	<i>Wider information and advice</i>	42
3.3.3	<i>FA ability and confidence</i>	43
3.3.4	<i>Day two offices</i>	43
3.4	Benefit fraud and error	44
3.4.1	<i>Day two offices</i>	45
3.5	Next steps	45
3.5.1	<i>Explanations of the PA meeting</i>	45
3.5.2	<i>Handover to the Personal Adviser</i>	46
3.5.3	<i>Further customer contact with FAs</i>	47
3.5.4	<i>Day two offices</i>	47
3.6	Monitoring the content of FA meetings and 'Must Dos'	48
3.6.1	<i>Day two offices</i>	48
3.7	Ability to manage workloads	49
3.7.1	<i>Day two offices</i>	50

3.8	Examples of good practice	50
3.8.1	<i>Calling customers the day before</i>	50
3.8.2	<i>Checking customer information before the appointment day</i>	50
3.8.3	<i>Close working relationships between FAs and PAs</i>	50
3.9	Progress towards the vision	51
3.9.1	<i>Barriers to progress</i>	51
3.10	Conclusions	52
4	Meetings with Personal Advisers	53
4.1	Models of delivery	53
4.1.1	<i>PA team set-up</i>	53
4.1.2	<i>Allocation of PAs to customers</i>	54
4.1.3	<i>Length of PA appointment times</i>	54
4.1.4	<i>Appointment booking system</i>	55
4.1.5	<i>Day two offices</i>	55
4.2	The content of Work-focused Interviews	55
4.2.1	<i>Preparing for the Work-focused Interview</i>	56
4.2.2	<i>Explaining the purpose of the PA meeting</i>	56
4.2.3	<i>Discussions about work</i>	58
4.2.4	<i>Discussion about customers' benefit claim</i>	63
4.2.5	<i>Providing information, advice and making referrals</i>	63
4.2.6	<i>PA confidence in giving information and advice to non-JSA customers</i>	68
4.2.7	<i>Conducting job searches</i>	69
4.2.8	<i>Ending Work-focused Interviews</i>	70
4.2.9	<i>Deferrals and waivers at PA meetings</i>	72
4.2.10	<i>Monitoring the content of PA meetings and 'Must Dos'</i> ...	73
4.3	Caseloading for non-JSA customers	74
4.3.1	<i>Format of help and support</i>	74
4.3.2	<i>Systems for caseloading</i>	76
4.3.3	<i>Extent of caseloading</i>	76
4.3.4	<i>Caseloading for JSA customers</i>	77
4.3.5	<i>Day two offices</i>	78
4.4	Ability to manage workloads and meet targets	78
4.4.1	<i>The duration of Work-focused Interviews</i>	78
4.4.2	<i>Ability to manage workloads</i>	79
4.4.3	<i>Ability to meet job entry targets</i>	80
4.5	Examples of good practice	81

4.6	Progress towards the vision	82
4.6.1	<i>Barriers to progress</i>	83
4.7	Conclusions	84
5	The experiences and perceptions of Jobseekers	85
5.1	First Contact.....	85
5.1.1	<i>Route taken to the contact centre</i>	86
5.1.2	<i>Establishing customers' benefit needs</i>	86
5.1.3	<i>Additional benefit advice</i>	86
5.1.4	<i>Discussions about work</i>	87
5.1.5	<i>Job searches and job submissions</i>	87
5.1.6	<i>Caseloading at First Contact</i>	88
5.1.7	<i>Booking appointments and next steps</i>	88
5.1.8	<i>Overall perceptions of First Contact</i>	89
5.2	Meetings with a Financial Assessor	90
5.2.1	<i>Explanations of the purpose of the FA meeting</i>	91
5.2.2	<i>Customers' completion of claim forms</i>	91
5.2.3	<i>The claim check</i>	91
5.2.4	<i>Providing information and advice</i>	92
5.2.5	<i>Explanations of the meeting with a Personal Adviser</i>	92
5.2.6	<i>Handover to the Personal Adviser</i>	92
5.2.7	<i>Overall perceptions of the Financial Assessor meeting</i>	92
5.3	Meetings with Personal Advisers.....	93
5.3.1	<i>Explaining the purpose of the meeting with a Personal Adviser</i>	93
5.3.2	<i>Discussions about work</i>	94
5.3.3	<i>Discussions about benefits</i>	95
5.3.4	<i>Providing information and advice, and making referrals</i>	95
5.3.5	<i>Conducting job searches and job submissions</i>	96
5.3.6	<i>Action plans</i>	97
5.3.7	<i>Ending Work-focused Interviews</i>	97
5.3.8	<i>Overall perceptions of the meeting with a Personal Adviser</i>	97
5.4	The impact of Jobcentre Plus on JSA customers	98
5.5	Conclusions	99
6	The experiences and perceptions of non-JSA customers	101
6.1	First Contact.....	101
6.1.1	<i>Route taken to the contact centre</i>	102
6.1.2	<i>Establishing customers' benefit needs</i>	103

6.1.3	<i>Additional benefit advice</i>	104
6.1.4	<i>Discussions about work</i>	105
6.1.5	<i>Job searches and job submissions</i>	106
6.1.6	<i>Caseloading</i>	106
6.1.7	<i>Booking appointments and next steps</i>	106
6.1.8	<i>Deferrals and waivers</i>	108
6.1.9	<i>Customers' receipt of claim forms</i>	109
6.1.10	<i>Overall perceptions of First Contact</i>	109
6.2	Meetings with a Financial Assessor	110
6.2.1	<i>Explanations of the purpose of the Financial Assessor meeting</i>	111
6.2.2	<i>Customers' completion of claim forms</i>	111
6.2.3	<i>The claim check</i>	112
6.2.4	<i>Expected amount of benefit entitlement</i>	113
6.2.5	<i>Wider information and advice</i>	114
6.2.6	<i>Deferrals at the end of Financial Assessor meetings</i>	116
6.2.7	<i>Explanations of the meeting with a Personal Adviser</i>	116
6.2.8	<i>Handover to the Personal Adviser</i>	117
6.2.9	<i>Further customer contact with a Financial Assessor</i>	117
6.2.10	<i>Overall perceptions of the Financial Assessor meeting</i>	117
6.3	Meetings with Personal Advisers	119
6.3.1	<i>Deferrals and waivers at PA interviews</i>	119
6.3.2	<i>Explaining the purpose of the interview with a Personal Adviser</i>	119
6.3.3	<i>Discussions about work</i>	120
6.3.4	<i>Discussions about customers' benefit claim</i>	126
6.3.5	<i>Providing information, advice and making referrals</i>	127
6.3.6	<i>Conducting job searches and job submissions</i>	131
6.3.7	<i>Action plans</i>	132
6.3.8	<i>Ending Work-focused Interviews</i>	133
6.3.9	<i>Overall perceptions of the interview with a Personal Adviser</i>	134
6.4	The impact of Jobcentre Plus on non-JSA customers	135
6.5	Conclusions	137
7	The office environment	141
7.1	The office environment	141
7.2	Privacy issues	142
7.3	Floor walker and reception staff	143

7.4	Job points	144
7.5	The impact of the environment on the likelihood of using the service again	145
7.6	Conclusions	145
8	Conclusions	147
8.1	Delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision	147
8.1.1	<i>First Contact</i>	147
8.1.2	<i>Meetings with Financial Assessors</i>	148
8.1.3	<i>Interviews with Personal Advisers</i>	149
8.2	Barriers to further progress	152
8.2.1	<i>Preconceptions about non-JSA customers</i>	152
8.2.2	<i>Staff confidence in discussing work with non-JSA customers</i>	152
8.2.3	<i>Lack of relevant benefits expertise</i>	152
8.2.4	<i>Workloads and time constraints</i>	153
8.2.5	<i>Insufficient interpreter facilities for non-English speaking customers</i>	153
8.3	Overall conclusions	153
Appendix A	Methodology	157
Appendix B	'Must Dos' guidance	165
Appendix C	Opt out letter to Jobcentre Plus customers	173
Appendix D	Confirmation letter to Jobcentre Plus customers	175
Appendix E	Letter of introduction to Jobcentre Plus Office Managers	177
Appendix F	Topic guides for interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff	179
Appendix G	Recruitment questionnaire for customer depth interviews	227
Appendix H	Topic guides for interviews with Jobcentre Plus customers	233
Appendix I	Observation guides	255

List of tables

Table A.1	Summary of Jobcentre Plus public office staff interviewed by type of staff member and by public office area (A-I) – types of Jobcentre Plus staff interviewed as part of the research	159
Table A.2	Summary of contact centre staff interviewed by type of staff and by area (i-vi)	159
Table A.3	Summary of observations conducted of first contact with customers by customer group and by area (i-vi)	160
Table A.4	Summary of observations conducted of WFI and FA meetings by customer group and public office area (A-I)	160
Table A.5	Customer groups approached in the research by benefit type	161
Table A.6	Customer targets per public office area	161
Table A.7	Summary of interviews conducted with Jobcentre Plus customers, by customer group and public office area (A-I)	162

List of figures

Figure 1.1	Cumulative office rollout: Jobcentre Plus stage 2 and 3	15
Figure 1.2	The Jobcentre Plus process	17

Acknowledgements

In April 2003, the Department for Work and Pensions commissioned ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd., on behalf of the Labour Market Research Partnership, and the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) at Loughborough University to conduct a third tranche of qualitative research with Jobcentre Plus staff and customers in six Pathfinder offices and three new offices.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped with this research, especially the staff and customers of Jobcentre Plus who gave up their valuable time to share their knowledge and experience. Their insights provide the substantial evidence to support our findings.

Our particular thanks go to Vicky Mayhew, Kim Shrapnell, Liz Rayner and Richenda Solon at the Department for Work and Pensions for providing clear guidance and support over the course of the research.

We'd also like to thank all members of the project team for their invaluable efforts during the fieldwork and analysis stages of this research: Ian Atkinson, Graham Bukowski, Stuart Durkin, Katherine Hill, Gerwyn Jones, Jane Nimmo, Liz Sutton, Helen Walton, and Lyn Webster.

A special acknowledgement should also be made to our colleagues at GHK, in association with the Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University, for allowing us to incorporate their work into this report.

As ever with these reports, our grateful thanks must go to our support staff within ECOTEC for their practical assistance and enduring tolerance in allowing our findings to see the light of day, and in particular to Lisa Hancox for all her hard work in putting this report together. Thank you.

The Authors

Vicky Davies is an Associate Director at ECOTEC working in the fields of welfare to work, labour markets, and learning. Vicky was responsible for the qualitative policy evaluation of ONE between 1999 and 2001 on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions, and the early qualitative research on Jobcentre Plus. Vicky recently completed an evaluation of the Tailored Pathways pilot programme under New Deal for Young People for the Department and is currently managing an evaluation of targeted funding in post-16 education and training for the Department for Education and Skills.

Yvette Hartfree is a Research Associate at CRSP. She has worked on earlier phases of the Jobcentre Plus research as well as research on the use of deferrals in Jobcentre Plus (with Jean Taylor at ECOTEC). Other current and recent research for the Department for Work and Pension include evaluations of New Deal for Disabled People and the Local Housing Allowance Pathfinders.

Karen Kellard is a Senior Research Fellow and Assistant Director at CRSP. She is currently working on the evaluation of New Deal for Disabled People, a local evaluation of Sure Start and research to explore participation in, and exclusion from, the e-society.

Jean Taylor is a Senior Research Manager at ECOTEC, working in the fields of welfare to work, labour markets, and children and young people. Jean was responsible for management of the research into deferrals in Jobcentre Plus. She has contributed to earlier rounds of this research, and was also involved in the qualitative research with customers of the ONE pilots.

Abbreviations

BA	Benefits Agency
BB	Bereavement Benefits
CAB(x)	Citizens Advice Bureau(x)
ChB	Child Benefit
CSA	Child Support Agency
CTB	Council Tax Benefit
DCI	Departmental Central Index
DEA	Disability Employment Adviser
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DPTC	Disabled Person's Tax Credit
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ES	Employment Service
FA	Financial Assessor
FCO	First Contact Officer
HB	Housing Benefit
IB	Incapacity Benefit
ICA	Invalid Care Allowance
IS	Income Support
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance

JSAg	Jobseeker's Agreement
LMS	Labour Market System
NDDP	New Deal for Disabled People
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NDYP	New Deal for Young People
NINO	National Insurance number
NJI	New Jobseeker Interview
NTC	New Tax Credit
PA	Personal Adviser
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework
SDA	Severe Disablement Allowance
SLA	Service Level Agreement
SOC	Standard Occupational Classification
WFI	Work-focused Interview
WFTC	Working Families' Tax Credit

Summary

Jobcentre Plus is a key part of the Government's strategy for welfare reform. It brings together the services of the Employment Service (ES) and the Benefits Agency (BA) to provide a single point of delivery for jobs, benefits advice and support for people of working age. In October 2001, 56 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and associated contact centres were established in 17 clusters across the UK, offering a fully integrated work and benefits service. The aim of the Pathfinder offices was to lead the way in demonstrating the new service, culture and organisation of Jobcentre Plus. Representing the second stage of the national implementation of Jobcentre Plus' 'day two' offices were planned to roll-out between April 2002 and March 2003 across twenty-four districts (some of which included Pathfinder offices). Further offices are planned to open over the next three years and the network will be complete by 2006.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Labour Market Research Partnership (led by ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd) and the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) at Loughborough University to conduct a qualitative evaluation of Jobcentre Plus. The overall purpose of the research was to assess the extent to which Pathfinder and day two offices were delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision. This report presents the findings of qualitative research conducted with staff and customers in Jobcentre Plus offices. It builds on earlier research to show the progress achieved by Pathfinder offices over the last year and includes an assessment of delivery within the new, day two offices.

First Contact

At the time of the research, contact centres were expanding to cope with the roll-out of new Jobcentre Plus public offices. In some cases, contact centres were expanding on site, whilst others were being moved to new, larger sites. Where contact centres re-located, they sometimes lost a high proportion of their more experienced staff. Contact centres had to recruit large numbers of new staff, and offer them intensive on-the-job training alongside their formal induction processes. However, newly appointed contact centre staff did not always feel that they had had sufficient training, particularly in relation to some benefits.

First Contact Officers (FCOs) used a range of different approaches to introduce the work-focused element of the Jobcentre Plus service for claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and non-JSA customers. FCOs tended to be fairly direct in raising work with customers claiming JSA. In contrast, FCOs modified their explanations of the work focus for non-JSA customers, tending to place more emphasis on the wider support available through Jobcentre Plus currently and in the future, rather than solely on work.

There was some evidence of progress and good practice on the part of individual staff over the year. Contact centre staff had a higher awareness of the need to undertake job searches and job submissions.

The 'Must Dos' document was used by FCOs in conjunction with VANTIVE as a prompt in the delivery of First Contact services to non-JSA customers. Managers indicated that this document was also used to monitor performance, and assure the quality of services delivered in contact centres, particularly the delivery of the work focus.

There was also some evidence of individual FCOs providing good explanations of the types of service and support that were available through Jobcentre Plus. In some cases these explanations were tailored to the customer's personal circumstances, and possible action points for the Work-focused Interview (WFI) were identified.

Jobseekers' experiences and perceptions of First Contact

Generally, the contact centre was the first point of contact for JSA customers. In some exceptional cases, First Contact was delivered by the Jobcentre Plus public offices or was handled by a relative or agency (such as the Prison Service) on the claimant's behalf. At First Contact, JSA customers were usually asked what benefit(s) they wanted to claim. Individuals with prior experience of claiming JSA were clear about the benefit they sought and informed the FCO accordingly. The exchange focused on the collection of personal details. Customers who were unsure which benefit to claim remembered the FCO asking a series of questions to establish their personal circumstances and their intentions with regards to work. Jobseekers rarely recalled asking for further advice or information regarding benefits at First Contact.

Overall, First Contact provided an efficient service to JSA customers. Information on the benefits sought by jobseekers was collected, claim forms were despatched, and WFIs were arranged to occur within four working days. It appeared, however, that First Contact was not effective in promoting the work-focused services of Jobcentre Plus to jobseekers. Customers recalled answering questions about work, but these tended to be limited to the context of the individual's claim. Some JSA customers received information on the work-related services available from Jobcentre Plus, such as Jobseeker Direct, and reported that their FCO conducted a job search at First Contact. These services were not, however, routinely delivered to jobseekers. JSA customers were generally aware that they were required to attend a WFI at a public

office as a condition of benefit entitlement and some recalled that they were told about two meetings, as observed in contact centres.

Non-JSA customers' experiences and perceptions of First Contact

The Jobcentre Plus contact centres were not always the first point of contact for non-JSA customers. Instead, carers, people with a health problem or a disability, and lone parents alike contacted public offices, ex-BA offices or local welfare agencies to enquire about starting a new claim for benefit before they were directed to the Jobcentre Plus contact centre. Some non-JSA customers from all groups did not speak with an FCO at a contact centre at all, either because they picked up the claim forms and arranged a WFI appointment at a public office or because discussions were handled by other agencies or individuals on the customer's behalf. As a result, these individuals did not personally experience First Contact.

When non-JSA customers did call a contact centre to initiate a claim for benefit, First Contact was generally found to provide an efficient service. Information on the benefits sought by non-JSA customers was collected, claim forms were despatched and Work-focused Interviews were booked to take place within four working days. There were some cases, however, where people with health problems did not feel that the FCO identified the most appropriate benefit for their circumstances. WFI appointments for some lone parents were scheduled to occur five days or more after their initial call to a contact centre. This may be due to the allocation to, and availability of, specialist lone parent advisers in public offices. Some non-JSA customers did not receive their claim forms in the post and so were unable to complete the forms prior to their meeting with a Financial Assessor (FA).

It appeared that First Contact was not effective in promoting the work-focused services of Jobcentre Plus to non-JSA customers. Some carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits recalled answering questions about work, but these tended to be limited to the context of the individual's claim. Some lone parents and, in an exceptional case, a customer with a health problem received information on the specialist support services available from Jobcentre Plus to help them back into work. Such information was not, however, routinely provided to non-JSA customers. Discussions about customers' current job search activity were only found in exceptional cases, and confined to lone parents. Although some lone parents were told that the FCO could look for jobs for them over the phone, there was no evidence that job searches or submissions were conducted for non-JSA customers.

WFIs were deferred for some people claiming sickness or disability benefits and the option of a deferral was offered to other customers with health problems. There were some instances, however, when a deferral or waiver was not made or offered but was appropriate, including customers who were due an operation, signed off work for life, diagnosed with a terminal illness, or who had a job to return to once they recovered from an illness or injury. These were typically picked up either by FAs or by Personal Advisers (PAs) in Jobcentre Plus public offices. Non-JSA customers

who were booked to attend a WFI were generally aware that they were required to attend a WFI at a public office and that non-attendance would affect their claim for benefit. Carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that the FCO explicitly told them that the meeting was a condition of benefit entitlement. Some lone parents and people with health problems recalled that their FCO explained that the meeting was concerned with work but other non-JSA customers reported that they were told the meeting was regarding their benefit.

Financial Assessor meetings

In all areas, Pathfinder offices were following the business model of customers seeing an FA before a PA wherever possible.

FAs viewed their role as primarily to check customers' claim forms to ensure that they were completed correctly and to ensure that all the relevant evidence had been gathered so that the claim could be processed. Explanations of the purpose of the meeting were brief and focused on the benefit claim check.

The main area of progress was in giving customers benefit information and advice. The service has progressed from being limited to a benefit claim check (as was found in earlier research) to being a more comprehensive service. In some Pathfinder offices, FAs routinely informed customers of the amount of benefit they could expect to receive, whilst in other offices FAs gave customers an indication of the general benefit rates they might be entitled to. Across all offices there was evidence that FAs were giving some customers wider information and advice about entitlements to other benefits and financial help. This progress appears to have been achieved through gradual on the job learning, which has plugged some of the training gaps identified in earlier research, rather than as the result of any specific action taken in public offices. Progress was also made in developing the skills of FAs to be able to process benefit claims.

Generally, FAs in Pathfinder offices were aware of the different circumstances that identified a claim as requiring a Gateway Intervention. FAs only very rarely referred claims on to the Counter-Fraud Intelligence Service. Where FAs suspected a benefit claim to be fraudulent they either completed the relevant form to refer the claim onto the fraud service, or referred the claim onto an FA Higher.

Generally, FAs and/or FA Highers in Pathfinder offices were aware of the 'Must Dos' guidance, although the contents were not generally known in detail. This general awareness of the 'Must Dos' appeared to be less widespread amongst FAs in new offices.

Examples of good practice were found by the research, and included calling the customer the day before, and checking customer details the day before the appointment.

Jobseekers' experiences and perceptions of FA meetings

FAs were generally reported to deliver an effective service to jobseekers. JSA customers consistently reported that the FA checked their claim forms, verified the information presented, collected evidence when requested, and filled in gaps on the forms as and when necessary. They also routinely reported that information on the status of the claim was given, although the exact details varied. The extent to which JSA customers were informed that their claim was dependent on satisfactory completion of a Work-focused Interview was, however, mixed. Some jobseekers recalled that the FA explained that they were required to meet with an adviser to discuss work and that this was a condition of receiving benefit. Others did not remember what they were told would happen next, why, or the consequences associated with non-attendance or non-participation in a WFI. This variation in practice is supported by the staff research.

Non-JSA customers' experiences and perceptions of FA meetings

FAs were generally reported to deliver an efficient service to non-JSA customers. Carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits consistently reported that the FA checked their claim forms, verified the information presented, collected evidence to support the claim, and filled in gaps on the forms as and when necessary. FA meetings were not found to be effective for some carers when evidence to support the claim was not collected and so processing was subsequently delayed. There was also less evidence that FAs routinely verified information on the claim forms submitted by carers. Similarly, carers rarely recalled that the FA explained the status of their claim at the end of the meeting. This contrasts with the findings from the staff research. Instead, these customers were simply told that their forms would be processed and someone would be in touch with a decision.

In contrast, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits reported that FAs provided some information on the status of their claim, usually in response to customer queries, but the exact details varied within and across these customer groups. Some FAs were reported to be unable to address questions raised by people with health problems concerning their entitlement to benefit or how much money they would receive. Again, this is in contrast to the evidence from research with staff. These questions were addressed for lone parents, but some recalled that the FA was unable to answer queries about other benefits or the conditions of a particular benefit. As a result, there were examples of unresolved benefit-related queries for customers from all non-JSA customer groups.

At the end of their meeting with an FA, non-JSA customers from all groups were informed that they were required to see another adviser but they rarely recalled that they were told why or that the meeting was about work. Similarly, these customers from all non-JSA groups rarely recalled that the FAs explained that the benefit claim was dependent on satisfactory completion of a WFI.

Work-focused Interviews with Personal Advisers

In some of the Pathfinder offices, PAs were specialists in the type of customers that they saw. There were Personal Advisers who predominantly only saw JSA customers, specialist New Deal for Lone Parent Advisers who under Jobcentre Plus had taken on lone parent new claims, and Personal Advisers who predominantly saw other non-JSA customers (customers with health problems and carers). To a greater or lesser extent, specialist PAs also saw other customer groups when this was required. In some offices the specialist/generalist split was a result of circumstance rather than design. New offices took a mixture of approaches to the use of specialist PAs.

PA understanding of the Work-focused Interviews

PAs understood the purpose of WFIs for JSA and non-JSA customers to be slightly different. This was reflected in the introductions that they gave customers in explaining the purpose of the interview. The purpose of WFIs for JSA customers was seen as being to help people into work and to ensure that they were aware of the conditions and obligations of claiming JSA. As a result, explanations about the content of the WFI and purpose of the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) were fairly detailed. For non-JSA customers, PAs understood the purpose of the WFI to primarily be to ensure customers were aware of the help and services available through Jobcentre Plus. Explanations given to non-JSA customers tended to explain that the meeting would discuss the customer's current circumstances in relation to work and the help and services available to them. In the new offices, PAs had no less of an understanding of the purpose of WFIs compared to PAs in Pathfinder offices and were as detailed in explaining the purpose of the meeting.

WFIs with customers claiming JSA followed a standard procedure, with two main parts. Firstly, PAs explained the fortnightly signing on procedure to customers, arranged a signing on day and time, and completed the customer's signing on booklet. Secondly, PAs completed a JSAg with the customer. However, considerable variation was observed in the extent to which customers were involved in drawing up the content of the JSAg. This depended on the customers' own willingness to participate and their desire to find a job, or through PAs asking further questions and probing for more information from less responsive customers.

WFIs for non-JSA customers were seen by PAs as having broader and more long-term objectives. The aims of interviews with non-JSA customers were to establish a rapport with the customer and make them feel at ease so that they would be willing to return in the future, and to inform them of the help and services available. Moving non-JSA customers into work was not an objective for PAs at the new claim stage, but was seen by PAs as a longer-term aim. WFIs with non-JSA customers did not follow a pre-determined structure but were based around PAs asking customers questions about their current circumstances in relation to work. There was little evidence from the observations that PAs challenged customers' own assessments of their ability to work, or encouraged customers who seemingly were not interested in discussing work. The extent to which PAs' questions led to an in-depth discussion

about work depended on the customer. There was no apparent progress in the extent to which PAs engaged non-JSA customers in discussions about work, although some PAs developed their own techniques for trying to engage customers who were not interested in discussing work. These included engaging customers in a discussion by asking about the customer's general long-term aims, rather than focusing on work directly. In one example a non-JSA PA tried to engage customers by focusing on training opportunities very early on in the meeting, which observations showed seemed to have some success in engaging the customer in thinking about what work they would like to do in the future. Overall, discussions about work were still relatively low-key and the extent of discussion was largely dependent on the interest and motivation of the customer.

There was some discussion about the customer's benefit claim observed in a number of WFIs, but these discussions tended to be minimal.

Overall PAs who dealt with customers claiming JSA reported feeling confident and knowledgeable about the help and support available to customers and were able to signpost customers to a variety of support services although there were examples of PAs being unsure of the New Deal eligibility rules for new jobseeker customers. The extent to which PAs gave non-JSA customers information, advice and made referrals depended on the customer's circumstances.

Conducting job searches during the Work-focused Interviews

Generally, job searches were conducted with all JSA customers and formed the final part of the WFI after completing the JSAg. Job searches were not usually conducted for non-JSA customers because most were not ready to think about looking for work at the time of their WFI, although there were some examples given where job searches were offered.

Caseloading during the Work-focused Interviews

One aim of the WFI, as defined by the vision, is for PAs to encourage non-JSA customers to take up voluntary caseloading to help them find work, or move closer to the labour market. Caseloading for lone parents should be provided through New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). Caseloading for customers with health problems or disabilities should be provided through New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP), although where this is not appropriate a customer can see their PA for further help and support. Carers, for whom there is no New Deal provision, should be caseloaded by their PA.

PAs defined the activities they undertook as caseloading as including: conducting job searches; conducting in-work benefit calculations; and promoting and referring customers to the services of specialist providers such as DEAs, New Deals and other organisations. PAs did not have specific targets for caseloading, but caseloading was seen as important if overall job submission targets were to be achieved.

Whether or not customers were given information on and caseloaded to New Deal programmes and other specialist help depended on the customers circumstances. Where customers were interested in moving into work in the medium term future and showed an interest in joining a New Deal programme, or training options, PAs specified that customers would be caseloaded.

Research with customers found that job ready lone parents were referred to, or provided with information on, NDLP. On the other hand, customers claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that their PA informed them of the help or support available under NDDP. Where PAs did mention NDDP and Job brokers, customers felt that they had received insufficient information. There appeared to be little evidence to suggest that carers were caseloaded.

In this phase of research, more offices were making arrangements with non-JSA customers for PAs to re-contact them at a certain point after the WFI. The number of customers on a PAs caseload that they were able to provide direct help to (that is excluding those customers referred to New Deals, training, or other specialist providers) at any one time was fairly small.

Providing information and advice on help and services available

Progress had been made in the knowledge and confidence of PAs in giving customers information and advice on the help and services available. In particular, there was evidence that some PAs were giving customers with health conditions information on transitional financial support via the Adviser Discretion Fund and on the New Tax Credits (NTCs). However, whilst there was a clear work-focused message delivered to JSA customers, with non-JSA customers there was still a relatively low-key approach to discussing work.

Jobseekers' experiences and perceptions of Work-focused Interviews

The explanations of the WFI provided by PAs varied. Some JSA customers reported that their PA explained that the purpose of the WFI was to help them into work or to find a job. Others outlined what would occur during the interview, such as discussing the type of work the individual wanted and looking for relevant jobs. Some jobseekers recalled that their PA focused on the need to collect labour market information, such as their previous employment and the type of work the individual wanted.

PAs usually led discussions in the WFI. Jobseekers consistently recalled that their PA asked what work they wanted, their previous work experience, and how they planned to look for work. The depth of discussions in WFIs, and the extent to which jobseekers participated, was varied. While some jobseekers reported a full and frank exchange with their PA, others did not feel that discussions about work were sufficiently detailed or tailored to their needs. In some cases, PAs did not appear to challenge JSA customers' assumptions about work. There was some evidence that

jobseekers were encouraged to take up additional support or provision available through Jobcentre Plus but this was not routinely offered and, in some exceptional cases, jobseekers appeared to be discouraged from enlisting on a training course. Job searches were usually conducted, and job submissions were made when suitable vacancies were found. Only in unusual instances was this not found to be the case. JSA customers also routinely reported that they reviewed the content of the JSAg drawn up by their PA and agreed to follow the actions set out in the agreement.

In general, JSA customers perceived their PA to be friendly and helpful. Their experiences of the WFIs were, however, mixed. Some jobseekers felt that the WFI was useful and productive, particularly when they felt they engaged in a meaningful, relevant and substantive discussion about work with their adviser or when suitable vacancies were found. These individuals reported that their PA listened, understood their work aspirations, and tailored the discussions and job searches to the customer's needs. Others perceived the meeting to be perfunctory. These JSA customers felt that the discussions were not tailored to their situation, were not sufficiently detailed, or did not tell the individual something they did not already know. Some of these jobseekers specifically wanted further advice from the PA on ways in which they could improve their job prospects. Several jobseekers were unhappy with the service they received during the WFI. These individuals felt 'processed', did not feel involved in the interview, and did not believe that sufficient information or advice was provided on the different options available to them.

Non-JSA customers' experiences and perceptions of Work-focused Interviews

PAs were typically reported to inform non-JSA customers that the purpose of the WFI was to discuss work. Only in exceptional cases was this found not to be the case. However, carers, lone parents, and people claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that they were told of the requirement to participate in the WFI as a condition of benefit entitlement. PAs usually led discussions with non-JSA customers during the WFI.

The extent to which WFIs involved meaningful and substantive discussions about work for non-JSA customers was varied. In-depth discussions were held with some customers with health problems, injuries or disabilities. Some of these individuals actively participated in the WFI when discussions were focused on work as an option for the future, when realistic and desirable options were explored with the PA, and when discussions were tailored to the individual's circumstances. Some lone parents also reported full and frank exchanges about work during the WFI with a PA. These customers felt fully involved in the conversation, were given the opportunity to ask questions, and the PA listened, and responded, to their suggestions. As a result, these lone parents trusted their PA, and felt that the nature and focus of the discussions were tailored to their situation and appropriate to their needs. In-depth discussions about work with carers were exceptional.

More limited discussions about work were found across all non-JSA customer groups, although the reasons for this were mixed. Carers were usually engaged in a discussion about work straight after the PA's introduction, and were asked a series of work-related questions. When asked about what work they were interested in, or what they wanted to do in the future, carers typically explained that work was not an option and WFIs ended shortly afterwards. Similarly, some lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits responded to work-related questions posed during the meeting. PAs did not seem, however, to explore some of the responses or issues raised by these customers but instead were reported to move the discussion on. As a result, these customers did not feel fully involved in the WFI and felt that they would benefit from a more in-depth interview. Some people with disabilities, mental health problems, acute or complex health problems perceived the PA to inappropriately focus on work as an immediate option. While these customers participated in the WFI, they were not fully engaged because they did not believe that it was relevant to their circumstances. Instead, these customers felt the WFI would be more useful at a time when they could think about work more actively.

There were some examples of very short WFIs for carers, lone parents, and people claiming sickness or disability benefits alike, with little discussion about work. In some cases, PAs were reported to approach the subject of work by enquiring about the customer's current circumstances – typically a carer's responsibilities or an individual's health problem – and, later, the implications in relation to work. In these instances, carers, people with disabilities, acute or complex health problems generally made it clear that they were unable to work and PAs tended to draw the interview to a close shortly afterwards. Similarly, some lone parents also reported that they made it clear to their PA, early on in the WFI, that they were either already in work or were not willing to work at that time given the young age of their child(ren). PAs appeared to follow the customer's lead and drew the interview to a close. In other cases, people with severe health problems or mental health problems reported that the PA asked them about work, touching upon their last job held, qualifications and current interest in work. These meetings were then brought to a close with little or no exploration of the responses provided by the customer. It is unclear why such WFIs were so short as the customers involved were often either willing to be engaged in discussions about work or wanted to talk about their work options.

In-work benefits or tax credits were rarely covered in interviews with carers or people claiming sickness or disability benefits, but were found in some WFIs for lone parents. Similarly, there was no evidence that better-off calculations were conducted for carers or people with health problems, injuries or disabilities. In contrast, there was some evidence that better-off calculations were conducted for lone parents. Discussions about current job search activity were held with some lone parents and people with mental health problems but were not found for other non-JSA customers. Similarly, job searches were conducted for some lone parents, people with mental health problems and some people with more complex health issues but were rarely recalled by other non-JSA customers. Information on any vacancies

found was routinely provided to customers, but applications were only made in exceptional cases.

Lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits who discussed work with a PA were routinely given advice or information on the different services available through Jobcentre Plus. Carers rarely received such information. Some lone parents were provided with advice on education or training, or were given information about NDLP. Similarly, people with health problems, injuries or disabilities were informed of the possibility of (re-) training and help available under NDDP, although the latter was rarely explicitly mentioned. The information provided by PAs was generally regarded as insufficient and non-JSA customers wanted further detail on the purpose, content or usefulness of the support to determine whether it was appropriate for them. There was little evidence that non-JSA customers were routinely referred to specialist provision. Instead, only some lone parents who were motivated to find work or learning opportunities were caseloaded or referred by their PA for an appointment with a NDLP adviser.

The extent to which action plans were used or agreed with non-JSA customers was varied. In some cases, non-JSA customers from across all groups did not recall that a plan was prepared or agreed. In others, they reported relatively vague plans that simply stated the individual's current circumstances and did not suggest any specific actions to help prepare the customer for work or outline what Jobcentre Plus would do to help. In contrast, more specific action plans were found for some lone parents, people with health problems and, in exceptional cases, carers who engaged in more detailed discussions about work with their PA in the WFI. At the end of WFIs, non-JSA customers were typically told to contact their PA again if their circumstances changed and/or they wanted to discuss work. Some PAs were reported to offer further contact with people with mental health problems and joint-related problems by phone, although there was little evidence that this had occurred at the time of the research. Non-JSA customers were rarely offered a further interview with a PA at a set time or date, with the exception of lone parents who were caseloaded onto NDLP.

Conclusions

To conclude, some progress was made at all stages of the Jobcentre Plus process towards delivering the vision. Where progress occurred, this was largely as a result of increased individual staff knowledge and confidence gained 'on the job'. However, a number of barriers to progress were also identified, including: staff pre-conceptions as to the job readiness of some non-JSA customers; a lack of confidence in promoting a work focus to some non-JSA customers; insufficient knowledge across all of the Jobcentre Plus benefits; constraints on staff time; and additional difficulties faced by staff in dealing with customers who do not speak English as a first language. There were some examples of customers who felt more positive about their future work prospects as a direct result of participating in a WFI, or were encouraged to move towards work.

1 Introduction

Jobcentre Plus is a key part of the Government's strategy for welfare reform. It brings together the services of the Employment Service (ES) and the Benefits Agency (BA) to provide a single point of delivery for jobs, benefits advice and support for people of working age. In October 2001, 56 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and associated contact centres were established in 17 clusters across the UK, offering a fully integrated work and benefits service. The aim of the Pathfinder offices was to lead the way in demonstrating the new service, culture and organisation of Jobcentre Plus. Representing the second stage of the national implementation of Jobcentre Plus' 'day two' offices were planned to roll-out between April 2002 and March 2003 across twenty-four districts (some of which included Pathfinder offices). Further offices are planned to open over the next three years and the network will be complete by 2006¹.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Labour Market Research Partnership (led by ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd) and the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) at Loughborough University to conduct a qualitative evaluation of Jobcentre Plus. The overall purpose of the research was to assess the extent to which Pathfinder and day two offices were delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision and the progress achieved over time. Phase 1 of the evaluation was carried out between October and December 2001, shortly after the first Pathfinder offices were established. The second phase followed some six months later. Phase 3 was conducted between July and September 2003, some six months after the new, day two Jobcentre Plus offices opened. This report presents the findings from the third phase of the evaluation. It builds on earlier research to show the progress achieved by Pathfinders over the last year and includes an assessment of delivery within the day two offices.

¹ Jobcentre Plus Vision 2002-2006, p8.

1.1 The policy context

The Government's goal is to provide employment opportunities for all. This has led to a fundamental shift in the way in which people without work are supported. The change has been to a more active system, based on the principle of 'work for those who can and security for those who cannot'².

Following the success of welfare to work policies for customers of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), the focus is increasingly on those who are economically inactive. With 3.5 million people claiming benefits as lone parents or because they are sick or disabled, the Government recognises that more needs to be done to help those who face particular barriers to the labour market. In addition, there is a recognition that some individuals may need assistance or support in reconciling work and their personal circumstances.

Jobcentre Plus brings a work focus for customers claiming benefits other than JSA. Under this new service, those entering the benefit system for either a new or repeat claim are obliged to attend a Work-focused Interview (WFI) with a Personal Adviser (PA) to discuss the job opportunities and support available.

1.2 The Jobcentre Plus vision

The overall aim of Jobcentre Plus is to deliver 'an integrated and efficient labour market and benefit service to people of working age'³. The Jobcentre Plus vision is that the service should provide:

- a work focus to the benefit system, for everyone using the service;
- a dedicated service to enable employers to fill their vacancies quickly and successfully;
- swift, secure and professional access to benefits for those entitled to them;
- a much better service for everyone who needs help;
- active help from PAs to assist people to get and keep work;
- a better working environment for staff, which will be safe and professional; and
- greatly improved information technology and accommodation.

² Department for Education and Employment, Towards full employment in a modern society, March 2001, DfEE, CM 5084, p27.

³ Opportunity for all - Making progress, Third Annual Report, Department for Work and Pensions, 2001.

1.3 The delivery of Jobcentre Plus services

As mentioned earlier, the first 56 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and their associate contact centres were launched in October 2001. The second stage of the national implementation of Jobcentre Plus was planned to take place between April 2002 and March 2003, creating day two offices. Figure 1.1 shows the cumulative expected roll-out of offices in stages 2 and 3. While most day two offices were operating by the start of the 2003/04 financial year, a large minority of offices remain to be rolled out. To a lesser extent, this is also the case for day three offices opening up in the third stage of implementation. This extended roll-out for each stage will complicate the measurement of the effects of integrated offices until each stage is fully rolled out.

Figure 1.1 Cumulative office rollout: Jobcentre Plus stage 2 and 3

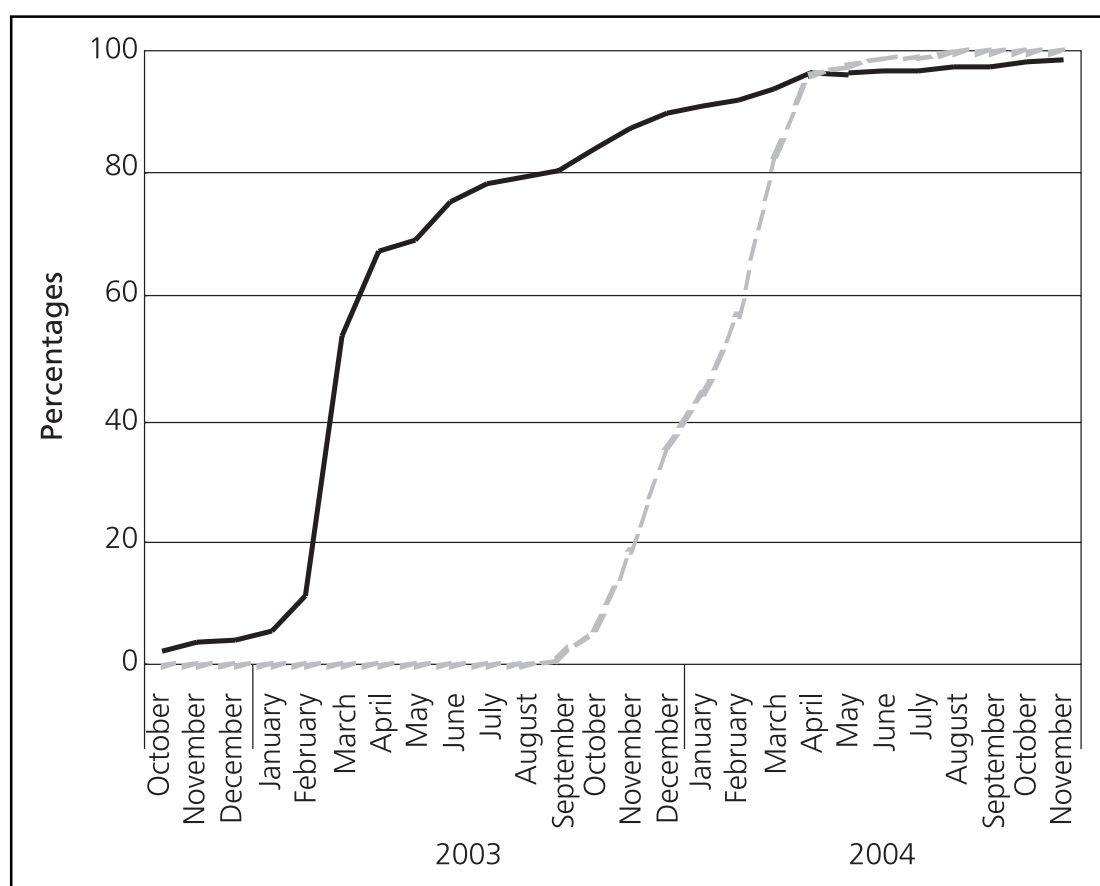


Figure 1.2 shows the process that new or repeat customers of working age benefits are intended to follow (in VANTIVE contact centres and associated Jobcentre Plus offices, as opposed to CMS sites). For JSA customers, the emphasis is on work and overcoming barriers to work; these customers follow the well-established Jobseeker's Allowance regime. For non-JSA customers, the introduction of a mandatory WFI as part of their benefit claim is new.

1.4 The Jobcentre Plus evaluation

This research forms part of a wider programme of work to assess the delivery and impact of Jobcentre Plus. In addition to this qualitative evaluation, the Department commissioned studies including qualitative research on deferrals, and a qualitative study looking at staff safety. There were also six waves of client exit surveys, which took place in the early months of the rollout of the Pathfinders, and which were intended to provide swift headline findings about early implementation. These exit surveys have now been replaced with a larger, more detailed quantitative survey which is currently underway and which covers all client groups in the first few months of their benefit claims.

The wider Jobcentre Plus evaluation also draws on findings from the ONE evaluation and other New Deal evaluation evidence.

1.4.1 The qualitative evaluation

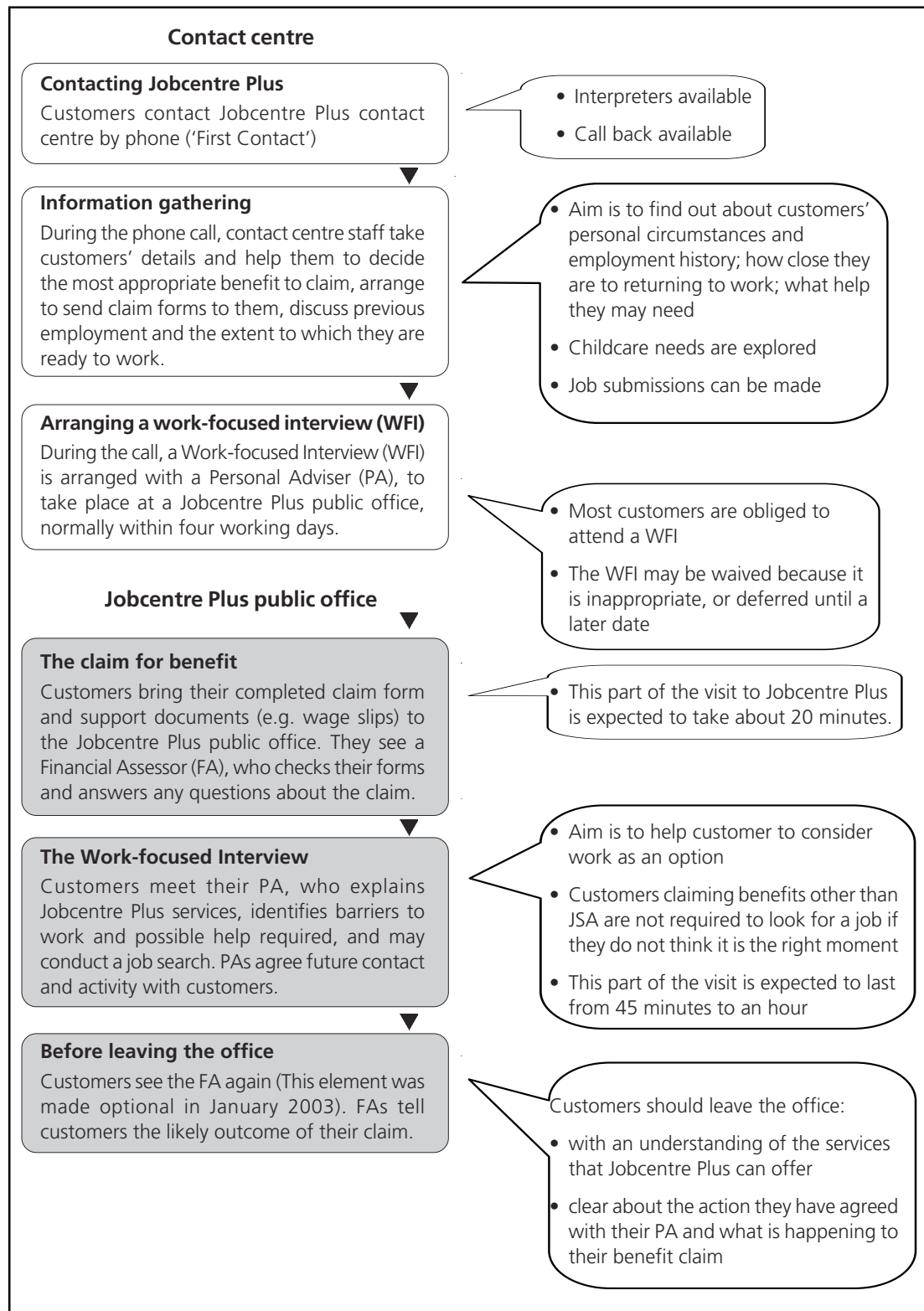
The overall aim of this evaluation is to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus offices are delivering the policy vision. More specifically, the research objectives are to:

- examine the effectiveness of Jobcentre Plus offices in delivering services to customers and moving customers towards the labour market;
- consider the impact on people's propensity to use the services and make the transition into work;
- assess the ability of Jobcentre Plus staff members to offer appropriate explanation and advice;
- consider customers' understanding and perception of the service received; and
- examine the extent to which the WFI moves people towards the labour market.

In addition, this third phase of the qualitative evaluation seeks to provide:

- further examination of the role of the contact centre's First Contact Officers (for example, the extent to which they provide benefits advice);
- an exploration of the role of Financial Assessors (FAs), for example, the extent to which they determine the accuracy of claims and explore potential fraudulent claims;
- an increased focus on the experience of Jobseeker's Allowance customers; and
- exploration of differences in the experience of non-JSA customers (lone parents, carers, and people claiming sickness or disability benefits).

Figure 1.2 The Jobcentre Plus process⁴



⁴ Adapted from Jobcentre Plus brochure, The work you want, the help you need.

1.4.2 Research design

This report presents the findings from qualitative research carried out with customers and staff of Jobcentre Plus (in Jobcentre Plus public offices and contact centres) from six clusters or districts. The areas were chosen to ensure a good mix of office sizes, urban and rural areas, and an appropriate geographical spread. A Pathfinder office and a contact centre were visited from each district. In addition, a day two office was visited from three of the districts. A total of nine Jobcentre Plus public offices and six contact centres were therefore visited as part of the Phase 3 research. All of the public offices were using the VANTIVE computer software at the time of the research and so the findings do not reflect any issues related to the use of the new system, called CMS.

The main fieldwork took place between July and September 2003, more than six months after the day two public offices were established and a year after the Phase 2 research. This aimed to ensure that day two offices were given the opportunity for delivery to settle down and stabilise after they first opened under Jobcentre Plus. The day two offices included in this research were rolled out in Pathfinder districts and were amongst the earliest to be established. In addition, they were all located in Pathfinder districts and were previously involved in either the ONE pilot or delivering WFIs to non-JSA customers. Their experience of delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision may not, therefore, reflect the experience of those that opened later, that were not in Pathfinder districts, or those with no previous experience of delivering WFIs to non-JSA customers.

Several research methods were used to fully represent the process, experience, perceptions and impact of the delivery of Jobcentre Plus. These methods included in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a wide range of staff from Jobcentre Plus public offices and contact centres and customers (JSA and non-JSA). The managers of the Jobcentre Plus public offices and contact centres selected the staff members to participate, covering: First Contact Officers (FCOs); Office Managers (OMs); Financial Assessors (FAs); Personal Advisers (PAs); and Floorwalkers Managers (FWs). Non-JSA customers were drawn from specific 'customer groups' determined by the benefit claimed. These groups were lone parents, carers and people claiming sickness or disability benefits. Non-participative observations of First Contact, FA meetings and WFIs were used to gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics of customer and staff interactions and to enrich the understanding achieved by the research. In total, 62 staff were interviewed across Jobcentre Plus pathfinder and day two offices, and 25 staff from contact centres. Over 130 observations were completed, and 114 customers were interviewed from both JSA and non-JSA groups.

Letters were sent out to Jobcentre Plus customers, explaining the purpose of the research. Individuals not wishing to take part were given the opportunity to 'opt out'. A gift of £15 was offered to each customer taking part in the research. Interviews with customers took place approximately three months after they started their new or repeat claim for benefit by calling a contact centre. Both JSA and

non-JSA customers were able to recall, in detail, the nature, focus and content of face-to-face discussions with Jobcentre Plus staff and provided the research with a wealth of information. In contrast, they consistently struggled to recall the details of discussions held over the telephone. Where possible and appropriate, evidence for observations of First Contact are used to address gaps in customers' recall of such discussions.

A full account of the methodology adopted for the research and copies of the research tools used are provided in the appendices to this report.

1.5 Research context

Phase 2 of this evaluation was undertaken immediately after the end of industrial action, which accompanied the introduction of Jobcentre Plus. As a result, offices were disrupted whilst returning staff members were integrated into their new roles within Jobcentre Plus. Phase 3 was not conducted alongside, or following, any industrial action. This may have implications for the research findings since offices were generally experiencing less disruption in the delivery of services than previously. However, the fieldwork coincided with the start of the summer holidays in some areas and with local industrial holiday weeks in others. As a result, the offices were busy handling an increase in customers, often with less staff who were on annual leave.

1.6 Report structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** explores the delivery of First Contact by contact centres;
- **Chapter 3** looks at how benefit services were delivered in Jobcentre Plus public offices by FAs;
- the nature, content and timing of WFIs with PAs are described in **Chapter 4**;
- the experiences and perceptions of jobseekers are outlined in **Chapter 5**;
- **Chapter 6** explores the experiences and perceptions of non-JSA customers (lone parents, carers, and sick or disabled people);
- **Chapter 7** discusses both staff and customers' perceptions of the office environment and the facilities available; and
- **Chapter 8** presents the conclusions of the qualitative evaluation to date.

2 First Contact

This chapter explores the delivery of First Contact in Jobcentre Plus contact centres. The operation of the contact centres is described in Section 2.1. How First Contact Officers (FCOs) identify customers' benefit and advice needs is outlined in Section 2.2, and the provision of a work focus at the First Contact stage is discussed in Section 2.3. Section 2.4 covers the procedures for booking appointments and the use of 'Must Do' lists, and finally, progress towards the vision is described in Section 2.5.

2.1 Background

At the time of the research, contact centres were expanding to cope with the roll-out of day two offices. In some cases, contact centres were expanding on site, whilst others were being moved to new larger sites. Where contact centres relocated, they sometimes lost a high proportion of their more experienced staff. Most contact centres had had to recruit large numbers of new staff, and offer them intensive on-the-job training alongside their formal induction processes. Offices were often organised in mixed teams of experienced and less experienced staff, so that colleagues could share experience, and experienced colleagues could help with any difficult enquiries.

2.1.1 Role of the contact centre

Customers who initiate a claim for benefit through Jobcentre Plus are expected to make First Contact with the service through a telephone call to the contact centre. FCOs are responsible for taking details of customers' personal circumstances and reasons for making the claim; checking their eligibility; establishing their current work status, barriers to work and job readiness; conducting a vacancy/opportunity match and booking them an appointment with a Personal Adviser (PA) for a Work-focused Interview (WFI) at the relevant Jobcentre Plus public office.

Contact centre staff expressed a range of views about the role of the contact centre. In some cases staff (both managers and FCOs) described the role of the contact centre as 'a gateway' to the Jobcentre Plus service. These FCOs viewed their role as

being to introduce the service, explain the process and promote the support available from the staff at the public office to customers. In other cases, staff described the contact centre's role in more limited terms, indicating that their job was to book appointments for customers.

2.1.2 Mode of contact

Customers initiate contact with Jobcentre Plus by telephoning the contact centre from 'warm phones' located in Jobcentre Plus public offices, or from a private telephone. Some FCOs indicated that they would offer call backs to customers if they were calling from home, or from a mobile.

In some cases, customers may send completed forms to Jobcentre Plus via a third party, for example, when they have been given forms at a Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). In these cases, FCOs will 'cold call' the customers at home in order to book a WFI for them. Staff in some areas shared responsibility for following these cases up. Staff sometimes disliked making cold calls, because they felt it was more difficult to introduce the service when they had to call the customer '*out of the blue*'.

FCOs indicated that calls tended to last between seven and ten minutes if the customers' circumstances were fairly straightforward. However, more complex calls could take up to twenty minutes to complete.

2.2 Establishing customers' benefits needs

FCOs use VANTIVE scripts to collect standard information including customers' personal details, current employment and living arrangements, dependants, partner's details (including work situation) and savings. FCOs appeared to use VANTIVE to varying degrees depending on their experience.

'There is a series of questions on there [Vantive] and I find that very useful, not having any background knowledge.'

(First Contact Officer)

In some cases, this meant that FCOs relied on the VANTIVE script quite heavily. Consequently, their conversations with customers could appear from observations to be fairly mechanistic, and did not always reflect information that the customer had offered earlier in the conversation. In other cases FCOs, particularly those with longer standing experience, tailored the VANTIVE script to reflect their personal styles or language.

2.2.1 Establishing benefit claim type

The way in which staff determined the appropriate benefit varied both across and within case study areas. Decisions about the appropriate benefit claim type were made on the basis of customers' assumptions about the benefit to which they were entitled, information collected using the VANTIVE script, and the knowledge and expertise of the FCO in relation to different benefits. FCOs indicated that the

identification of customers' benefit needs was often customer driven.

'Usually the client...knows exactly what benefit they want to claim, that's also a big help.'

(First Contact Officer)

FCOs usually verified these assertions by confirming key eligibility criteria, for example availability for work. In some cases however, FCOs indicated that they did not view it as being their responsibility to verify if customers were making the correct claim.

Where customers were not certain of which benefit they wanted to claim for, the FCOs would determine the appropriate benefit by asking the relevant questions on customer circumstances from the VANTIVE script.

Staff generally felt confident in identifying appropriate benefits for customers. The main exceptions were where customers were making a claim for Bereavement Benefit (BB), or Carer's Allowance (CA). These benefits sometimes caused difficulties for staff who had not come across them before, usually because they were new to their jobs. In other cases, staff's prior knowledge and experience aided them in the identification of the appropriate benefit. Some staff were not confident about identifying the correct benefit. This was particularly the case where staff were new to their position and had received limited training in relation to benefits.

'Most benefits I still don't understand. The only reason I understand a bit of them now is from what I have learnt from the contact centre and not from training.'

(First Contact Officer)

Benefits knowledge often seemed to result from experience rather than training. Training appeared to be delivered somewhat inconsistently across different offices (see Section 2.5 for further information).

2.2.2 Additional benefit advice

Some FCOs viewed it as their responsibility to make a full assessment of a customers' eligibility for benefits in addition to the primary benefit being claimed, including, for example Housing Benefit (HB) or Council Tax Benefit (CTB), to ensure that customers were getting all the benefits they were entitled to. This view tended to be expressed by FCOs with more detailed knowledge of benefits, either through longer-term experience of working in the contact centre, or in previous Benefits Agency (BA) positions. Some FCOs also referred customers to additional benefits help and advice including information on the tax credit help line, and referral to benefit specific telephone helplines.

Whilst FCOS are not expected to give customers an indication of what benefit they will receive, customers sometimes asked for this information. A strong message from FCOs was that as they did not have sufficient knowledge to give an indication

of how much they might receive, they were reluctant to offer advice in case it was inaccurate. Observations supported this view. In some cases, FCOs indicated that they could only give an indication of the rates, but that '*it was not gospel*'. In other cases, FCOs were observed giving customers an indication of the level of benefits they could expect to receive.

FCOs identified a number of barriers to offering more detailed benefits advice. For example, FCOs indicated that it is necessary to probe the customers in order to get a better understanding of their circumstances and make a full and accurate judgement on what benefits they may be entitled to. This was identified as being time-consuming, however, and would not occur where time was limited and where FCOs were conscious of call answering times. FCOs also indicated it was difficult to determine what benefits a customers might be entitled to if they do not speak English (this also presented a barrier to conducting discussions about work).

FCOs placed a considerable degree of emphasis on the necessity to '*learn on the job*' either through formal shadowing of, or informal information exchange with, colleagues or through personal experience over time. Where staff were not able to answer a benefits enquiry themselves they indicated that they might put a customer on hold and consult a colleague for advice. This seemed to be fairly straightforward in those offices that were arranged so that experienced, and less experienced FCOs sat together. In some cases, staff also transferred customers to other departments, such as Income Support (IS), for further advice.

Staff sometimes used benefit handouts as sources of information for themselves. Whilst staff were aware of the information available on ESCOM, they indicated they would not use this resource whilst on a call as it would take too long to do so.

2.2.3 Identification of Gateway Interventions

FCOs are expected to identify the need for a Gateway Intervention if the JSA customers or IS customers to whom they are speaking describe circumstances which suggest that they might fit into one of the Gateway Intervention categories (these are described in Section 3.4 of this report) and which requires additional scrutiny on the part of the benefits processors. Where a Gateway Intervention is identified, FCOs are expected to make arrangements for these interviews to be either conducted by the Financial Assessor (FA), or for the FA to arrange for the customer to be seen by the appropriate person. Exceptionally, FCOs indicated that they had been told only to book Gateway Interventions for Child Support Agency (CSA) cases.

Where FCOs had limited experience of identifying Gateway Interventions, they appeared to have a limited understanding of the appropriate procedures. FCOs also exhibited limited spontaneous recall of the different risk categories for Gateway Interventions. Inexperienced staff in newly established offices in particular had a low awareness of Gateway Interventions. Where awareness was low, staff felt that potential cases might not always be picked up. FCOs who had more experience of identifying Gateway Interventions appeared to be confident with the process.

2.3 Discussions about work

FCOs are expected to actively promote the work-focused emphasis of Jobcentre Plus by explaining the purpose, and compulsory nature of the WFI. They are also expected to discuss any current job search activity being undertaken by the customer, and conduct a job search where appropriate.

FCOs used a range of different approaches to introducing the work-focused element of the Jobcentre Plus service for JSA and non-JSA customers.

2.3.1 JSA customers

FCOs appeared to be comfortable in undertaking work related discussions with JSA customers. First Contact discussions were often focused on the employment history screen on VANTIVE, and included questions on what work the customer may have done in the past and what they were looking for in the future. However, the explanation of the WFI varied. In some cases, the purpose of the interview was not explained and there was limited 'selling' of the WFI to customers as part of First Contact.

'We'll get you set up for a Work-focused Interview. You must attend it because it is a condition of your receiving benefit.'

(Observation of First Contact)

'I need to book you an appointment now at the Jobcentre...I'll send you a letter with this date on it which will also explain a bit about the interviews you will get at the Jobcentre with a Personal Adviser.'

(Observation of First Contact)

In other cases, the WFI was explained in more depth, often by highlighting the types of support on offer.

'[name of PA] will talk to you about getting back to work, what you've done before, what kind of jobs you're interested in, if there is any kind of training you'd like to do.'

(Observation of First Contact)

Exceptionally, some FCOs were also able to begin to discuss customers' work experience and aspirations over the phone, and therefore identify particular action points for the WFI.

'It's called a work-focused meeting. They'll look at helping you to get a job' [explores job history, establishes that the customer wants to change job]. 'Maybe draw up a new Jobseeker's Agreement cause you've tried that kind of work and it's not suited you. So if you have any queries, she's your woman!'

(Observation of First Contact)

2.3.2 Non-JSA customers

FCOs generally indicated that they modified their explanations of the work focus for non-JSA customers, and this was supported by the evidence from the observations. When speaking to non-JSA customers, FCOs tended to place more emphasis on the wider support available through Jobcentre Plus available to the customer at the time of the claim and in the future, rather than solely on work.

'In a roundabout way, like I said to you before, with a non-JSA I will point out that this Jobcentre Plus service is there to offer you, this will cover you know, employment, possibly in the future, training, they can put you in touch with a training provider, they can offer to, if they haven't got a CV, you know, they can do things like get a CV drawn up for you, you know, more or less that's it, I don't go into a great deal of depth because what I feel about it is they want you to tell, say so much on the phone that it's like having junk mail through their door, you end up putting it all in the bin.'

(First Contact Officer)

FCOs did not always appear to be comfortable with their role in actively promoting the work-focused services available from Jobcentre Plus. Some FCOs indicated that they did not always feel this was appropriate because customers were unlikely to be available for work, and they modified their explanation accordingly.

'I personally don't like it being called a Work-focused Interview for Incapacity claimants and Carers, that's just my personal opinion. Automatically you could be getting people's backs up by saying you're coming in for a Work-focused Interview and it's not always the right thing to do and occasionally I will admit, I don't particular tell them it's a work focused meeting because you could be aggravating somebody's condition.'

(First Contact Officer)

They also indicated that they were reluctant to actively pursue the topic of work as non-JSA customers are not obliged to work as a condition of their benefit.

'...if it's a non-JSA customer you don't want to be too pushy because obviously there isn't an obligation to find a job.'

(First Contact Officer)

Some FCOs indicated that sick or disabled customers and carers in particular were unlikely to be work ready, and were therefore unlikely to respond positively to the issue of work being raised.

'People on IB which I've noticed when you ask them more than two questions about work they'll get very annoyed, very annoyed.'

(First Contact Officer)

The observations suggested that in some cases FCOs were making assumptions about a customer's job readiness, delivering a limited work focus as a result. For example, an FCO was observed to respond to a lone parent who cared for her

disabled child by saying,

'You're not eligible for work. We would normally do the employment section but you're not eligible for work. I'll go to the benefits section. These are compulsory questions.'

(Observation of First Contact)

There were also some examples of similar assumptions being made on behalf of sick or disabled customers.

'Are you available for work? You are sick! That means you're not available for work.'

(Observation of First Contact)

As a consequence, these customers may not have had the opportunity to indicate how they felt about work, and have a job search undertaken on their behalf.

However, other FCOs appeared to be more confident in promoting the work focus to those customers who they thought were likely to be work ready in particular, lone parents.

'I explain to them lone parents, a lot of lone parents would love to get out and work, but because of their circumstances maybe at the time...I don't find a problem promoting a Work-focused Interview.'

(First Contact Officer)

Some FCOs took extra care in promoting aspects of the service which they felt would be relevant to the customer, based on their conversations with them, and had a good understanding of the type of help available to non-JSA customers at the WFI.

'I'll make an appointment for you to see a Personal Adviser. They are there to help you get help, support and encouragement. At a future date they try to help you get back to work. We also have disability employment advisers. It's mandatory that you attend the PA meeting' 'If you could get into work, what would you like to do [...] you're a care assistant. Perhaps we could get you some training.'

(Observation of First Contact with a customer claiming IS)

Some FCOs had developed personal approaches to promoting the work focus to non-JSA customers. Amongst some, there were indications of a 'casual style' to introducing work, for example by gauging whether they are work ready on the basis of their personal circumstances, and 'tone' of the response to the questions posed, and then indicating that 'if you'd like me to look for work for you' that they could do this. Another FCO introduced the work focus to carers by asking them if they think that they could fit work with their other responsibilities. Other FCOs indicated that they would highlight particular aspects of support in order to engage the customer, for example with lone parents they would mention support available with childcare costs.

2.3.3 Job searches

FCOs are expected to consider job searches and job submissions for those customers who are work ready.

FCOs indicated that undertaking job search and job submissions was a key priority, and that management were placing more emphasis on this area of their work. This emphasis appeared to have increased from earlier research when it was found that job searches and job submissions were generally undertaken in quiet periods rather than as part of the customers' initial telephone call, and were mainly being undertaken for jobseekers. In some cases FCOs felt that job submissions were as important as call answering times. FCOs were aware of, and broadly comfortable with, their role in offering job searches to JSA customers, as they saw this as being both straightforward and rewarding. There was little evidence from JSA customers that this routinely occurred (see Section 5.1.5). However, FCOs were sometimes less comfortable about conducting job searches for non-JSA customers.

Managers monitored the completion of job searches using the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) (based on the Must Dos document). Some contact centres had also targets for job submissions. In other cases performance was measured against a Service Level Agreement (SLA).

FCOs broadly regarded the purpose of job searches as being to contribute towards the promotion of an active work focus as part of the Jobcentre Plus vision. In some cases, FCOs regarded them as an explicitly pre-emptive strategy, because by undertaking a job search at First Contact phase there would be the possibility that you could find a job for the customer before they were required to attend a PA meeting. In other cases, FCOs viewed job submissions as a means of keeping queues at job points down.

In general, FCOs were comfortable about their job search responsibilities. Staff found undertaking job searches rewarding because they felt that they could provide a more substantial service to customers, and potentially contribute to targets for job submissions. Managers felt that the increased staff confidence and ability that staff have acquired over time may have resulted in an increase in job search activity.

Job searches were generally undertaken towards the end of the First Contact conversation, and prompted by information collected on customers' personal circumstances and job readiness. However, in some cases FCOs undertook job searches following the work related questions on VANTIVE. They felt that this approach was more effective than leaving this part of the service to after the booking of the interview, when customers were often eager to finish the conversation. FCOs made the decision on whether to undertake a job search based on several factors. These included: FCOs' perceptions about a customer's job readiness; customer's response to, and participation in, the First Contact conversation; and practical issues. There were no examples of locally identified rules or guidance being used to inform these decisions.

FCOs sometimes made judgements on whether to offer a job search based on their perceptions of whether the customer was likely to move into work, rather than discussions with the customer about whether they were ready for work. Jobseekers were assumed to be job ready by virtue of the benefit claimed, and in particular, those who had just left work were targeted for job search. Lone parents were viewed as being more likely to be job ready by some FCOs, and job searches were therefore sometimes offered to these customers. In other cases, FCOs were prompted to undertake job searches as a result of how the customer responded to the questions, and the information volunteered by them on their personal circumstances and attitude to work.

However, other FCOs would not conduct job searches for non-JSA customers unless asked to by the customer. This was in the belief that it was inappropriate at the contact centre stage because, for example, the customers' circumstances were likely to have changed very recently hence a new claim for benefit. Some FCOs had never undertaken a job search for a non-JSA customer.

Where discussions about work had been limited, FCOs did not generally offer a job search and this supports evidence from research with JSA customers (see Section 5.1.5). Practical issues, for example, time constraints also appeared to impact on whether job searches were offered to all customers. FCOs indicated that where they were conscious of having callers waiting, they were unlikely to undertake a job search.

FCOs did not appear to regard their role as being to persuade customers to take up the offer of a job search. Some would only go on to conduct job searches if their initial offer of a job search was taken up spontaneously. There was limited evidence of FCOs trying to persuade customers of the benefits of participating in a job search. FCOs did not view this as being part of their role.

'I don't see it as part of my job to be forcing people who are really not interested into doing that. That's up to their PA to decide whether they should press any further.'

(First Contact Officer)

The FCOs undertook job searches based on information collected on customers' work history, job aspirations and practical issue like the wage level a customer would accept, and the distance to which the customer was prepared to travel to work. FCOs sometimes had lists of local vacancies available to them for reference. Searches were undertaken on the basis of labour market types (Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes).

2.3.4 Job submissions

FCOs can submit customers to jobs either by sending out application forms to them, or by contacting the employer on the customers' behalf to discuss the job in more detail and possibly arrange an interview. Where job submissions are made, this is then recorded on the Labour Market System (LMS).

In some cases it was reported that an FCO's decision on whether to submit a customer to a job vacancy would be influenced by considerations such as whether the submission was likely to be successful, and whether submissions were appropriate to the needs of employers (and whether employers would therefore continue to use the service).

'So you've got to emphasise...that people understand that they're submitting quality to the right jobs, either that or you'll just lose employers, employers will say...if they're submitting people that are not suitable.'

(First Contact Officer)

Like job searches, job submissions are sometimes limited by time constraints, and staff acknowledged that this impacted on the service delivered.

'But fortunately most of our calls are on the Monday and pressure is on to take calls to keep a hundred per cent answering something has to go, because if we all spent fifteen minutes with a customer, that hundred per cent would be somewhere around sixty per cent.'

(First Contact Officer)

In some cases, when job submissions were limited because of time constraints, customers would be caseloaded until the time of their PA meeting and undertake follow up vacancies for them when they had more time.

2.3.5 Caseloading

Caseloading was undertaken in some offices. FCOs offered to caseload customers where they felt that they may be able to find them a job in the future. FCOs acknowledged that this meant that the customers who were most likely to move into work were most likely to be caseloaded (typically jobseekers). These customers remained on FCOs' caseload until the date of the PA meeting. In other cases, FCOs indicated that if their initial job searches were not successful they would refer the client straight to the PA.

2.4 Booking appointments and next steps

Once FCOs have booked an appointment for the customer on the LMS system, they confirmed key details with the customer, which are then included in a follow up letter to the customer. Details include the name of the PA, the time of the WFI, the location of the Jobcentre Plus office, and what identification they should bring with them.

FCOs generally reported telling the customer that they will see both an Financial Assessor (FA) and a Personal Adviser (PA), with some explanation of what will happen at these meetings. In other cases, customers were told to arrive twenty minutes early for the WFI, but it was not always explained that this was so they could see an FA. Some FCOs told customers the likely length of each meeting and how

long they can expect to be in the public office overall. FCOs used the Must Do document to remind themselves of these details.

'It [the wrap-up section in VANTIVE] only partly covers what the PA does, so I have the Must Do list, which is I think better, just need to add a couple more things, but I find that list better.'

(First Contact Officer)

In some cases, FCOs were observed as reiterating the mandatory nature of the WFI. In some cases, FCOs may have also explained longer-term obligations, for example 13 week review meetings for JSA customers.

FCOs also reminded customers of the requirement to bring two forms of identification to the meeting, often giving a number of possible examples, including driving licence, passport, household bills, bankcards, bank statements, other benefit books, a P45, and wage slips. Proof of redundancy and medical certificates were also requested where appropriate. However, in some areas a less detailed explanation of evidence required was offered.

FCOs may also remind the customer that they need to complete the benefits forms sent to them before they attend their appointment at the Jobcentre. In some cases the FCO could also give the customer their PA's contact details so that they could notify the PA if they were unable to attend the meeting.

FCOs may tell customers that if they need any further assistance they should get back in touch (and they may give out their name).

In other cases, FCOs indicated that they felt less confident about explaining what would happen when customers attended their meeting at the public office, often because they felt that they had limited knowledge of what would be covered by staff in the FA and PA interviews. In such cases, FCOs said that they would like to undertake visits to public offices in order to address this knowledge gap.

2.4.1 Additional information offered

Some FCOs offered additional information to customers about the services available through Jobcentre Plus. Common examples included referrals to Jobseeker Direct, Work Train and the New Deals. FCOs also sometimes offered information about local initiatives and opportunities, for example recruitment drives by large employers.

2.4.2 Deferrals and waivers

FCOs have the ability to defer the work focus interview where they feel that it would be inappropriate at the appointed time or would not be of benefit to the customer because of their circumstances at the time of contacting Jobcentre Plus. Work-focused interviews can be waived where a customers' claim for benefit is wholly retrospective, or where the customer is unlikely ever to benefit from a WFI.

FCOs appeared to have an understanding of the common circumstances under which it was acceptable to make a deferral and waiver. However, they appeared to be less confident in explaining how they would decide whether or not a WFI was appropriate. As a consequence, these staff were likely to have more difficulty in making decisions for customers with more complicated circumstances.

2.4.3 The mandatory nature of the Work-focused Interview

FCOs indicated that in general they would emphasise the mandatory nature of the WFI to both JSA and non-JSA customers. FCOs used phrases including *'you need to attend this meeting'*, *'it's a condition of you receiving benefit'*. FCOs sometimes mentioned the mandatory nature of the meeting several times.

However, observations undertaken at contact centres suggested that the mandatory nature of the WFI was not always mentioned explicitly and as a result customers may have been less likely to attend the interview. In some cases, FCO did not mention the mandatory nature of the interview even where customers queried the relevance of the interview. For example, an FCO indicated that they *'[I] just need to book you an appointment'*. When the customers questioned, *'What's that for?'*, the FCO responded by saying, *'Just basically to see if there's anything else they can help you with'*.

2.4.4 Use of the 'Must Dos' document

The non-JSA customer 'Must Dos' document outlines a list of things that PAs, FAs and FCOs must do in order to promote the work focus to non-JSA customers. It also includes a reminder of the key differences between JSA and non-JSA customers, and some key operational requirements. The document is intended for use as a work aid by staff delivering the service, and for managers wishing to monitor the quality of the service being delivered in their offices.

FCOs were generally aware of the Must Do document. This was often because this document was used in preparation for, or response to, quality assurance of service delivery, or has been used on visits by the Pathfinder Improvement Team (now the Work Focused Delivery Team).

In some cases, FCOs used the 'Must Dos' as a working document or prompt, for example, to help explain the WFI to customers, and highlight all the assistance available through Jobcentre Plus including the Internet, job points offering to do job searches, and caseloading. However, FCOs acknowledged that the document was less useful for customers making repeat claims as they may get irritated or impatient because they were already familiar with the system,

'For some claiming new benefit, absolutely brilliant. For second or third claims a waste of time, because I've had one person last week, and he talked over me, saying I know that, I know that, I know that, I know that.'

(First Contact Officer)

In some offices quality assurance checks were being undertaken using the Must Do document as regularly as every four months.

2.4.5 The appointment booking process

FCOs generally enter customer details into the VANTIVE and LMS systems whilst they are making the call, except in those instances where they are inexperienced.

FCOs indicated that they would usually book the first available appointment with a PA. In some cases they indicated that it was necessary to select an adviser with the appropriate skills, for example a lone parent adviser with knowledge of in-work benefits. In some contact centres staff had been provided with a list of PAs in the public offices served by the contact centre and their areas of expertise.

FCOs were usually able to book appointments within four working days of the customer making contact. However, there were some examples of customers having to wait for their appointment for longer. FCOs reported that it was sometimes difficult to book appointments because the LMS diaries were booked up, or not available. These issues had been raised with public offices where appropriate.

2.5 Progress towards the vision

Contact centres experienced a substantial degree of upheaval as a result of the roll-out of Jobcentre Plus, and the extension or relocation of contact centres. This upheaval was often accompanied by high staff turnover and the loss of more experienced staff. Newly appointed contact centre staff did not always feel that they had had sufficient training, particularly in relation to some benefits.

However, since previous rounds of research, there was some evidence of progress and good practice on the part of individual staff. Contact centre staff had a higher awareness of the need to undertake job searches and job submissions. Staff in contact centres appeared to be using the non-JSA customer 'Must Dos' more actively than previously. This document was used by FCOs in conjunction with VANTIVE as a prompt in the delivery of First Contact services to non-JSA customers. Managers indicated that this document was also used to monitor performance, and quality assure services delivered in contact centres, and particularly the delivery of the work focus.

Whilst experienced staff appeared to be comfortable with undertaking work related discussions with JSA customers, there was still some discomfort with raising the issue of work with non-JSA customers across all staff. The research also identified some evidence that FCOs were not actively promoting a work focus by discussing work, or explaining the mandatory nature of the WFI to both JSA and non-JSA customers.

There was some evidence of individual FCOs providing good explanations of the types of service and support that were available through Jobcentre Plus. In some cases these explanations were tailored to the customer's personal circumstances, and possible action points for the WFI identified.

2.5.1 Barriers to progress: benefits training

FCOs had typically received benefits training on the five main Jobcentre Plus benefits, and basic computer training for the VANTIVE and LMS systems. The length of training received appeared to have varied considerably. In some cases, FCOs indicated that they had received training on new issues/policies including tax credits, disability awareness training and training in supporting customers with mental health issues. However, in other cases staff appeared to have only received general training.

In general, staff did not feel that the benefits related training they had received was sufficiently detailed in order for them to perform their jobs effectively.

In particular, staff felt that they would have liked more detailed information on benefits other than JSA and IS.

It was also suggested that some of the training came too early and was forgotten before they could put it into practice. In some cases, FCOs also felt that the training was of a poor quality. In some contact centres, staff felt that the quality of training was getting better, and that new staff were benefiting from this. Disability training was viewed as particularly positive.

Some FCOs had had no formal training because they had started working at the contact centre in a period where no training had been available. Where this was the case, the FCOs felt that it was preventing them from offering customers more detailed advice on their likely benefits entitlement.

'To be honest the FCOs don't get involved in benefit advice because, partly because they don't have the training.'

(Contact centre Office Manager)

2.6 Conclusions

Contact centres have suffered substantial upheaval as a result of the roll-out of Jobcentre Plus, and this appears to have resulted in a high level of staff turnover. Consequently, some offices were staffed by mixed teams of experienced and inexperienced staff. Staff experience sometimes impacted on the level of benefits advice offered to customers; the identification of Gateway Interventions; and the level of explanation offered in relation to Jobcentre Plus customers.

There was mixed practice in relation to the delivery of the work focus at First Contact, but more detailed work related discussions, job searches and job submissions tended to be undertaken for those (usually JSA) customers. This was the case

because FCOs judged, on the basis of the benefit claimed, that the customers were likely to be interested in work, or because customers volunteered information on their desire to work. Work related discussions – and job searches in particular – were offered to non-JSA customers if they clearly indicated that they were interested in work. This may be in part because FCOs saw their role as being to book appointments and provide a gateway to the system, rather than challenging customers' attitudes towards work. Time constraints and performance target pressures (particularly call answering time) were also identified as limiting the degree to which work related discussions – and sometimes job searches – could be undertaken.

However, this research identified examples of FCOs having interpreted their remit more broadly, for example by offering additional benefit advice, actively promoting the work focus to customers (even those who did not appear to be immediately work ready), or trying to make appropriate job submissions. This good practice tended to be demonstrated by experienced individual FCOs, but is illustrative of the potential role played by FCOs in the successful delivery of the Jobcentre Plus vision.

3 Meetings with Financial Assessors

This chapter explores how benefit services were being delivered, through Financial Assessors (FAs), in Jobcentre Plus public offices. There were some variations in terms of the organisation of FAs and the booking of customer appointments (Section 3.2). Benefit services are delivered through FAs, whose role it is to check claim forms and supporting evidence, and respond to customer's benefit queries (Section 3.3). FAs also play a role in minimising benefit fraud and error (Section 3.4). This chapter also explores the Jobcentre Plus process and how FA meetings link to Personal Adviser meetings (Section 3.5). FA responsibilities are included in a 'Must Dos' list and the extent to which these tasks are followed is discussed in Section 3.6. Workload management issues are covered in Section 3.7 and some good practice is highlighted in Section 3.8. Finally, the chapter summarises where progress has been made (Section 3.9) and draws some overall conclusions (Section 3.10). The experience of day two offices is reported separately within each section highlighting where practice compares or differs to practice in Pathfinder offices.

3.1 Models of delivery

Some Pathfinder offices operated a pool system whereby FAs dealt with the next customer in line. Although the VANTIVE booking system pre-booked FAs to customer appointments, a pool system was reported to have the advantage of greater flexibility, for example if an FA was on sick leave. It also allowed an FAirer distribution of workloads, for example if some customers failed to attend, or if Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and non-JSA appointments were allocated unevenly across FA diaries. In another office, FAs were pre-allocated to appointments by the Team Leader a day or two beforehand. In these offices FAs saw both JSA and non-JSA customers.

In another office FAs specialised in JSA, Incapacity Benefit (IB) or Income Support (IS). Consequently customers were allocated to the relevant FA specialist by the Team Leader at the start of each day. This model had been adopted following its successful

use in an earlier ONE pilot, although it did require FAs to have a general knowledge across all benefits to enable them to provide cover for colleagues if necessary.

In general, benefit claims were processed by separate processing teams rather than FAs. However, in some offices a few FAs had received training within the previous year to be able to process claims. In some offices this was so that FAs could process some customers' claims the same day and thus move closer to the Jobcentre Plus vision of parallel processing, and so that FAs could assist benefit processors during busy periods. In other offices, it meant that an FA would be able to process claims for JSA customers who considered their case to be urgent, thus avoiding any potential difficulties for customers who were unable to wait for a benefit payment.

Pathfinder offices were following the business model of customers seeing the FA before the PA. The policy intent is that any benefit queries the customer may have are resolved prior to the Work-focused Interview (WFI). However, it was reported by some FAs that there were occasions when customers (across all customer groups) would see a PA first, for example when FA schedules were behind. It was not possible to ascertain the extent to which this impacted on the content of the WFI. Some non-JSA customers also reported seeing the PA first either because they were late for their appointment or because the office was running behind schedule (see Chapter 6).

Some Pathfinder offices had introduced a new pre-appointment checking system whereby FAs telephoned customers the day before their appointment to check whether customers were still able to attend their appointment, whether they had received and completed their claim form, and to remind them of the supporting identification and evidence they needed to bring with them. A particular benefit reported was that this had helped to reduce the problem of a high 'fail to attend' rate.

3.1.1 Appointment booking system

In some areas, difficulties were reported with the appointment booking system and the First Contact process, which could hinder the delivery of services in the Pathfinder public offices. These difficulties included:

- double-booked appointments;
- customers attending their appointment with no claim forms or the wrong claim forms which impacted on the ability of the FA to conduct the meeting (see Section 3.2.3);
- customers being unaware that they would see a FA because the confirmation letter only mentioned the PA, causing confusion for some customers on arrival (this is also reflected in the customer research);
- interpreters not being booked for speakers of other languages – in an office which saw a high proportion of refugees and asylum seekers, it was reported that FCOs at the contact centre did not always add any information to the booking

system as to whether a language line interpreter was required. This could mean that the FA had to re-book the customer's appointment unless they were able to book a language line interpreter for later that day, or unless the customer had someone they could call upon at short notice to interpret for them; and

- the booking of FA appointments (through VANTIVE) according to the availability of PA appointments, regardless of how many FAs were actually available, was reported to cause problems in some offices. The booking system only allowed FCOs to book appointments into PAs' diaries if a free FA appointment slot could also be found. Where there were insufficient FAs available to meet the number of available PA appointments, additional 'fictitious' FA diaries were created, or the appointment diaries of FAs who were away on holiday or off sick were booked in to. This meant that more FA appointments were booked than there were FAs available to see customers, leaving FAs to juggle several appointments booked for the same time.

3.1.2 Day two offices

In the day two offices similar models of delivery were observed: benefit processing occurred off-site and FAs were multifunctional. An example was also reported where FAs were also required to be multifunctional across a number of other roles, helping front line staff with enquiries and job searches because of the small size of the office.

In some of the day two offices, customers were pre-allocated to FAs – which reflected practice in the neighbouring Pathfinder office. At others, FAs telephoned customers the day before their appointment, which again reflected practice in the nearby Pathfinder offices. Pathfinder offices and day two offices within the same Jobcentre Plus district used the same contact centre, therefore, as might be expected, where problems were reported by Pathfinder areas they also tended to be reported by day two offices.

3.2 The content of Financial Assessor meetings

This section looks at the two main aspects of the FA role: conducting benefit claim checks and giving customers further benefit information and advice.

3.2.1 Checking information on customers prior to the meeting

In the Pathfinder offices, where FAs called customers the day before their appointment, FAs had some prior information about the customer before they saw them. Before telephoning customers, FAs looked at the customer's details on the computer system, such as previous employment or benefit history, which could also alert them to potential fraud or whether a customer might be potentially violent. In the other Pathfinder offices the only preparation FAs did for meetings was looking through the customer's claim form and bringing up their details on the computer system just prior to calling the customer over. Reasons for this were a lack of time and because FAs did not know in advance which customers they would be seeing.

3.2.2 Explanations of the purpose of the FA meeting

FAs viewed their role as primarily to check customers' claim forms, to ensure that they were completed correctly and that all the relevant evidence had been gathered so that the claim was able to be processed. This was reflected in the way that FAs introduced themselves to customers and explained the purpose of the meeting to them. Explanations as to the purpose of the meeting were brief and focused on the benefit claim check.

'I'm going to check through the claim forms, make sure we've got all the evidence we need to process the claim.'

(Observation of an FA meeting)

'I'm your Financial Assessor, X. I'm checking your forms.'

(Observation of an FA meeting)

An exception was a Pathfinder office, where FAs telephoned customers the day before the meeting, FAs did not always give an explanation of the purpose of the meeting when they saw the customer because they had already explained this to the customer during the telephone call.

3.2.3 Customers' completion of claim forms

In Pathfinder offices staff reported that customers did usually make an attempt to complete their claim forms in advance, although the extent to which all sections of the form were completed varied. FAs reported problems with some customers not receiving claim forms in advance because of delays with the post and that some other customers were unable to complete forms due to literacy problems. In an area that had a high ethnic minority customer base, it was found that customers who did not speak English as a first language were less likely to have completed claim forms in advance.

When customers did not complete claim forms in advance, FAs tended to either ask customers to complete the form before they conducted the meeting, or FAs completed the claim form for the customer during the meeting. In both cases, this could cause disruption to the appointment schedule, either because the FAs ran over the allocated 20 minute appointment slot or because a further appointment had to be 'fitted in', sometimes after the PA meeting.

In some Pathfinder offices it was reported that if FAs were particularly busy, or if customers were late for their appointment, and claim forms had not been completed, then customers would not be seen and appointments would be re-booked.

3.2.4 The claim check

FAs checked claim forms by asking customers questions about their circumstances to verify the information on the form, for example about their last job, dependants or savings, and explained to customers the information required for any parts of the form that had not been completed. Customers were asked to initial any amendments made to the form by the FA.

FAs across Pathfinder offices felt confident in checking claim forms across all customer groups. Some FAs had been in the role since the launch of Jobcentre Plus and were therefore experienced in checking claim forms. Newer FAs who had been in the role for less than a year also felt confident checking claim forms, having gained 'on the job' experience since their initial training. This reflects the findings of earlier research, where FAs gained confidence as a result of learning gained on the job from other FAs and colleagues in benefit processing teams. A particular view expressed by an office manager was that FAs now had a good understanding of what benefit processors needed to be able to process a claim and that the ability and accuracy of FAs in checking claims had improved.

As part of the benefit claim check, FAs asked customers for proof of identification and relevant supporting evidence such as payslips, P45s and medical certificates. FAs were very stringent about checking customers' identification and in some areas FAs also verified customers' details by comparing them with information already held on the Departmental Central Index (DCI) computer system. It was reported that relatively few customers attended without the necessary proof of identification and supporting evidence. However, when this did happen customers were told to return with the missing information as soon as possible because otherwise their claim could not be processed.

3.2.5 Day two offices

In day two offices where FAs had no prior benefit processing experience they reported feeling increasingly confident in checking claim forms. This also applied to FAs who had processing experience in one benefit, but had no prior experience of dealing with the whole range of Jobcentre Plus benefits. These findings reflect those of the previous research whereby six months after roll-out FAs generally felt more confident in checking claim forms across all customer groups, as a result of experience and knowledge gained on the job. There were no notable differences in the claim check process, as described above, in day two offices as compared to Pathfinder offices.

3.3 Providing information and advice

In addition to checking customers' claim forms, supporting evidence and proof of identity, FAs were providing customers with further information and advice. This had not been common practice in earlier phases of research. Much of the information and advice given was in direct relation to the customer's benefit claim.

Customers were usually given some idea as to how long it would take to process their claim, although in the customer research some customers reported that they were not given this information. Customers were also given information and advice on the most appropriate benefit for them to claim and on the eligibility criteria for different benefits, for example the difference between income and contributions based JSA, or the limits on savings. Customers might also be given information on backdating their claim.

3.3.1 Expected amount of benefit entitlement

The extent to which FAs gave customers an indication of the likely amount of benefit they could expect to receive varied across, and within, Pathfinder offices depending on the experience and ability of individual FAs. In some offices, FAs gave customers an indication of the general benefit rates along with a caution that they may actually receive a different amount.

'I wouldn't say you're going to get this amount of money. I'd say the rates are this if you qualify.'

(Financial Assessor)

Other FAs would only calculate the specific amount a customer could expect to receive if they were specifically asked to by a customer. There was still a reluctance among some FAs to give customers this detailed information because of concerns about misleading customers and because of the extra time that it took FAs to do individual calculations. However, in some Pathfinder offices FAs did routinely inform customers during the FA meeting of the expected amount of benefit. The reasons why these FAs were able to do this was: due to the on the job experience and increased benefit knowledge that FAs had gained over the previous year across all benefit types; or due to the use of specialist FAs who were responsible for processing their own claims and as a result had in-depth knowledge on specific Jobcentre Plus benefits.

3.3.2 Wider information and advice

In contrast to the findings from Phase 2 of the research, there was also evidence in Pathfinder offices to indicate that FAs were giving some customers wider information and advice about entitlement to benefits and financial help. This included:

- information about the Social Fund – including the option to apply for a Crisis Loan and Community Care Grants;
- directing customers to other entitlements such as Disability Living Allowance, Child Benefit and tax credits⁵;

⁵ Although FAs were aware of the New Tax Credits: Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, introduced in April 2003, and referred to these specifically, for example when talking about training issues, but when talking generally about their role and their dealings with customers FAs tended to use the general term 'tax credit'. The term 'tax credit' is therefore used throughout this chapter, unless specified otherwise.

- information on new payment methods via bank accounts;
- checking whether customers have also made a claim for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit;
- information on permitted work rules; and
- directing customers to other sources of help, such as Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Findings from the customer research shows that across all customer groups some customers were given wider information and advice, however, it appeared to be an experience more common among lone parents.

In the Pathfinder office with specialist FAs, the Office Manager was seeking to develop the FA role further so that FAs would also be able to conduct in-work better-off calculations for customers and provide customers with in-work financial advice.

3.3.3 FA ability and confidence

In Pathfinder offices there were two types of FAs: those who came from a benefit background and had prior expertise in one or possibly two benefit types; and FAs who did not have any prior in-depth benefit knowledge. Since Phase 2 of the research, FAs reported feeling more confident and knowledgeable across all the Jobcentre Plus benefits as a result of learning on the job from fellow FAs who had expertise in a particular benefit, or from colleagues in benefit processing teams whom they telephoned for help and advice. For some FAs, knowledge gained on a day-to-day basis had plugged training gaps identified in earlier research. However, for others, on the job learning had not (yet) given them sufficient knowledge and confidence across all the benefit types to be able to give customers more in-depth information and advice and particularly to be able to calculate the expected amount of entitlement. Commonly, FAs wanted further training on just one particular benefit, either that which they had no prior experience in, or that which they found to be more complicated – in particular Incapacity Benefit.

3.3.4 Day two offices

With some exceptions, customers were being told when they might expect to receive a benefit payment. As in the Pathfinder offices, whether FAs gave customers an indication of the expected amount of benefit they could expect to receive varied. In some day two offices FAs gave customers a rough indication of the likely rate of benefit they could expect. In these offices, FAs had prior experience of one of the Jobcentre Plus benefits gained from working for the Benefits Agency. In the other day two offices FAs only informed customers of the expected amount of benefit if they were specifically asked. In this office FAs did not have any prior in-depth benefit experience and did not feel very knowledgeable or confident in doing these calculations and were also concerned about giving customers misleading information.

As in the Pathfinder offices, FAs in day two offices were giving customers wider benefit information and advice on entitlements to other benefits such as Disability

Living Allowance and tax credits. This had not been common practice in the Pathfinder offices six months after roll-out. Reasons why FAs in the day two offices were able to do this are not clear, but may be attributable to a number of factors including:

- FAs in some day two offices having had additional experience, help or support. For example, where a day two office had been involved in the ONE pilot, FAs had received help and support from the PAs who had previously undertaken the FA role. Another example, was where an FA in a day two office had prior experience from working as an FA in a neighbouring Pathfinder office since the launch of Jobcentre Plus; and
- training, whereby training for FAs in day two offices was not disrupted by industrial action as it had been when Pathfinder offices rolled out.

3.4 Benefit fraud and error

To minimise benefit fraud, FAs are required to identify and highlight claims with circumstances that might be more prone to fraud and error. These claims can then be followed up more closely through a home visit, a telephone interview, or a further office interview. This process is known as a Gateway Intervention. Circumstances that FAs are required to identify as a Gateway Intervention include:

- customers who have been self-employed;
- lone parents who are not receiving any child maintenance and are therefore of interest to the Child Support Agency (CSA);
- customers who have recently separated;
- customers who might be living with a partner as husband and wife, but have not declared this;
- customers with a care of address; and
- customers from abroad who require an Habitual Residence Test.

Generally FAs in Pathfinder offices were aware of the different circumstances that identified a claim as requiring a Gateway Intervention. FAs were more aware of Gateway Interventions required for lone parents with a CSA interest. This was largely because this had had the most impact on their role. As with the introduction of Gateway Interventions, FA Highers and/or FAs were now responsible for conducting CSA interviews with lone parents.

FAs only very rarely referred claims on to the Counter-Fraud Intelligence Service. Where FAs suspected a benefit claim to be fraudulent they either completed the relevant form to refer the claim on to the fraud service, or referred the claim on to the FA Higher to deal with. Circumstances of fraud that FAs were more familiar with were the ones covered by the Gateway Intervention, such as customers not declaring bank accounts, or receipt of tax credits, or customers indicating that they lived alone when they were living with a partner.

FAs viewed their role as being both important and successful in reducing fraud and error. This was largely due to the face-to-face nature of the claim check process, whereby FAs asked customers questions about the information they had put on the claim form; and FAs cross-checked information given by customers with information held on computer systems. However, the FA role in reducing fraud and error was felt to be limited and could not, for example, detect the use of stolen or forged identification.

3.4.1 Day two offices

In comparison with their Pathfinder colleagues, FAs in day two offices reported a similar level of awareness of Gateway Interventions, experience of fraudulent claims and had similar views on the role of FAs in eliminating fraud and error.

3.5 Next steps

After the FA meeting, customers are required to attend a WFI with a PA as a condition of benefit receipt.

3.5.1 Explanations of the PA meeting

In Pathfinder offices, FAs were very clear in explaining the Jobcentre Plus process to customers, informing them that after the FA meeting they would be seeing a PA. Customers were informed of this at the start of FA meetings and were reminded again at the end of the FA meeting when FAs handed the customer on to the PA. However, explanations given by FAs to customers as to the purpose of the PA meeting were not always clear. From the observation evidence it was apparent that some explanations as to the purpose of the PA meeting were very general and made only broad distinctions between the role of the FA – to deal with the benefit claim, and the PA – to deal with work.

'After you've seen me you're going to see a Personal Adviser who will go through and discuss the job side of things.'

(Observation of an FA meeting)

'She'll [PA] go through the work side.'

(Observation of an FA meeting)

Other explanations were more specific and broadly described what the PA would do in the meeting in relation to work, such as:

- discuss the signing on process (for JSA customers);
- go through the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSA customers); and
- offer advice and support with regards to work.

Evidence from the customer research suggests that JSA customers were generally being told what the meeting would be about (Chapter 5), whereas non-JSA customers were receiving little or no explanation as to the purpose of the meeting (Chapter 6).

It could be suggested that the ability of FAs to tell customers about the PA meeting depended on their own understanding of it. An example was found where there was relatively little communication between FAs and PAs and where FAs had a poor understanding of what happened in WFIs, and explanations to customers were limited to giving a broad description of the PA role. Similarly an example was found where there was a close working relationship between FAs and PAs and where FAs had a positive attitude and understanding of the work-focused element of Jobcentre Plus, and explanations to customers provided more detail. However, this pattern does not necessarily follow for all other Pathfinder offices.

One requirement listed in the 'Must Dos' document is for FAs to explain to non-JSA customers that their benefit claim is dependent on satisfactory participation in a WFI. However, there was relatively little evidence that FAs were doing this. There were limited examples where FAs were observed to tell some customers that the PA meeting was a condition of their benefit claim.

'You have to see a Personal Adviser for a Work-focused Interview – that's one of the conditions of your Jobseeker's Allowance, okay?'

(Observation of an FA meeting)

'But you'll need to see [name of PA] for your claim to be processed – it's part of the conditions for you to get benefit.'

(Observation of an FA meeting)

3.5.2 Handover to the Personal Adviser

Generally, when FAs had finished their meeting with a customer they went to see whether the PA was ready and either took the customer over to the PA or showed them to the waiting area and explained to them that the PA would call them over when they were ready. An exception was an FA who if the PA was not ready took the customer over to look at the job points whilst they waited. In contrast to the original Jobcentre Plus vision in the Pathfinder offices, FA and PA meetings were conducted at separate desks.

FAs passed on the completed claim forms to the PA and informed PAs of any key issues relevant to the WFI, for example, if a customer had left work voluntarily or had health problems or basic skills needs.

In some instances, FAs saw customers whom they felt should have been deferred and should not be attending a WFI at the start of their claim. In these cases FAs conducted the benefit claim check as normal, informed the PA of the customers' circumstances, and then passed the customer on to the PA for them to make a decision as to whether or not to defer the customer.

3.5.3 Further customer contact with FAs

Generally customers would only return to see the FA again after the PA meeting if the FA had been unable to complete the claim check within the first 20 minutes. In general FAs were discouraged from running over into the PAs appointment time, even though trying to fit customers back in after the PA meeting could be difficult to organise. Circumstances where FAs saw the customer again after the PA meeting included:

- customers arriving late;
- customers who had not completed claim forms in advance;
- when FAs needed to obtain further information such as contacting a customer's former employer; and
- customers needing an immediate payment.

The ability of FAs to complete meetings within the 20 minute time slot is discussed further in Section 3.7.

The only circumstances under which FAs would see customers again at a later date would be if customers were required to bring in missing identification documents or supporting evidence. Some FAs also reported seeing some customers who came back several weeks later with queries as to why they had not yet received any benefit payments.

3.5.4 Day two offices

Handover to the PA in day two offices was the same as in Pathfinder offices: FAs took the customer over to the PA or directed them to the waiting area; and passed the customer's completed claim forms on to the PA. Practice for dealing with customers who should have deferred by the contact centre was also the same as in Pathfinder offices.

There were some examples observed where FAs gave customers relatively full explanations as to the purpose of the PA meeting. FAs gave an indication as to what would happen, and also informed customers that attendance was a condition of benefit receipt. This reflected practice at the neighbouring Pathfinder office.

'You have an appointment with my colleague [Name], basically to let you know what help is available if you return to work. This is compulsory now to claim Income Support.'

(Observation of an FA meeting)

In other day two offices FAs informed customers that they would be seeing a PA next, but did not always give an explanation as to the purpose of the meeting.

A further reason reported as to why a customer might return to see the FA after the PA meeting was if the customer had specifically asked how much benefit they could expect to get. This was because FAs were not yet confident in doing benefit

calculations and were unable to complete them within the 20 minute appointment time. Therefore, FAs did the calculation whilst the customer was seeing their PA and then saw the customer again afterwards.

3.6 Monitoring the content of FA meetings and 'Must Dos'

To remind staff of the key elements of delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision to non-JSA customers, the Department for Work and Pensions produced a list of actions that FAs (as well as PAs and First Contact Officers) must do. To ensure that staff are actually delivering the 'Must Dos', Team Leaders are required to monitor FA meetings on a regular basis using Quality Assurance Framework checklists.

In some Pathfinder offices, FAs and/or FA Highers were aware of the 'Must Dos' list, although the contents of the list were not generally known in detail. Some FAs had been asked to sign a form to say that they had read the 'Must Dos' on the Jobcentre Plus intranet. Aspects of the role that FAs thought were covered by the 'Must Dos' list included:

- telephoning the customer beforehand – recalled by some FAs where this was done (although this was not actually an action in the 'Must Dos');
- checking information held on the computer systems;
- gathering all the necessary evidence and identification;
- checking and registering claim forms; and
- emphasising the compulsory nature of the WFI and the need for customers to attend (recalled by some FAs).

In some Pathfinder offices, FAs were formally monitored in their conduct of meetings, using Quality Assurance Frameworks. In an office where formal monitoring was not happening, the Team Leader was close enough to be able to overhear FA meetings so reported knowing what was happening. Some Team Leaders double-checked a proportion of the claim forms checked by FAs to see if they were fit for processing and fed back any problems to FAs.

3.6.1 Day two offices

In day two offices, awareness of the 'Must Dos' among FAs also varied. In some day two offices FAs were not aware of the 'Must Dos' and no formal monitoring of meetings was reported as taking place. In an office where FAs were aware of the 'Must Dos' list, the Office Manager was also in the process of drawing up an assessment checklist for the formal monitoring of FA meetings.

3.7 Ability to manage workloads

Across Pathfinder offices, FAs reported particular circumstances where they were unable to complete the meeting within the 20 minute appointment slot. These included:

- where customers had not completed claim forms in advance;
- where tax credit applications were undertaken;
- customers who had been self-employed and therefore needed to complete an additional form;
- customers from abroad who needed to undertake an Habitual Residency Test; and
- customers who did not speak English as a first language and/or used an interpreter (as well as taking longer, these customers were also reported to be more likely not to have completed their claim forms in advance).

Although customers in the above circumstances may be a minority of Jobcentre Plus customers generally, for areas that had a high proportion of ethnic minority customers, asylum seekers or refugees, language difficulties and the need for customers to undertake an Habitual Residency Test placed a considerable additional workload on FAs.

For JSA customers, in general, FAs reported that 20 minutes was sufficient time to conduct meetings, which in some cases only took 10 minutes to check. However, for non-JSA customers, 20 minutes was considered insufficient. This was because these claim forms were longer than JSA forms, and required FAs to collect more information. Particularly problematic was where customers with health conditions had to apply for both IB and IS. FAs reported that checking two sets of claim forms took anything from 30 minutes up to an hour for customers with more complex circumstances. The only Pathfinder office where IB claims were generally reported as unproblematic was the office with specialist FAs who also processed customers' claims. Where meetings were not finished within 20 minutes, FAs saw customers again after the PA meeting. For some offices this was difficult to organise when FAs had appointments booked back-to-back. To accommodate customers whose FA meetings tended to take longer, 30 minutes was suggested by several FAs as being a more appropriate length of time.

More generally, some Pathfinder offices reported new difficulties with managing workloads because of recent cuts in staff numbers. In some of these offices staff numbers were further reduced by staff away on long-term sick, or by staff who only worked during term-time. Some offices had extended their opening hours to fit in the necessary number of customer appointments. In some areas FAs were having to juggle appointments for customers booked into dummy/fictitious FA diaries, or into the diaries of FAs who were absent. The overall impact was that FAs felt under pressure and meetings were often rushed.

3.7.1 Day two offices

FAs in day two offices also found that 20 minutes was sufficient time for JSA customers, but that more time was needed when seeing non-JSA customers. In some of the day two offices staff reported having sometimes to re-book customers' appointments if they did not attend the FA meeting with completed claim forms. Staffing levels were only a concern in an office where staff numbers were due to be reduced.

3.8 Examples of good practice

The following examples of good practice were identified by staff (in Pathfinder Offices and/or day two offices), which they felt improved the delivery of services to customers.

3.8.1 Calling customers the day before

In offices where FAs telephoned customers the day before their appointment, FAs felt that this was good practice. The reported benefits of reminding customers about the meeting included increased attendance rates and customers arriving on time or early when they had not received claim forms or needed help with completing them. The problems reported by FAs in general when customers did not complete claim forms in advance suggests that any measures to minimise this, such as contacting customers prior to their meeting, would help improve the service that FAs are able to offer.

3.8.2 Checking customer information before the appointment day

In some offices FAs conducted in-depth checks on customer information held on VANTIVE, LMS, and DCI, either as part of the process of calling customers the day before, or as part of more general 'day before' preparations. Where this happened FAs reported it helped to identify possible fraud and error, helped them to prepare for the meeting and saved time during the FA meeting.

3.8.3 Close working relationships between FAs and PAs

Staff emphasised the importance of good communication and team work between FAs and PAs in delivering an effective service. Reports of good relations between FAs and PAs were common, although there was an exception where there appeared to be very little team work or communication between FAs and PAs. Examples of good practice aimed at specifically fostering good relationships and team work included: FAs and PAs job shadowing each other so that each gained a better understanding of the other's role and an appreciation of the pressure each were under; and deliberately integrating ex-BA and ex-ES staff in teams to achieve a more integrated service.

3.9 Progress towards the vision

In previous research, the main area of progress was that FAs had become more confident and knowledgeable in checking customers' claim forms across all the Jobcentre Plus benefits. For this round, the main area of progress has been in giving customers benefit information and advice. The findings suggest the service is progressing from being limited to a benefit claim check to being a more comprehensive service. In some Pathfinder offices FAs were informing customers of the amount of benefit they could expect to receive, whilst in other offices FAs gave some customers an indication of the general benefit rates they might be entitled to. Across offices there was evidence that FAs were giving some customers wider information and advice about entitlements to other benefits and financial help. This progress appears to have been achieved through gradual on the job learning, which has plugged some of the training gaps identified in earlier research, rather than as the result of any specific action taken in public offices.

'You just pick things up as you go along, listening to other people and asking questions.'

(Financial Assessor)

Progress has also been made in developing the skills of FAs to be able to process benefit claims. For example, in the Pathfinder office with specialist FAs (who came from processing backgrounds), these FAs were now also responsible for processing some claims themselves. In previous phases of research this activity had not become established due to the impact of the industrial action. In some other Pathfinder offices steps had been taken to train some FAs in benefit processing, although the reasoning behind this varied. In offices where benefit processing occurred off-site, staff felt that on-site processing (by FAs, or benefit processing teams) would improve service delivery to customers. Problems had been reported with claims taking longer to be processed because of the time claims spent in 'transit' and some claims getting lost in the post. Staff in public offices sometimes found it difficult to track down benefit claims when customers came in to enquire why they had not yet received any benefit.

In the office, where specialist FAs were already delivering a more comprehensive service, the Office Manager was working to extend the FA role beyond the Jobcentre Plus vision, with FAs providing customers with in-work benefit calculations and in-work financial advice.

3.9.1 Barriers to progress

Overall, compared to previous phases of the research, insufficient training was less of an issue for FAs. In general, training gaps seemed to have been filled in by experience and knowledge gained on the job over the last year. However, FAs still reported training gaps in some areas. In particular a lack of in-depth benefit knowledge on one or more Jobcentre Plus benefits was reported by some FAs to be the reason why they did not conduct benefit calculations for customers. FAs also

reported training gaps on some of the more recent introductions to the Jobcentre Plus service such as New Tax Credits and Gateway Interventions. In supporting FAs it was felt that initial FA training should be accompanied by job shadowing, with FAs spending their first week being accompanied by an experienced FA.

There was some evidence to suggest that a lack of communication between FAs and PAs, whereby FAs' understanding of WFIs was limited, may be a barrier preventing some FAs from giving customers clearer and more detailed explanations about the purpose of the WFI. Improving lines of communication between staff working in different Jobcentre Plus roles was a recommendation made in Phase 2 of the qualitative evaluation.

3.10 Conclusions

The findings from this phase of research and earlier phases highlight the extent to which FAs require an in-depth benefit knowledge in order to be able to deliver an effective and comprehensive service to customers. Some staff mentioned the importance of recruiting FAs from a benefit background because their prior knowledge brought them up to speed quicker. Even so, some FAs who did have a benefit background did still not feel fully confident across all the benefit types in giving customers more in-depth information and advice. However, the findings suggest that with more time these FAs, by asking fellow FAs and experts in benefit processing teams, will continue to learn and become more knowledgeable. Progress has indeed been made since the launch of Jobcentre Plus, albeit slowly. Consideration could be given to enabling FAs to become benefit specialists. However, this would only work in larger offices with several FAs and FAs would still need to be able to multifunction across all benefits to provide cover for colleagues. A more universal solution would therefore be to ensure that FAs have ongoing training to help them gain more quickly an in-depth knowledge across all the Jobcentre Plus benefits.

The research also raises the issue of the length of FA meetings. Although not a new issue, it is only in this phase of research that a clear and consistent picture has emerged as to the particular customer groups and circumstances where 20 minutes is not sufficient time. The findings suggest that a one size fits all meeting length does not meet the needs of the range of Jobcentre Plus customers.

The research has also highlighted the additional difficulties faced in areas with a large proportion of asylum seekers and refugees, or with a large ethnic minority customer base. Additional problems were caused by language differences, whereby meetings took longer to conduct and by a high proportion of customers requiring Habitual Residence Tests. Extra resources for interpreters were suggested.

4 Meetings with Personal Advisers

This chapter explores the delivery of Work-focused Interviews (WFIs) to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and non-JSA customers. Whether Pathfinder offices had generalist Personal Advisers (PAs) who saw both JSA and non-JSA customers, or specialist PAs varied (Section 4.1). Section 4.2 describes the content of WFIs in terms of how PAs were able to prepare for interviews, how the purpose of the interview was explained to customers, the extent to which work was discussed, whether the customer's benefit claim was discussed, the extent to which PAs gave customers information and advice and made referrals, whether or not job searches were conducted, how WFIs were brought to a close, the process for deferring customers at the PA meeting, and how PA meetings were monitored. Caseloading of non-JSA customers is also a key part of the PA role and how this operated is discussed in Section 4.3. Issues relating to PAs' workloads and targets for moving customers into work are explored in Section 4.4 and some good practice is highlighted in Section 4.5. The chapter ends by summarising where progress has been made (Section 4.6) and draws some overall conclusions (Section 4.7).

4.1 Models of delivery

This section describes the organisation of PAs, including the allocation of customers and the appointment system.

4.1.1 PA team set-up

In Pathfinder offices, PAs tended to specialise in the type of customers that they saw. There were PAs who saw only or mainly JSA customers, specialist New Deal for Lone Parent (NDLP) Advisers who under Jobcentre Plus had taken on lone parent new claims, and PAs who saw only or mainly other non-JSA customers (customers with health conditions and carers). To greater or lesser extents specialist PAs also saw other customer groups when this was required, for example non-JSA specialists might also see lone parents when the Lone Parent Advisers were busy or unavailable.

There was also an example of a Pathfinder office which had a generalist PA, in addition to specialist PAs, who covered all customer groups and saw emergency appointments.

However, for some Pathfinder offices having specialist JSA and non-JSA PAs (not including specialist Lone Parent Advisers) was a result of circumstance rather than design. In these offices it was the intention of the PA Manager that PAs should be multifunctional across JSA customers, carers and customers with health problems. The reason why PAs were not multifunctional was because it had not yet been possible to send JSA PAs on the non-JSA training. In these offices new PAs started with JSA WFIs, which were perceived to be more straight forward, and were then supposed to progress to seeing customers with health conditions (claiming Incapacity Benefit (IB) or Income Support (IS)) and carers.

However, there was an example of a Pathfinder office where PAs were generalists and saw customers from all customer groups as well as covering New Deal advisory work for one of the New Deals. In this office, staff would have preferred to adopt a specialist model for delivering WFIs so that PAs could develop specialist knowledge with a particular customer group.

The main advantage of having a specialist team set up was the depth of expertise and advice that PAs could offer to customers. However, the main advantage of having a generalist team set up was considered to be practical, through the flexibility multifunctional PAs provided in maximising the use of PA diary time and meeting the four day target for booking customer appointments.

4.1.2 Allocation of PAs to customers

In Pathfinder offices, customers would usually see the PA that they had been booked in to see. The exception was an office which had just started to trial a new 'pooled' system, whereby specialist JSA PAs would see the next JSA customer in line rather than the customer that they were originally booked to see. There were several reasons for this trial: some JSA PAs were absent on sick leave so their appointments were having to be re-allocated; the VANTIVE booking system did not book appointments evenly across PA diaries so some JSA PAs had more customers to see than others; if PAs were running late customers had to wait; and if customers were late or failed to attend, PAs were having to wait. At the time of the research the new system was still in its infancy so staff were unable to comment on how well it was working.

4.1.3 Length of PA appointment times

The length of time allocated for PA meetings in Pathfinder offices slightly varied. In some offices PA meetings (for both JSA and non-JSA customers) were allocated 40 minutes whilst in others PA meetings were allocated 45 minutes. There was also an example where PA meetings were only allocated 30 minutes. In previous phases of research PA meetings had been allocated 60 minutes (for non-JSA customers) as

required in the Jobcentre Plus vision⁶. Staff reported that the length of PA meetings had been reduced to meet the four day appointment target, and because PAs were not using all of the 60 minutes allocated to them (as had been found in earlier phases of the case study research).

4.1.4 Appointment booking system

PAs and PA Managers reported several problems with the appointment booking process. The main problem was that First Contact Officers (FCOs) did not always transfer the appointment booked on the VANTIVE system onto the PA diary system (LMS). As a result, PAs needed to check across both computer systems to find out what appointments they had. This also meant that PAs had to spend time setting up LMS records for new customers or updating LMS records for existing customers, which in some cases happened during the WFI and impacted on the amount of time that PAs had for actually conducting the WFI with the customer.

4.1.5 Day two offices

In some day two offices PAs were generalists and saw both JSA and non-JSA customers. Reasons for these team set ups included:

- the continuation of a generalist PA approach which had been in place from participation in the ONE pilot; and
- to provide flexibility to the appointment booking system, although the PA manager would have preferred for PAs to be able to specialise more.

In another day two office there was a generalist PA and a PA who focused more on non-JSA customers. Due to the small size of this office PAs also had other roles to cover. In day two offices WFIs were allocated 40 minutes.

4.2 The content of Work-focused Interviews

This section covers how PAs prepared for the interview using information available on LMS (Section 4.2.1), explanations to customers about the purpose of the interview (Section 4.2.2), discussions about work (Section 4.2.3), discussions about the customer's benefit claim (Section 4.2.4) and further information or advice (Section 4.2.5). Conducting job searches and ending the meeting are covered in Sections 4.2.6 and 4.2.7 respectively. Deferral and waiver practice is briefly described in Section 4.2.8 followed by monitoring processes and the use of 'Must Dos' (Section 4.2.9).

⁶ At the time of the fieldwork, the Jobcentre Plus policy allowed 60 minute appointment slots for non-JSA customers and 46 minutes for JSA customers. This, however, changed subsequent to the fieldwork (24 November 2003) to 40 minutes for both JSA and non-JSA customers.

4.2.1 Preparing for the Work-focused Interview

As well as setting up a customer's record on LMS, FCOs can also add additional customer information to LMS 'notes'. The extent to which FCOs did this was reported to vary depending on the individual FCO. Some PAs had found that the more experienced FCOs tended to collect more information from customers and thus recorded more details on LMS. The main pieces of additional information that PAs found useful to have in preparing for WFIs were: for JSA customers, to know what type of work they had done previously or were looking for now; and for customers claiming IB, to know about the nature of their health condition. It was reported that often there was no information about why a customer was claiming IB, or if there was the information would only say that the customer was 'sick'.

In general, more detailed prior information enabled PAs to mentally prepare for WFIs by giving them a background picture of the customer and an idea of the things they could talk about with them. More specifically, information on a customer's previous employment or the type of work they were looking for enabled PAs to prepare by doing a job search in advance of seeing the customer. Information on the exact nature of a customer's illness or disability enabled PAs to do some background research on the condition if it was something they were not familiar with so that they could better understand how the health condition affected them.

Lack of prior information is not a new issue and was reported as a problem by PAs in earlier phases of research. In this third phase of research, however, it appeared that PAs were used to conducting WFIs without having detailed information on LMS and that it was not viewed as being such a large obstacle to delivering WFIs. Having background information on LMS was reported as being useful and helpful, but not always essential. Where there was no prior information on LMS, PAs could look at the customer's claim form before the meeting and sometimes FAs would tell them about any particular issues or circumstances.

Similar issues were found in day two offices.

4.2.2 Explaining the purpose of the PA meeting

PAs understood the purpose of WFIs for JSA and non-JSA customers to be slightly different, which was reflected in the introductions that PAs gave customers in explaining the purpose of the meeting.

JSA customers

The purpose of WFIs for JSA customers was seen as being to help people into work and to ensure that they were aware of the conditions and obligations of claiming JSA in terms of actively seeking work and the fortnightly signing on procedure. Explanations given to JSA customers were fairly detailed and explained that the interview would be a discussion about work, that a Jobseeker's Agreement would be drawn up, and in some cases PAs also explained that a job search would be conducted.

'Hi, my name's X, we're just going to have a chat about what kind of jobs you're looking for. Together we'll fill out a Jobseeker's Agreement and then we'll do a job search to see what's out there.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

It did not appear to be common or a standard practice for PAs to inform customers that participation in the WFI was a mandatory part of the benefit claim process, although this was observed in some instances. Evidence, however, from the customer research suggests that this may have been more common and that JSA customers were sometimes told about the mandatory nature of the WFI (Chapter 5).

'My name is X. What I will do with you now is look at the job side of things, this is a mandatory interview which you've got to participate in. The first thing we'll do is a Jobseeker's Agreement, the second thing we'll do is get you to sign a few pieces of paper and third we'll look at the system to see if we can find anything for you job wise.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

Non-JSA customers

For non-JSA customers, PAs understood the purpose of the WFI to be primarily to ensure customers were aware of the help and services available through Jobcentre Plus. Explanations given to non-JSA customers tended to explain that meetings would discuss their current circumstances in relation to work and the help and services available to them.

'This is a Work-focused Interview and the purpose is to see what your situation is now and how we can help.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

'What you're chatting to me about, is there any help you feel could help you with getting back to work?'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

Some PAs also reassured customers that they were not going to be made to work.

'You might wonder why you have been asked to come here as the Doctor has signed you off. You need to see a PA whether or not you are looking or work. There's lots of different sorts of help available especially as you are claiming these benefits.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

Some PAs also explained that the requirement to attend the meeting was as a result of changes to legislation. Again, PAs generally did not tend to explain that participation in a WFI was a condition of benefit receipt, although this was observed in some cases. This finding is also supported by the customer research (Chapter 6).

'When you make a claim for benefit you have to have a Work-focused Interview. Now I understand you have children and you don't have to look for work on Income Support, but this just to talk about what you might do.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

Day two offices

In the day two offices PAs had no less of an understanding of the purpose of WFIs compared to PAs in Pathfinder offices and were as detailed in explaining to customers about the purpose of the meeting. This is likely to be due to the participation of the day two offices in other pilot initiatives (ONE and WFI Extension sites) which meant that PAs already had experience of seeing both JSA and non-JSA customers.

4.2.3 Discussions about work

JSA customers

WFIs with customers claiming JSA followed a standard procedure with two main parts. Firstly, Personal Advisers explained the fortnightly signing on procedure to customers, arranged a signing on day and time, and completed the customer's signing on booklet. Secondly, PAs completed a Jobseeker's Agreement with the customer.

The main focus of the Jobseeker's Agreement was on establishing the type of work customers were looking for, based on the condition of JSA that customers must be available for work and actively looking for work. Completion of the Jobseeker's Agreement involved PAs asking customers about the following:

- the types of work they were looking for, including the hours of work wanted, acceptable pay, geographical area of work and access to transport;
- their employment history, qualifications and skills;
- barriers to work, such as whether the customer had any health conditions or disabilities, or literacy problems; and
- the customer's proposed job search activities i.e. how they were going to go about looking for work.

In going through the Jobseeker's Agreement with the customer the PA could also tell customers, depending on their circumstances, about options for training, or other support and services available through Jobcentre Plus (see Section 4.2.5).

However, whilst the topics of discussion with JSA customers followed a common format and were focused around finding work, observations showed considerable variation in the extent to which customers were involved in drawing up the content of the Jobseeker's Agreement. In some cases completing the Jobseeker's Agreement led to an in-depth discussion of the customer's circumstances and aspirations, which was then reflected in the content of the Agreement. Discussions which were

more in-depth were a result of customers' own willingness to participate and desire to find a job, or through PAs asking further questions and probing for more information from less responsive customers.

In other cases, completing the Jobseeker's Agreement appeared to be a more mechanistic process with minimal involvement of the customer. Customers who were fairly unresponsive and gave only brief answers to the PAs questions were not always encouraged by the PA to go into further detail. For example, where customers were unable to think of three job goals, as required on the Jobseeker's Agreement, the PA might suggest job goals to the customer, rather than explore with them any other interests, work experience or aspirations they might have. Another example observed was where a PA told the customer what job search activities they needed to undertake and added these to the Agreement, without any discussion with the customer.

'You need to come to the Jobcentre at least once a week and use the job points downstairs.... Papers, we like you to read two papers a week. Hours, I'll put as flexible. Is that okay?'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

There was also some evidence from observations that although the Jobseeker's Agreement includes a short section on barriers to work, they may not be discussed in any depth in the context of how they impacted on the customer's ability to work and whether they need any additional help or support in returning to work. One example was of a customer who had made a claim for IB, but at the FA meeting was told they would have to claim JSA because they could not get a sick note – their health was not discussed at all in the meeting.

Overall, PAs reported that they felt confident in discussing work with JSA customers in terms of introducing the purpose of the meeting as a discussion about work and completing the Jobseeker's Agreement. However, the extent to which this resulted in an in-depth discussion about work varied, depending on PAs' individual personal skills and the interest and responsiveness of individual customers.

Non-JSA customers

In contrast to the work focus for JSA customers, WFIs for non-JSA customers were seen by PAs as having broader and more long-term objectives. PAs' aims of meetings with non-JSA customers were to establish a rapport with the customer and make them feel at ease so that they would be willing to return in the future, and to inform them of the help and services available. Moving non-JSA customers into work was not an objective for PAs at the new claim stage, but something PAs saw as being a longer-term aim.

WFIs with non-JSA customers did not usually follow a pre-determined structure but were based around PAs asking customers questions about their current circumstances in relation to work. Customers were commonly asked about what work they had been doing prior to their benefit claim, what other jobs they had done in the past,

and the type of work they wanted to do in the future and in some cases, whether they had done any training, or if they had any qualifications. They were also commonly asked about their barriers to work. For example, customers with health problems might be asked how long their sick note was for, about the treatment or medication they were receiving and how their health condition affected them. Lone parents would typically be asked about the number and ages of their children and whether they needed or used childcare.

Use of a more pre-determined interview structure was, however, found in a Pathfinder office where Lone Parent Advisers structured their interviews on a proforma with six questions that they went through with all lone parents. The proforma had been used by Lone Parent Advisers prior to Jobcentre Plus and included questions on: educational qualifications; employment history; work skills and vocational training; current work; barriers to work; and caring responsibilities.

There was little evidence from the observations that PAs challenged customers' own assessments of their ability to work, or encouraged customers who seemingly weren't interested in discussing work. The extent to which PAs' questions led to an in-depth discussion about work depended on the customer. Where customers were not interested in discussing work or were not very forthcoming in telling the PA about their circumstances then they were not pushed to do so. In general, PAs were reluctant to pursue discussions about work with customers who were not interested, which is associated with PAs' aim of wanting to make customers feel at ease. Observations showed that even for some customers – particularly those with health problems who expressed a definite interest in returning to work in the future, discussions about work were sometimes brief.

Customers with health problems or disabilities

In conducting WFIs with customers with health problems, discussions around work were more limited when:

- customers said that they wanted to work in the future, but did not know what they would like to do, or could do;
- customers said that they were not looking for work until their health was better, PAs accepted this and did not always ask the customer about the type of work they were looking for, or whether they might need help with re-training etc.
- customers were clear that they wanted to return to work with their current or former employer or to return to college when their health improved, PAs did not always engage these customers in a discussion of how realistic this was or initiate discussions on alternative options; and

- customers were experiencing depression. In these cases, there were examples in the observations of PAs encouraging the customer to talk to their GP in the first instance about their returning to work or starting training. Here, PAs seemed reluctant to set in motion any immediate referrals or suggestions for the customer during the WFI – *'I think Progress2Work would be excellent for you to get back on your feet, but I don't want to put any pressure on you at the moment.'*

Carers

Observations of WFIs with carers also showed that discussions about work were sometimes limited. When customers mentioned their caring responsibilities PAs did not pursue discussions about the customer's circumstances in relation to work any further, and sometimes presumed that the customer would not be interested in work: *'You're on Invalid Carer's Allowance. You wouldn't be looking at work then, part-time or full-time?'* (PA).

Lone parents

In contrast, observations of meetings with lone parents who knew what they wanted to do in either the immediate or longer-term future and where childcare was the main barrier to work, showed that discussions about work tended to be more substantive.

Some PAs had developed strategies for encouraging discussions with customers. Some PAs reported trying to engage customers in a discussion by asking about the customer's general long-term aims, rather than focusing on work directly. Another PA tried to engage customers by focusing on training opportunities very early on in the meeting, which observations showed seemed to have some success in engaging the customer in thinking about what work they would like to do in the future.

'The old way is that you'd just send your forms in...but we would like to know how we can help you more. You'd be amazed at what training there is, what would you like to do?'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA, customer with health problems)

In some cases where customers were interested in working in the future, PAs did suggest alternative types of work that the customer might wish to consider or suggested the option of part-time Permitted Work whilst claiming benefit. Only if the customer showed an interest in these options were they then discussed any further.

Following discussions about the customer's circumstances, PAs then tended to move on to inform customers about the services and support available through Jobcentre Plus (see Section 4.2.5). Where customers had not been very interested or involved in talking about their circumstances in relation to work, some PAs hoped to engage the customer's interest in this part of the meeting.

Generally, PAs felt confident in explaining the purpose of the WFI and in engaging in a dialogue with non-JSA customers about work as they had gained more knowledge and experience and had found more ways of approaching customers about work. However, the degree to which this confidence translated into further in-depth discussions about work depended on the individual capabilities of the PA and on the individual circumstances and interest of the customer.

There were, however, certain customers and circumstances that some PAs found more difficult to engage with. Some PAs did not feel comfortable discussing work with customers with mental health problems, drug users, or carers who had given up work to care.

[Carers] A lot of them have given up work to care for someone and you're talking about them working...sometimes I feel really guilty trying to get them a job.'

(Personal Adviser)

[Customers with drug abuse problems] I don't probably question if they say I'm not really able to work at the moment...it's not how it should be done, but it's just how I feel comfortable doing it.'

(Personal Adviser)

Some PAs also felt uncomfortable about some of the health issues raised by customers and wanted training to give them a better medical knowledge, for example on mental health conditions, or more severe physical health problems.

PAs reported that they did not very often see customers who were making a claim for bereavement benefits and some PAs had never conducted WFIs with these customers. Of those that had, their main concern was to be sensitive and treat the customer sympathetically. PAs did not recount any examples of WFIs with bereaved customers where work had been the main focus of discussion, although that is not say that this never happened, but gave examples of where they had just listened to the customer or had tried to reassure the customer with general offers that help was available should they want any.

Day two offices

As in Pathfinder offices, in day two offices discussions with non-JSA customers covered customers' employment history, the type of work they wanted to do in the future, qualifications and barriers to work. Some day two offices PAs were basing their meeting on the Lone Parent Adviser proforma, asking customers six questions from which further discussion could develop. In day two offices the depth of discussion with non-JSA customers about work was also found to depend on the interest and motivation of the customer. An example of a strategy employed to encourage discussions about work was a PA who with customers with health problems tried to emphasise the positive aspects, that they would be likely to return to work at some point.

PAs reported a number of difficulties in conducting WFIs:

- some PAs were unsure as to how they could encourage discussions about work with customers with health problems who were not interested in talking about work;
- another PA who was a generalist was less confident in conducting meetings with lone parents because they did not see them very often; and
- in an office, which saw a large proportion of customers from ethnic minorities, PAs found it difficult to conduct meetings where customers did not speak English as a first language.

4.2.4 Discussion about customers' benefit claim

There was some discussion about the customer's benefit claim observed in a number of WFIs, but the extent of these discussions tended to be minimal. For JSA customers, PAs referred to the customers benefit claim in relation to setting up the fortnightly signing on appointment at the start of the meeting. Other discussions about the benefit claim occurred in response to queries or issues raised by the customer, which, if they did arise, were usually brief and did not prevent the PA from discussing work with the customer. Most queries and issues seemed to be raised by non-JSA customers rather than JSA customers, perhaps because they were less familiar with the benefit claim process.

Queries raised by customers included whether they could backdate their claim, and how long it would take to receive a benefit payment. In response to information customers gave PAs about their circumstances, PAs might also check whether customers were claiming other benefits they might be entitled to. For example, when a lone parent said that one of her children had a learning disability the PA enquired as to whether she was receiving Carer's Allowance and Disability Living Allowance (DLA). Some PAs ended their meetings with non-JSA customers by informing them when they could expect to receive benefits and reminding them of any further action required, such as what to do when their medical certificate expired.

4.2.5 Providing information, advice and making referrals

As part of the WFI for non-JSA customers, PAs are supposed to actively promote and encourage customers to take-up New Deal options and help from other providers to enable customers to move into, or towards, work.

JSA customers

Overall PAs who dealt with customers claiming JSA felt confident and knowledgeable about the help and support available to customers either through Jobcentre Plus or via external service providers. In some Pathfinder offices PAs had access to a local directory of service providers and in another office individual PAs were responsible as account managers for certain providers so were in regular contact with them.

There were a variety of service providers that PAs reported they gave JSA customers information on and made referrals to:

- Job Clubs or centres that provided help with CVs, job search, confidence building;
- New Deal 18-24 and New Deal 50+ for customers with early eligibility, such as ex-offenders, or as result of large scale redundancies in the local area;
- short training courses for customers looking to move into specific areas of work, such as bus driving, fork lift driving, food hygiene certificate;
- ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) providers which were key service providers in a Pathfinder area that had a high proportion of asylum seekers and refugees;
- self-employment advisory services for people looking to set up their own business;
- careers advisory services were sometimes mentioned by PAs; and
- Progress2Work was also occasionally mentioned.

The extent to which JSA customers were given information on and referred to the above services depended on the circumstances of the customer. For example, a customer who had been out of work for some time and was keen to get any type of work was offered help with preparing a CV and was booked an appointment with a local job club. Another customer who was out of work because there was no longer any demand for their engineering skills was asked if they would be interested in retraining. Another customer who had recently left prison was told about the training opportunities available through New Deal 18-24 and had an appointment arranged to see an adviser.

However, not all JSA customers were given information on training opportunities and service providers. JSA customers with qualifications and looking for a specific type of work, or those who had previous work experience and were looking for general positions e.g. administration or warehouse work, where vacancies were common, tended not to be given any information. It was commonly reported in the customer research that JSA had not been given any information on training or support options (Chapter 5).

Where JSA customers were given information and advice observations showed that the information given by PAs tended to be quite broad and did not go into great detail. In some cases this was because the customer made it clear that it was not something they were interested in so the PA did not pursue the topic further. In other cases, where the customer did appear interested, PAs might tell the customer broadly about the kind of help available, such as provision of training, help with CVs, advice on setting up a business, and might tell the customer how long the programme lasted for. PAs did not, however, appear to provide customers with any specific information on the type of training or advice that they would receive. For example, a customer referred to a 26 week English, IT and office skills course, was not told what level of IT and office skills they would learn, or whether the English classes focused on spoken or written English.

PAs also gave some customers advice on how to go about looking for work as the meeting covered the job search activity part of the Jobseeker's Agreement. For example, some customers were advised to register with specialist agencies and another customer was given a list of local contact details for possible employers in the customer's specialist field of work.

There was little evidence that PAs gave JSA customers information on the financial benefits of work at the new claims stage. Some customers were asked if they were aware of tax credits⁷ (observations showed that occasionally JSA customers were asked if they were aware of 'Working Tax Credit'), and in some cases were told about tax credits to encourage them to consider accepting lower paid jobs, or minimum wage jobs. PAs reported that better off calculations tended to be done when customers were signing off JSA to move into work, or were conducted for customers who had been caseloaded, rather than at the WFI. An exception appeared to be an office where PAs were observed telling customers about the travel to interview scheme.

Occasionally, PAs reported difficulties in giving JSA customers information and advice. For example, some PAs were unsure of the New Deal eligibility rules for new customers, or had insufficient knowledge on opportunities for work based learning and training courses.

Non-JSA customers

Informing customers of the help and services available through Jobcentre Plus was seen by PAs as a key function of the WFI for non-JSA customers. However, the extent to which PAs gave non-JSA customers information, advice and made referrals depended on the customer's circumstances.

Carers

In two observations of WFIs with carers, both were caring full-time so could not consider working as well. In these meetings PAs did not give any information or advice beyond telling the customer that help was available should their circumstances change in the future. There was an example of a carer who was given a leaflet on training opportunities, but no other details or explanations were given as to what this 'help' might entail. However, some PAs reported that where carers had been interested in doing part-time work or doing something else whilst they were caring,

⁷ Respondents varied in the terminology they used when talking about the New Tax Credits: Working Tax Credit (WTC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC), introduced in April 2003. Some PAs used the term 'New Tax Credits' or occasionally specified either WTC or CTC when talking in reference to a particular customer group. In WFIs, PAs were also sometimes observed using the terms Working Tax Credit or Child Tax Credit. However, more commonly in both interviews and observations PAs used the general term 'tax credits'. For this reason the term 'tax credit' is used throughout this chapter, unless specified otherwise.

they had discussed training and given carers information on 'permitted work', which was seen by some staff as a key stepping stone to moving customers into work.

Lone parents

Observations showed that lone parents were commonly given information on NDLP. NDLP was explained as being a voluntary scheme which provided help with training, help with childcare and help with looking for work. For a lone parent looking to become self-employed, they were told that through NDLP they could be referred to an organisation that provided help with setting up a business. Where customers were not seen by a specialist Lone Parent Adviser, they were advised by the PA to see a Lone Parent Adviser who would be able to help them with training, childcare and benefits advice. Some lone parents were given leaflets about NDLP.

The difference in lone parent interviews was the extent to which customers were encouraged to come back again for an NDLP initial interview. Where lone parents were not in a position to think about moving into work in the near future, for example those with very young children who wanted to wait until they were older, or a lone parent whose child was ill and was waiting for an operation, information on NDLP was given as something for customers to think about for the future. PAs explained that the customer would have to come back again in six months time where they could discuss the customer's circumstances again. Where lone parents were interested in moving into work in the more immediate future, PAs encouraged them to make an appointment for a few weeks time to discuss the help available through NDLP in more detail.

Lone parents were also advised that they could be helped financially with moving into work, through assistance with the costs for training courses and childcare costs. Lone parents were also told that advice on tax credits and better off calculations were available to them if they wanted help with moving into work, but better off calculations were generally not performed at the WFI. Better off calculations were felt by some PAs to be more appropriate at further meetings when customers were more ready to think about work.

Customers with health problems or disabilities

The extent to which customers with health problems were given information and referred to services depended on the customers' circumstances and the different individual approaches of PAs. Observations suggested that for customers with short-term health problems, who knew what they wanted to do when they were better, for example to return to work with their former employer, or to start college, relatively little information or advice was given by PAs. For example, a customer intending to return to work with their employer was told by their PA that, '*If you need any help, we can help you.*'

For customers with longer term health problems who were not sure of when they might be able to move into work, or of the type of work they might be able to do, observations showed that some customers were told about New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP). However, explanations as to the help available through NDDP and the job brokers who provide the NDDP service tended to be limited and did not describe in any detail the type of help job brokers were able to offer.

[NDDP] It's not mandatory but if you feel better it can help with training and getting back into work.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

'We've also got job brokers that can help people with health problems.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

In some cases NDDP was described as something customers might be interested in for the future. Customers were given an NDDP leaflet or a list of the job brokers in their area and it was then up to the customer if and when they were interested to make contact.

Other services that PAs reported they told customers about and made referrals to included: careers services; charity funded mental health services; and centres helping customers with drug and alcohol problems such as AdAction. PAs in some offices also mentioned referrals to Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs), although this did not appear to be a widespread practice.

Observations also showed that some customers were given information on the additional financial benefits available, such as help via the Adviser Discretion Fund and were told about tax credits. Some PAs reported that they would tell customers about tax credits if they were looking to change their field of work to one with less pay because of a health problem, but that it was not always relevant to discuss in-work benefits at the WFI, although it would be if the customer returned for further meetings. Another PA reported that they emphasised tax credits when customers said they were not prepared to work for the minimum wage.

There appeared to be a concern among some PAs about giving these customers (who they perhaps perceived to be more vulnerable) too much information and a reluctance to encourage customers to consider referral options, for fear of upsetting them or making customers feel under pressure.

'There's job brokers who may be able to help you financially back into work...there's also a travel to work scheme, but I don't want to load you with too much information at the moment.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

For example, a customer suffering from depression was told that training was available, but that it was not for now, but something the customer could think about for the future. In some cases this 'holding-back' of information and encouragement

was linked to PAs waiting for customers circumstances to have settled down or improved, which they would ascertain when following-up customers up after the WFI (see Section 4.3).

Widows

Some PAs reported that they would suggest to bereaved customers the option of contacting 'Cruse' for bereavement counselling.

4.2.6 PA confidence in giving information and advice to non-JSA customers

Overall PAs reported feeling confident in giving non-JSA customers information and advice. Some PAs felt more confident as they had gained more knowledge about the various organisations and services that they could refer customers to. However, there were still knowledge gaps for some PAs. The areas where some PAs reported feeling less confident and knowledgeable on included eligibility criteria for New Deal programmes; giving appropriate help to customers with mental health conditions; the role of DEAs; and generally keeping up-to-date with services and courses available through different organisations which were liable to change.

Across the Pathfinder offices, direct contact between PAs and service providers appeared to be key in improving PAs knowledge about the help available to non-JSA customers and therefore their confidence in giving customers information and making referrals. In some Pathfinder offices, PAs had had visits from service providers to inform staff of their services. In some cases PAs had also attended training courses run by specialist organisations, such as those dealing with mental health and disability issues. There were variations amongst Pathfinder offices in terms of how proactive they were in developing relations with service providers. For example, in one office there had been no contact list or information available to the non-JSA PA on services for customers with health problems. As a result the PA had developed their own list by contacting organisations and inviting them to visit. In contrast, at another office each PA was responsible as an 'account manager' for individual organisations and a key part of their role, as recognised by managers, was in developing these relationships and being in regular contact with service providers. It was commonly found that Pathfinder offices had developed links with NDDP job brokers and staff seemed more aware of the services provided by job brokers compared to earlier phases of research.

Also important in improving PAs knowledge and therefore confidence in giving information and advice was having someone to ask if they were unsure. PAs would ask colleagues with more experience or with specialist knowledge if they were unsure about who to refer a customer to. In some Pathfinder offices, non-JSA PAs in the District had formed a network where they regularly met to share experience and knowledge and whom PAs could telephone if they needed any advice.

Although PAs reported feeling more confident this did not necessarily mean that PAs gave customers information and advice in all cases where it may have been appropriate.

Day two offices

The confidence and ability of PAs in giving JSA and non-JSA customers information and advice varied (both across and within offices). Some PAs were very knowledgeable, whilst others were less so. For example, a PA who had been conducting WFIs for many years under the ONE pilot was particularly confident and knowledgeable about service providers and was observed to be proactive in suggesting them to customers (JSA and non-JSA). During the ONE pilot they had compiled a directory of specialist local organisations and training courses and had met people from several of these organisations. In the day two offices, PAs were aware of the services provided by DEAs, although in a particular office this may have been because they used to have a DEA based on-site.

There was also an example of an office where PAs commonly told JSA customers about and gave out leaflets on Jobseeker's Direct, which under Jobcentre Plus was a new service:

'This has changed, it's now called Jobseeker Direct...they'll search for work for you.... All you have to do is ring that number between 9 and 6.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

Some day two offices had not yet developed links with local NDDP job brokers. Where this was the case, PAs did not feel they knew anything about the kinds of help available through NDDP and in WFIs were observed to give only very vague information to customers that they could help, along with a contact list.

Some PAs were experienced in conducting better-off calculations for customers, although they may not have time to do them during the WFI, whilst others had yet to receive training on this.

4.2.7 Conducting job searches

In the WFI, PAs are supposed to undertake a job search for customers who are ready for work and to submit customers to jobs where there are suitable vacancies.

JSA customers

Typically, job searches were conducted with JSA customers and formed the final part of the WFI after completing the Jobseeker's Agreement. However, job searches did not always result in finding suitable vacancies that customers wanted to apply for. Instances were reported where job searches were not done if customers had to leave promptly, for example, if they had another appointment to get to.

Non-JSA customers

Job searches were not usually conducted for non-JSA customers, mostly because they were not ready to think about looking for work at the time of their WFI. However, there were examples from PAs of non-JSA customers they had seen who were interested in looking for work for whom they had conducted job searches. These customers included:

- carers interested in part-time work;
- customers with very short-term illnesses, who expected to be able to return to work in four to six weeks time;
- lone parents wanting to work in the near future; and
- lone parents looking for part-time work.

4.2.8 Ending Work-focused Interviews

Agreements and action plans

Completing Jobseeker's Agreements are a mandatory part of the WFI for JSA customers. On completion, PAs printed out the Agreement and asked customers to sign two copies, one of which the customer kept. In some cases PAs either read out the completed Agreement to the customer or asked the customer to read through the Agreement to ensure that the customer was happy with its content before signing it.

In contrast, non-JSA customers do not have to complete and sign any formal agreement, but can draw up a voluntary Customer Action Plan with the PA, which sets out their plans for moving into work. Practice varied in the Pathfinder offices, some offices completed Customer Action Plans whilst others did not. Where Action Plans were completed with non-JSA customers (across all non-JSA customer groups) they were loosely structured and recorded the WFI discussion including: the customer's current circumstances, employment history, the advice or help suggested by the PA, and any follow-up contact or action that had been agreed. The content of the Action Plan depended on the individual customer and the PA. Customers were told by PAs that they were completing an action plan.

In Pathfinder offices that did not complete Customer Action Plans, PAs still recorded notes of the meeting on LMS but did this after the WFI, for the PAs own future reference. These notes were not dissimilar in content to the actions plans completed in other offices, but the main difference appeared to be that customers were not aware of any notes being recorded.

'It's really for my own purposes. Whenever I do a follow up telephone call or whatever, I can look at that and I can picture the person sat in front of me, I know exactly who it is I'm ringing, so that is the main aim of that.'

(Personal Adviser)

Follow-up contact

JSA customers

With JSA customers, PAs tended to end the meeting by reminding customers of the signing on process, of when they next had to come in and what they had to bring with them. In some offices PAs gave customers their contact details, but only exceptionally were examples observed where the PA informed the customer that they could come back to see the PA if they wanted any further help. In general it appeared that because JSA customers have to follow a mandatory process of fortnightly signing on and review meetings that PAs did not give much emphasis to encouraging follow-up.

Where JSA customers had been referred to a service provider, PAs ended the meeting by reminding the customer of this appointment. In some offices, although not all, customers were also told that if they were still claiming benefit they would have to attend a 13 week and six monthly review meeting.

Non-JSA customers

With non-JSA customers, PAs tended to end the meeting by giving customers their contact details and inviting them to call or come back if they wanted any help or support, or if their circumstances changed. These were generally flexible offers of further help with it being left up to the customer to initiate further contact.

'If you have any problems then just contact me.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

'If you did think of anything then give us a call.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

In some Pathfinder offices, in addition to this general offer of further help and support, PAs arranged to telephone the customer at a later date to see how they were and if their circumstances had changed, and to remind customers that help was available if they wanted it. The timing of the further telephone contact varied: in some offices there was no fixed time, although PAs aimed to call customers within two to three months time, depending on the customers' circumstances; in the other office all customers were contacted four weeks later.

'How would you feel if I contacted you after about a week to see how it went with the Doctor?'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

'As you are claiming benefit, I'm your PA and will be contacting you just to see how things are going...I'm not here to put pressure on you. I'll ring every 4-6 weeks.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

In the Pathfinder offices that did not make formal arrangements to call customers back, PAs reported that they would in fact call customers back every so often to see how they were getting on, even though this was not formally agreed with the customer at the WFI. This follow-up contact was linked to the caseloading process (see Section 4.3)

There was little evidence that PAs informed non-JSA customers of any requirement to attend further mandatory meetings. Where this did happen it tended to be with lone parents who were told that they had to attend a further meeting in six months time and that it could affect their benefit if they did not attend. Some lone parents were also told about further meetings at 12 months. An exception to this was where a customer with health problems was informed that they didn't have to come in again for three years, although they could do if they wanted any help.

Day two offices

In some of the day two offices, PAs completed voluntary Customer Action Plans with non-JSA customers. PAs tried to establish a minimal agreement with the customer, such as the customer may consider NDDP when feeling better. In some offices PAs gave general offers of further help and support, advising customers to come back and see them or to call if they wanted any further help, with the onus being on the customer to initiate this. Whilst in the other office PAs made formal arrangements to contact customers again after the WFI to review their circumstances.

4.2.9 Deferrals and waivers at PA meetings

In Pathfinder offices PAs reported occasionally seeing non-JSA customers who should have had their WFI deferred or waived by the contact centre, but that it was not a significant problem and largely the deferrals process was working well. These findings reflect those of more in-depth research conducted on deferrals and waivers where PAs generally felt that the right customers were being deferred by the contact centre.

Customers who were not deferred or waived but who should have been, included customers with a range of serious health conditions and lone parents who were heavily pregnant or who had newly born babies.

Some PAs acknowledged that it was not always possible to assess the extent of a customer's incapacity over the telephone and that some customers were reluctant to give personal information over the telephone. However, in some offices some PAs felt that deferral mistakes occurred at the contact centre because FCOs were not asking customers the right questions.

Where non-JSA customers are inappropriately booked to attend a WFI, PAs have the discretion to defer or waive the customer. How PAs dealt with customers varied across offices. In some offices PAs reported that they would continue with a WFI if the customer had 'made the effort' to attend. However, in another office PAs would generally defer a customer if it was felt that this was appropriate.

'Well, they're in the office. I just carry out the WFI because if you were to send them away you'd only have to drag them back later.'

(Personal Adviser)

This supports findings from more in-depth research on deferrals and waivers, where it was found that PAs did not usually defer customers once they had attended the WFI⁸.

In another office the non-JSA PA said that they asked the customer whether or not they wanted to continue with the meeting. Some customers did because they were already there, whilst some did not want to continue. Another PA reported that they would only defer a customer at the WFI if they became upset during the meeting and were unable to continue.

In an office where PAs looked at the customer's details on the computer system in advance of the meeting, they were sometimes able to defer customers before they came into the office. An example was given of a customer who had been booked to attend a WFI but whose details showed that they had recently undergone a major operation. This is in contrast to findings from other research which found FCOs did not usually record sufficient information as to the nature or severity of a customer's health problem.

Widows or customers claiming bereavement benefits were another customer group who PAs reported were not always being appropriately deferred by the contact centre. As with other non-JSA customer groups, how PAs dealt with bereaved customers who they felt should have been deferred varied: some would defer them, whilst others would continue with the WFI.

Day two offices

Practice in dealing with customers who were not deferred by the contact centre varied. Some PAs would continue with the WFI, whilst others would give the customer the option of depending on whether or not they felt able to continue. In an office which used to be a ONE pilot site, PAs felt that under Jobcentre Plus more customers with health problems were being deferred by the contact centre than they used to defer themselves under ONE and that some of these deferred customers should be attending.

4.2.10 Monitoring the content of PA meetings and 'Must Dos'

As for FAs, PAs also have list of topics that must be covered with non-JSA customers in WFIs. Generally, PAs and PA Managers were aware of the 'Must Dos', although it was not something staff referred to on a day-to-day basis. An example was given

⁸ Taylor, J. and Hartfree, Y. Deferrals in Jobcentre Plus: Research into Staff Understanding and Application of Deferral Guidance for Non-Jobseeker's Allowance Customers, DWP In-house Report 126, 2003.

where staff had been made aware of the 'Must Dos' as part of the work-focused review undertaken by the Pathfinder Improvement Team in March 2003. Some PAs felt that it was not always appropriate to cover all of the non-JSA 'Must Dos', such as conducting in-work benefit calculations, if customers were not interested or able to think about moving into work at the time of their WFI. There was an exception, where staff in an office were not aware of the 'Must Dos'.

In some of the Pathfinder offices PA managers were monitoring the delivery of WFIs using the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF). Using the QAF, PA managers should observe each PA about once a month and provide feedback on their delivery of the WFI. In an office where this was not being done, the reason given was a lack of time, due to staffing problems. In addition to formal monitoring in some offices and instead of formal monitoring in others, several PA managers informally overheard PA meetings so reported they had a feel for what was being discussed at WFIs.

Day two offices

Awareness of the 'Must Dos' and monitoring of PA meetings varied in the day two offices. In some offices PAs were aware of the 'Must Dos' and formal monitoring was being carried out. Difficulties were, however, reported by a PA manager in dedicating the required number of hours to this task and they felt that more experienced PAs needed less monitoring than was stipulated. In the other office, PAs were not aware of the 'Must Dos' list and PAs were not being formally monitored because the PA manager had yet to attend the QAF training.

4.3 Caseloading for non-JSA customers

One aim of the Work-focused Interview is for PAs to encourage non-JSA customers to take up voluntary caseloading to help them find work, or move closer to the labour market. Caseloading for lone parents should be provided through NDLP. Caseloading for customers with health problems or disabilities should be provided through NDDP, although where this is not appropriate a customer can see their PA for further help and support. Carers, for whom there is no New Deal provision, should be caseloaded by their PA.

PAs described the activities they undertook as caseloading as including: conducting job searches; conducting in-work benefit calculations; and promoting and referring customers to the services of specialist providers such as DEAs, New Deals and other organisations. PAs did not have specific targets for caseloading, but caseloading was seen as important if overall job submission targets were to be achieved.

4.3.1 Format of help and support

As already discussed in Section 4.2.5, whether or not customers were given information on and referred to New Deal programmes and other specialist help depended on the customers circumstances. In some cases customers were given no information by PAs, or information was given as something for customers to think

about in the future. Where customers were interested in moving into work in the medium term future and showed an interest in joining a New Deal programme, or training options, customers would be 'caseloaded'. This involved PAs inviting customers back for a further meeting (or meetings) to talk to customers in more detail about the help available and to ensure that a referral was suitable. Where WFIs for lone parents were not conducted by the NDLP Adviser, the PA would arrange for the customer to attend any further meetings with the NDLP Adviser.

'What I'll do is book an appointment for you to come back and see me and discuss training with you.'

(Observation of a WFI with a PA)

'What I want to do is invite you in for another meeting when we can talk about all the support that's available [via NDLP] for you and what you want to do.'

(Observation of a WFI with an NDLP Adviser)

Beyond referring customers to New Deals or to other specialist provision or training, the main focus of caseloading activity for (non-NDLP) PAs was to conduct job searches for customers (those with health problems and carers) who wanted to move into work in the near future and who were nearly job ready. In some offices PAs offered this job matching service on a face-to-face basis initially to develop a rapport with the customer, but generally it was provided as a telephone service. PAs kept a check on the vacancy lists and then telephoned customers with the details of any new jobs that might be suitable. Where customers showed an interest in moving back into work in the near future PAs would try and caseload these customers.

'Anybody that says they're interested in work and they're job ready.'

(Personal Adviser)

The type of non-JSA customers who PAs were able to interest in this type of service tended to be those with short-term illnesses or injuries who were expecting to move into work very soon. Thus PA caseloading activity (outside of services offered by Lone Parent Advisers under NDLP) was generally focused on those customers who were most job ready and who needed the least help in moving into work.

Other forms of help that (non-NDLP) PAs offered to customers who were on their caseload included conducting in-work benefit calculations. In some offices PAs would also caseload and offer further help to customers who were not job ready, but who were interested in permitted work.

'[A customer with bad arthritis] really wanted to go back to work and it was me that said to her why don't you try permitted work first to see how you get on.'

(Personal Adviser)

There was insufficient evidence regarding the extent to which PAs (excluding Lone Parent Advisers who were responsible for conducting the WFI and providing the

NDLP service) provided a holistic caseloading service in moving customers closer to the labour market. It is unclear whether customers who were 'caseloaded' in terms of being referred to a training provider, remained in contact with the PA and their progress monitored and then returned to their PA when they were more job ready, for help with job search and an in-work benefit calculation. There were some examples where this did happen. This occurred in an office where PAs were responsible as 'account managers' for particular service providers, PAs reported being in regular contact to see how customers referred to them were getting on. In another office an example was given of a carer who had been referred to several training courses before coming back to see the PA for help with finding a job.

4.3.2 Systems for caseloading

As discussed, the main caseloading service offered by (non NDLP) PAs was a job matching service. However, PAs reported that few non-JSA customers were in a position at the time of their WFI to be able to consider looking for work, thus following customers up, several weeks or months later, was important in attracting customers to the caseloading service. In Pathfinder offices, PAs reported calling some customers back to see how they were getting on, whether their circumstances had changed, and if they felt ready to think about moving into work. Some NDLP Advisers also reported following up lone parents who had not been interested in joining NDLP at the time of their WFI.

In some offices this follow-up process had been incorporated into a formalised caseloading system. All customers were 'caseloaded' and categorised into one of three groups. One system in use was where customers were categorised into: 'green', 'amber' 'red'. Customers in the 'green' category were those who were interested in moving into work in the near future, for whom a job search service was provided, or for whom the PA might refer to training providers, New Deal, or for help with CV preparation. Customers in 'amber' were those for whom work might be an option in the medium-term future who PAs called back some time after the WFI to see how they were getting on. Customers in the 'red' category were those for whom work was not an option in the medium-term future. Another office used a very similar system, customers were categorised into: 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold'. Customers in the 'hot' category were those who were looking for work for the very near future and were job ready. 'Warm' were those customers who were interested in moving into work but who needed extra support through referral to training providers or New Deal. 'Cold' were those customers who were not ready to think about moving into work.

4.3.3 Extent of caseloading

The number of customers on a PAs caseload that they were able to provide direct help to (that is excluding those customers referred to New Deals, training, or other specialist providers) at any one time was fairly small. PAs were limited to caseloading only a few customers because of constraints on their time. The number of customers PAs had on their caseload varied from less than five to 15.

Generally, PAs had to fit caseloading into their downtime. The exception was an office where PAs had allocated time in their diaries for caseloading. The main difficulty reported was that PAs 'downtime' was limited because they had WFI appointments booked throughout the day, and had to fit in customers for emergency appointments. The downtime that PAs had was often fragmented, for example, if a customer failed to attend or if the FA meeting was quick enabling the PA to finish their meeting early. For some PAs the only downtime they got was when the office shut to the public. Downtime also had to be used for completing other work, such as preparing for the next day's appointments, checking emails and bulletins, completing paperwork etc. As a result, PAs were limited in the number of customers they could caseload. Consequently, it appears that caseloading was targeted at those customers who were the easiest to help, and the process seemed to largely operate as a telephone job search service, which did not take up too much of the PAs' time.

In the office where changes had been introduced to give PAs dedicated time for caseloading, the number of non-JSA customers that PAs could caseload was still limited to about 15 customers per adviser, and was still focused on customers who were wanting to work in the near future, but was not restricted to customers who would be job ready. Although caseloading was still largely about providing a job search service, it appeared that PAs were able to work with customers on a more regular and face-to-face basis than was reported in other offices and were able to offer help to customers who were less job ready, such as those wanting to try Permitted Work.

4.3.4 Caseloading for JSA customers

In some Pathfinder offices, JSA customers were also caseloaded (in addition to be referred to New Deals), even though this is not part of the policy vision. This involved PAs offering customers a more intensive job search service, delivered in addition to their fortnightly signing on meetings. In other offices, PAs did not caseload JSA customers because there were other staff and services available to help them into work. Caseloading was offered to JSA customers who were keen to start work immediately and were very active in looking for work, or to customers who were looking for work in an area that Jobcentre Plus had lots of vacancies for.

'If there's somebody that's really desperate to get into work and they're applying for 10 jobs a week, then we can caseload them.'

(Personal Adviser)

Thus PAs targeted those customers who they could most easily help move into work. The service offered by PAs was essentially a job matching service where PAs called the customer with details of new vacancies. PAs also faxed customer's CVs to employers, and some PAs (from the same office) reported that if a customer was unsuccessful in applying for jobs they could refer them for help with developing their CV and interview skills. PAs might also conduct in-work benefit calculations for customers.

4.3.5 Day two offices

As in the Pathfinder offices, caseloading in day two offices was focused on PAs offering a job-matching service to non-JSA customers who were interested in looking for work. For customers who were further away from the labour market and who wanted to move into work, PAs would refer these customers on to specialist providers and New Deals. There was no evidence that any of the day two offices had formalised caseloading systems for following-up customers who were not interested in looking for work at the time of the WFI.

4.4 Ability to manage workloads and meet targets

This section examines the length of WFIs (Section 4.4.1) and the management of workloads and targets (Sections 4.4.2 and 4.4.3).

4.4.1 The duration of Work-focused Interviews

In general, PAs found that they had sufficient time allocated in which to conduct WFIs. WFIs with JSA and non-JSA customers varied in length from 20 to 40 minutes. WFIs with JSA customers were relatively quick if customers had claimed JSA before, so already had a Jobseeker's Agreement and were aware of the signing on process. WFIs with non-JSA customers could also be very quick if customers were not interested or able to think about work.

Conversely, there were also circumstances reported where the time allocated for WFIs was not sufficient. These included:

- where JSA customers were interested in applying for lots of jobs that were found during the job search;
- where JSA customers had left work voluntarily, which required PAs to complete additional paperwork;
- where non-JSA customers were interested in looking for work, PAs might not have enough time to cover everything with the customer, such as conduct a job search, provide information on tax credits, and conduct an in-work benefit calculation; and
- where customers did not speak English as a first language and/or brought an interpreter with them – in a Pathfinder office where this a particular problem it was felt that an hour appointment would be more appropriate.

Generally, PAs found WFIs harder to complete during the allocated appointment slot when the contact centre had not completed customers' records on LMS, if customers arrived late, or if FA meetings ran over 20 minutes.

4.4.2 Ability to manage workloads

It was a common problem raised by PAs in Pathfinder offices that they did not get enough 'downtime' (time when they were not seeing customers for WFIs), in which to do other work. Activities that PAs had to complete during downtime included: administration and paperwork; checking emails; re-contacting deferred customers; preparing appointment lists for the following day; contacting service providers; following customers up after the WFI; and caseloading. The main tension was in finding time to help customers who PAs had caseloaded, which in some offices PAs had been told was priority for use of their downtime, and fitting in these other necessary tasks. In some offices, PAs had WFI appointments booked back-to-back and saw up to eight customers per day. Thus, the only downtime available to PAs was when the office was closed to the public, if meetings finished early, or if customers failed to attend, giving PAs some additional, but fragmented time.

It was also a difficulty mentioned by some PAs that when they did get free time from conducting WFIs, that they would be asked to see a customer for an emergency appointment or be asked to assist elsewhere in the office. It was felt by some PAs that their managers did not recognise that they were busy doing other work when they were not seeing customers.

'I think its still seen that if you don't have somebody in front of you you're not doing anything.'

(Personal Adviser)

There was an example of an office where PAs had tried address this issue by booking themselves five minute appointments in their diaries to follow customers up after the WFI by telephone, just to show that they were in fact busy working.

In some Pathfinder offices staff were having particular difficulties in managing workloads. In these offices the number of PAs had been reduced since the launch of Jobcentre Plus, and some PAs were absent on long-term sick. Offices had different strategies in place to deal with this. One example was an office which was trialling a 'pooled' system for allocating PAs to JSA customers, whereby PAs would see the next customer in line, to maximise the use of PAs time (see Section 4.1.2). In another office, opening hours had been extended so that extra appointments could be fitted in, but which reduced the amount of downtime available to PAs. PAs were sometimes having to fit two customers into one appointment slot which meant that PAs did not have time to conduct job searches for customers and in some instances when PAs were particularly short-staffed, non-JSA customers were given the option at the FA meeting of seeing a PA or not.

4.4.3 Ability to meet job entry targets

In Pathfinder offices it was commonly found that staff felt under pressure to meet targets for submitting customers to jobs and placing customers into work and felt that the job entry targets⁹ for both JSA and non-JSA customers were unrealistic. Targets for 2003 were reported in some offices to be higher than the previous year. Overall job entry targets for each office were translated into individual PA targets by PA Managers, such as X number of job submissions or job entries per PA per week.

Job entry targets were perceived to be unrealistic for the following reasons:

- In some offices higher targets were having to be met, but with fewer staff.
- It was reported that for some groups of non-JSA customers there was no help that PAs could immediately offer to customers who were, for example, too ill to work, and thus required PAs to work with customers over a much longer period of time. It was a common view that targets for non-JSA customers were too crude a performance measure and that there should be recognition of the distance travelled as PAs moved customers closer to the labour market.
- In offices whose customer base consisted of a high proportion of customers from ethnic minorities, it was felt that the targets did not reflect these local factors. For example, PAs reported seeing a number of women who claimed benefits as lone parents to support themselves (and their children) whilst their husbands went away on pilgrimage for several months, for whom it was not possible for PAs to achieve any job submissions. In another area with a high proportion of asylum seekers and refugees, customers did not meet the requirements of many job vacancies, where employers only wanted people who could speak English and had work experience – even for manual jobs such as cleaning or factory work.
- In some offices it was also felt that under Jobcentre Plus the replacement of the Response to Displayed Vacancies (RDV) team (whereby customers had to see a member of staff for job application details) with Jobseeker's Direct (a telephone service where job entries are recorded centrally rather than against the local office), meant that offices felt they were losing job entry points as customers were able to telephone Jobseeker's Direct from home, or were able to contact directly employers whose contact details were now listed in the job vacancy advert.

The impact of the new higher targets included:

- low staff morale in some offices where staff felt that they were working as hard as they could, and where the number of PAs had been cut;

⁹ Respondents described job entry targets as office level targets but which had been set at a District level.

- the development of an initiative to call back a proportion of non-JSA customers after their WFI and thereby aim to improve the job submission rate; and
- a shift from quality to quantity in job submissions: in some offices PAs were no longer focusing on the quality of the job submissions they made for JSA customers as they had been trained to do, but were focusing on the number of job submissions they could make, in the hope that the number of job entries would increase. As a consequence the number of customers failing to complete application forms or attend interviews had also increased.

There was however, an exception, where staff recognised that the new targets were very high, but were positive about achieving them. Managers had specifically not set PAs individual targets, but had set monthly team targets to encourage team work and a sense of shared responsibility. There was also a strong emphasis from managers that the targets were achievable. This office had also introduced dedicated PA diary time for caseloading.

Day two offices

In day two offices, PAs were also feeling under pressure to meet targets and complete work in the limited amount of downtime available to them. Specific reasons given for this included an office where PAs thought the job entry targets would be hard to achieve in part because of the large amount of temporary agency vacancies, which customers were reported not to be interested in. This office had reinstated a virtual RDV team, whereby Floorwalker Managers were being encouraged to direct customers leaving job points to a member of staff, rather than to the warm phones. Another day two office was struggling to manage workloads due to its large ethnic minority customer base, whereby customers who did not speak English as a first language were reluctant to use the warm phones for making benefit enquiries which placed added pressure on staff.

4.5 Examples of good practice

The following examples of good practice were identified by staff (in Pathfinder Offices and/or day two offices), which improved the delivery of services to customers.

In some offices PAs were part of non-JSA PA network which they found to be very useful in providing an opportunity to share good practice and expertise. Here, it was reported that through this network their knowledge of the help available to non-JSA customers had increased, and their confidence in conducting WFIs had improved greatly. Files or lists of local service providers had been compiled in some offices which PAs found very useful to be able to refer to.

In another office, managers had given PAs dedicated time in their diaries for carrying out caseloading activities, which PAs regarded as a positive change. This appeared to enable PAs to offer more of an face-to-face service and to offer help to less job ready customers, than in other offices.

Although not identified by staff themselves, good practice was also found in an office which had developed close working partnerships between PAs and local service providers through designating individual PAs as 'account managers' for particular providers. PAs were in regular contact with local providers and worked with local providers to help move customers into work.

4.6 Progress towards the vision

The main area where progress had been made was in the knowledge and confidence of PAs in giving customers information and advice on the help and services available. PAs were generally more knowledgeable about the different organisations, training courses and programmes that they could refer JSA and non-JSA customers to, although for some PAs there were still knowledge gaps. PAs were more aware of external support groups and voluntary organisations for non-JSA customers and reported having referred customers to these. Permitted Work was also reported as being discussed by some PAs with non-JSA customers, which had not been apparent in previous research. PAs were also more familiar with the services provided by NDDP job brokers. This increased knowledge appears to have occurred as a result of gradual on the job learning and through the development of direct links with service providers.

'It's a very gradual process, you learn every day.'

(Personal Adviser)

There were some instances where improved PA knowledge had occurred as a result of specific actions, such as through the setting up of a non-JSA PA network to share knowledge and expertise, and the holding of a PA training event on intermediaries and making referrals. As a result some PAs seemed to have a better understanding of the reasoning behind conducting WFIs for non-JSA customers, when they could see that there was some help they could offer to them.

However, the extent to which customers were actually given any information or advice varied. The findings also suggest that the depth of some PAs' knowledge in giving customers information and advice was limited. Whilst they may have been more aware of the breadth of different organisations, training courses and programmes available, they did not tend to give customers detailed information on the type of help and support they could expect to receive.

In previous research, the only non-JSA customer group who were given any information on the financial benefits of work were lone parents. Findings from this phase of research suggests that progress had been made and that some customers who were claiming benefits due to health problems were also being given some information on transitional financial support via the Adviser Discretion Fund and on tax credits.

In this phase of research more offices were making formal arrangements with non-JSA customers for PAs to re-contact them at a certain point after the WFI. In offices where arrangements were not being made, PAs reported that they would in fact call customers back every so often to see how they were getting on. This increased emphasis on following-up customers after the WFI appeared to be related to achieving targets and recognition that because non-JSA customers were not always in a position to think about moving into work at the time of their WFI, following them up when their circumstances might have improved and when offers of help might be more likely to be accepted, was essential. The customer research (Chapter 6) found that some customers had been told that their PA would call them back, although none had in fact been followed-up. This may have been because the customer interviews occurred before PAs were due to call customers back, or be because without dedicated diary time PAs do not get the time to make follow-up calls. There was also increased emphasis and priority for PAs to use any downtime (when not conducting WFIs) for working with customers on their caseload.

4.6.1 Barriers to progress

There was no apparent progress in the extent to which PAs engaged non-JSA customers in discussions about work, although some PAs had developed their own techniques for trying to engage customers who were not interested in discussing work. Overall, discussions about work were still relatively low-key and the extent of discussion was largely dependent on the interest and motivation of the customer. PAs were not challenging customers' own assessments of their ability to work or encouraging seemingly less interested customers in discussions about work. The depth of discussion about work with JSA customers and the extent to which JSA customers were actively involved in drawing up their Jobseeker's Agreement also varied.

Some PAs did not feel comfortable in discussing work with customers with mental health issues, drug users and customers with more severe physical health conditions. Some PAs wanted more training so that they could better understand the issues for these customers, some also wanted to have more medical knowledge so that they would be able to better gauge the type of work customers might be able to do. However, it was the view of one PA, with many years experience of conducting WFIs with non-JSA customers from an earlier pilot initiative, that to understand the issues facing customers with health conditions required having the confidence to ask customers questions about how their health condition affected them – confidence which was gained over time and through experience. It was reported that in one office PAs had attended a mental health workshop where the guest speaker had paranoid schizophrenia. PAs had found the workshop very useful in raising their understanding of mental health issues, suggesting that training can help accelerate the process by which PAs gain confidence and become more competent in conducting WFIs with all non-JSA customers.

A number of specific training needs were identified which hindered the ability of PAs to give customers appropriate advice and make referrals:

- across JSA and non-JSA customers some PAs wanted further information or training on the eligibility criteria for entry to New Deal programmes, this was also an issue in previous rounds of research; and
- training or information on the role of DEAs to raise PAs awareness of the services they provide. Evidence suggests that the best way of achieving this would be through establishing more direct contact and links between PAs and DEAs.

In some offices it was reported that due to staffing problems it had not been possible for PA Managers to release PAs to attend training events.

4.7 Conclusions

Some progress had been made in the ability of PAs to deliver WFIs to customers as a result of experience gained 'on the job' and as a result of some specific actions. However, whilst work-focused discussions with JSA customers were direct and fairly comprehensive (covering job goals, job search activities etc.), with non-JSA customers there was still a relatively low-key approach to discussing work.

There was no clear evidence that where offices had specialist PAs the delivery of WFIs, particularly to non-JSA customers, was any more work-focused compared to offices with generalist PAs. The views of PAs and PA Managers as to which system they preferred varied: the perceived advantage of having specialists was the opportunity for PAs to develop a depth of expertise on one customer group; whereas the perceived advantage of having generalists was practical in terms of being able to maximise the use of PA diary time for seeing customers.

Whilst staff understood the purpose of WFIs for non-JSA customers to have more long-term objectives in terms of moving customers into work, there appeared to be a tension between this longer-term view and job entry targets for non-JSA customers, whereby PAs focused their efforts when caseloading on customers who were closest to moving into work and needed the least help. Creating dedicated time in PAs' diaries for carrying out caseloading seems to be key in enabling them to offer help to customers who need more support.

In delivering WFIs and helping customers move into work there were additional difficulties faced by offices in areas that had a high proportion of customers who did not speak English as a first language. There was felt to be a need for improved resources for interpreters and a review of job entry targets.

5 The experiences and perceptions of jobseekers

This chapter outlines jobseekers' experiences of Jobcentre Plus services. It is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals who claimed Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) under Jobcentre Plus in late spring/early summer 2003. The findings presented here detail how JSA customers interacted with the different stages of Jobcentre Plus, their perceptions of the service delivered, and its impact on their understanding of the services available and propensity to move into work. It begins by looking at the ways in which individuals started their claim for JSA and the nature of discussions held with First Contact Officers (FCOs) (Section 5.1). The timing and content of meetings with Financial Assessors (FAs) are then discussed (Section 5.2) before turning to Work-focused Interviews (WFIs) with Personal Advisers (PAs) (Section 5.3). Finally, the chapter explores the impact of jobseekers' experiences on their willingness to access and use Jobcentre Plus services, and their search for work (Section 5.4).

5.1 First Contact

The Jobcentre Plus contact centre is intended to be the first point of contact for all individuals of working age who want to make a new or repeat claim for benefit. Some of the JSA customers interviewed for this research did not, however, speak with an FCO at a contact centre. Instead, 'First Contact' was occasionally delivered by the Jobcentre Plus public offices or was handled by a relative or agency (such as the Prison Service) on the customer's behalf.

Even where JSA customers did call the contact centre, their recall of the content of discussions was generally poor. This may be due, in part, to the method of contact (by telephone) and the usually brief discussions held. Jobseekers consistently reported that First Contact lasted five minutes or less. In addition, First Contact was often perceived as a means to an end, with customers' attention focused on the goal of sorting out their claim. Consequently, evidence collected from JSA customers on the appropriateness and effectiveness of First Contact was limited, particularly in

relation to discussions about work. The findings presented in the rest of this section should, therefore, be read alongside those gleaned from staff interviews and observations of First Contact in Chapter 2.

5.1.1 Route taken to the contact centre

None of the JSA customers interviewed for this research called the contact centre first to initiate their claim for benefit. Instead, they were directed to the contact centre by staff in Jobcentre Plus. Some customers phoned numbers displayed on posters in local Jobcentre Plus public offices, in newspaper advertisements and on old benefit books to start a new claim. Once connected, they were either transferred to the contact centre or given the correct telephone number to ring.

Jobseekers tended to visit their local Jobcentre to enquire about making a benefit claim. Some of these individuals were familiar with claiming benefit and approached the Jobcentre either as a matter of habit (and alongside looking for jobs) or because they believed they were required to attend in person. Others, with little or no prior experience of claiming, went to the Jobcentre as their 'first port of call'. Upon arrival, JSA customers were usually directed by a member of staff to the 'warm phones' to speak with someone at a contact centre about making a benefit claim. In some cases, customers were given the contact centre telephone number to ring. These individuals took the number and called the contact centre from home.

As mentioned earlier, the Jobcentre Plus public office occasionally handled First Contact. On these occasions, claim forms were handed out to JSA customers and an appointment for a WFI was booked at the same time. It is unclear why these individuals were not directed to the warm phones, and hence the contact centre, although there were examples of respondents who appeared determined to get their claim underway and wanted to avoid being '*passed from one department to another*'.

5.1.2 Establishing customers' benefit needs

At First Contact, JSA customers were usually asked what they wanted to claim. Individuals with prior experience of claiming JSA were clear about the benefit they sought and informed the First Contact Officer (FCO) accordingly. Few of these customers recalled the FCO asking questions that would verify the appropriateness of, or eligibility for, JSA. Instead, the exchange focused on the collection of personal details such as name, address, telephone number and National Insurance number (NINO). Customers who were unsure which benefit to claim remembered the FCO asking a series of questions to establish their personal circumstances and their intentions with regards to work.

5.1.3 Additional benefit advice

Jobseekers rarely asked for further advice or information regarding benefits at First Contact. While JSA customers were asked by an FCO if they had any questions, some were not able to think of any at that time and others did not feel able to ask over the

telephone. Instead, customers felt that it was more appropriate to raise any outstanding queries at the interview stage. In exceptional cases, JSA customers with complex circumstances did ask further questions at First Contact regarding, or related to, their claim. These queries were often specific to the individual's circumstances including, for example, the implications of claiming after a redundancy and the consequences of moving from Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) to JSA. FCOs were rarely able to address such questions and advised customers to raise them at the interview stage.

5.1.4 Discussions about work

Work was discussed with some JSA customers at First Contact although this was not always found to be the case. The scope and depth of these discussions were reported to be very limited. This finding supports the evidence from research with staff, where the emphasis placed on work by FCOs, and the depth of discussions, was found to vary. Work was either not discussed at all with JSA customers or was only covered as background information to the claim. As indicated in Section 5.1.2, the content of discussions between some FCOs and JSA customers focused on the collection of personal details. These customers did not recall that work was mentioned at all. Once the information requested by FCOs was provided, a WFI was booked and the customer was simply told that their claim forms were in the post. In other cases, work was briefly discussed within the context of the individual's claim. Here, JSA customers were asked about their last job, how long it lasted, the reason the job came to an end and, occasionally, the type and nature of work sought. These discussions were short and highly structured, usually led by the FCO, and likened by some jobseekers to a 'question and answer session'. There was little or no exploration of the answers given by the customer. No information or advice was offered by the FCOs, and no work-related action was agreed except for attendance at a WFI.

Some JSA customers reported more detailed discussions about work at First Contact. These conversations built on the background information collected by FCOs and progressed to talk about how and where the individual looked for work. FCOs gave advice on different job search methods and places to look for vacancies, such as local newspapers, Jobseeker Direct and websites, and provided customers with the relevant contact details. Such advice offered new avenues for these jobseekers to explore, and they altered their job search strategies to include the FCO's suggestions.

5.1.5 Job searches and job submissions

There was little evidence from interviews with JSA customers that job searches were routinely conducted by an FCO at First Contact. Instead, job searches were only carried out in exceptional cases where discussions about work were much more tailored to the type of jobs sought by a customer. These jobseekers reported that their FCO explored vacancies for suitable jobs while on the telephone, and then sent information about the vacancies with the claim forms. The individuals concerned subsequently made applications for the jobs.

5.1.6 Caseloading at First Contact

There were no examples of jobseekers who were caseloaded by an FCO at First Contact. As a result, it is not possible to comment on the impact and effectiveness of this aspect of the Jobcentre plus service for JSA customers.

5.1.7 Booking appointments and next steps

JSA customers were generally aware that they were required to attend a meeting at a public office as a condition of benefit entitlement. However, only some were aware that this was intended to be a WFI or that the principal purpose of the meeting was to discuss work. Those customers who recalled an FCO explaining the requirement to attend were usually better informed. In these cases, individuals understood that they had to attend a meeting to discuss work, and that this was compulsory for their claim to proceed. Some JSA customers were only aware, however, that they were expected to go to an interview. These customers were uncertain about the purpose of the meeting. Some thought it was related to their claim, to determine whether they were eligible for JSA, and understood that their claim would not proceed if they did not attend. Other jobseekers thought the meeting was concerned with helping them to find work. In some cases, JSA customers were informed by an FCO that they would have two meetings at the public office: one to check and assess their benefit claim; and one to discuss work. This finding supports evidence from interviews with, and observations of, staff in contact centres that FCOs informed some customers of two separate meetings (see Section 2.4).

'I presumed to take in the forms that I was expecting, the completed forms and then to process my application.'

(Male Jobseeker, aged 43 yrs)

'I think it was just to see whether I was entitled to Jobseeker's Allowance.'

(Female Jobseeker, aged 28 yrs)

'It was to find me a job, just to find out more about me and why I couldn't find a job.'

(Male Jobseeker, aged 40 yrs)

WFIs were generally booked to take place within four working days of First Contact. JSA customers accepted this as necessary and standard but some were concerned about the status of their claim if they took on temporary agency work in the interim. For some JSA customers, the WFI was due five days or more after First Contact. In these cases, jobseekers felt the time between initiating their claim and their interview at a Jobcentre Plus public office was too long and some were concerned about their financial security in the short-term.

'It was just the waiting. My problem was that I got a day with the agency after I started the claim, so I wasn't sure how it stands that I signed on for one day and then the next I did a day's work.'

(Female Jobseeker, aged 22 yrs)

'I had to wait a week. I found that a bit distressing because I wondered if I had enough money to live on.'

(Male Jobseeker, aged 44)

JSA customers received their claim forms and a letter confirming the date, time and location of their meeting within a day or two of initiating their claim with a contact centre.

5.1.8 Overall perceptions of First Contact

JSA customers were generally positive about their experiences of First Contact. They found calling the contact centre a quick, efficient and straightforward process. FCOs were perceived to be informative, friendly and helpful, particularly with those customers who were unfamiliar with claiming and needed some guidance. Some jobseekers were less happy with the service delivered at First Contact, either due to the way in which they were treated over the telephone or because the computers were down when they telephoned and their call was not returned as promised by an FCO.

'It was very good. The impression I got was that they know what's going on.'

(Male Jobseeker, aged 48)

'When I called, the guy said he was just on his way home. I asked whether I should call back but he just rushed through it all. I felt as though I was putting him out and I wasn't sure what to do at the end of it all.'

(Female Jobseeker, aged 42)

'They were very helpful. They clearly explained everything and was only too happy to look stuff up for me. She also gave my very exact instructions so I knew to be there on time, and they were friendly with it.'

(Jobseeker, female, aged 40)

Jobseekers who called from home felt that this approach was more convenient for them because it avoided an unnecessary trip and afforded greater privacy than using the warm phones in Jobcentres. In contrast, other jobseekers preferred to use warm phones in order to avoid the cost of a local call. These individuals often used their visit to the Jobcentre as an opportunity to look at current vacancies posted on job points. Some JSA customers with previous experience of claiming benefit did not see any advantage in starting their claim by phone. These individuals were uncomfortable

using the telephone and wanted to talk with someone on a face-to-face basis so that they could feel able to ask more questions.

'I think it's better than before. Previously you had to go down to the Jobcentre and arrange an appointment there. So you'd jot down when your appointment was. Now everything is done by phone so I can sit here and sort it out without wasting time going down to the Jobcentre. They send confirmation in a letter and there's less risk of missing or forgetting about the interview. It's also a lot quicker. I prefer it this way.'

(Male Jobseeker, aged 43)

'I reckon it's faster, it's quicker than waiting in queues in the Jobcentre. I'd rather call in the Jobcentre, it don't cost you anything.'

(Male Jobseeker, aged 22)

'I would prefer to speak to someone face-to-face so I could have asked them a few questions. You don't really feel like you can do that over the phone.'

(Male Jobseeker, aged 20)

5.2 Meetings with a Financial Assessor

On arrival at the Jobcentre, JSA customers were usually either met by staff at the reception area or were approached by a Floorwalker Manager. At some of the larger public offices, jobseekers reported that they were met by a security guard. On occasions, customers felt intimidated by this at first because they were not used to being approached by security. However, staff were generally considered to be *'pleasant and friendly'* or *'polite and helpful'*, directing customers to a seating area and asking them to wait until their adviser was available.

In general, jobseekers met with an FA before their WFI with a PA and did not see them again afterwards. This finding also supports evidence from interviews with staff (see Section 3.1). Some individuals, from across both new and Pathfinder offices, only recalled one meeting, suggesting that the FA and WFIs were combined. JSA customers were either seen promptly by an FA or PA, or within ten minutes. Any waiting time was used as an opportunity to explore vacancies on the job points located in public offices. There were some examples of jobseekers waiting for more than ten minutes, and an exceptional case of a delay lasting 45 minutes. Generally, these customers did not mind waiting as long as they were informed and knew the reason for the delay. When this did not happen, and the waiting times were excessive (more than half an hour), JSA customers became annoyed and felt aggrieved. These individuals understood that they were booked an appointment at a set time and believed that it should be adhered to.

As indicated in Section 5.1.7, some JSA customers were aware that they would attend two meetings at the Jobcentre Plus public offices: one to check and assess their claim; and one to discuss work. These customers were either familiar with the process due to recent experience of claiming JSA under Jobcentre Plus, or they were explicitly told at First Contact that there would be two meetings. Other jobseekers only expected one meeting, with the adviser named in the letter confirming their appointment. Some of these individuals were surprised to be met by an FA and, in a highly unusual case, believed that the FA was sent to bide time until the PA was available. When FAs approached waiting customers, explained their role and the purpose of the first meeting, JSA customers were generally happy to follow their lead.

5.2.1 Explanations of the purpose of the FA meeting

JSA customers were usually informed that the purpose of their meeting with an FA was to check the completed claim forms and to make sure that all the relevant documentation was ready for the claim to be processed. This supports the evidence from staff and observations. JSA customers who attended combined FA and WFIs recalled similar explanations.

5.2.2 Customers' completion of claim forms

Jobseekers understood that they were expected to fill in the forms prior to their meeting at a Jobcentre Plus public office. The extent to which customers were able to complete the forms varied. Some JSA customers struggled because they were unsure which forms to fill in (particularly with regards to the type of JSA they could claim), because they were dyslexic or because they were unable to read and write. Some of these individuals sought help from family and friends. As a result, JSA customers did complete most, if not all, of the forms ahead of a meeting with an FA.

5.2.3 The claim check

At the start of the meeting, JSA customers were sometimes asked to provide proof of their identity and to outline their circumstances to the FA. In some cases, this exchange led the FA to determine that either further claim forms were required (particularly for those who were self-employed) or that the claims forms completed were not appropriate to the individual (often because they were for the wrong type of JSA). On these occasions, JSA customers reported that their FA collected the necessary forms and continued with the meeting.

Where JSA customers completed their claim forms before attending the public office, FAs were reported to focus on checking through the documentation during the meeting. Questions were asked throughout, to verify the information provided and to fill any gaps. Jobseekers were asked to initial any amendments made. This was also found in the research with staff (see Section 3.2.4). Where forms were not completed, either because the individual did not fill them in beforehand or because additional/alternative forms were required, the FA focused attention on completing the forms during the meeting. JSA customers recalled the FA asking to see the

evidence to accompany their claim. Jobseekers usually presented: their passport, birth certificate or driving licence as proof of identification; wage slips, P45s and bank account statements for proof of income; and household bills or other official correspondence for proof of address. These were usually checked and photocopied. In unusual cases, individuals reported that they either took evidence to the meeting but were not asked for it by the FA or did not take any evidence with them and were not asked to produce any. The FA meeting drew to a close once the claim forms were completed and checked.

5.2.4 Providing information and advice

Some JSA customers were asked how and where they wanted their benefit paid and, occasionally, whether they wanted to claim Housing Benefit (HB). Others were advised on the amount of benefit they could expect to receive and the frequency of payments. Jobseekers rarely recalled that they were informed that they would receive benefit or when they could expect to receive some money. Where JSA customers asked for further information or advice, they were principally concerned with their eligibility for HB or Council Tax Benefit (CTB), and the implications of a change in their circumstances. The FA typically addressed such queries.

5.2.5 Explanations of the meeting with a Personal Adviser

At the end of their meeting with an FA, JSA customers were usually informed that they were required to see another adviser to discuss the type of jobs they were looking for, how and where they looked, and to explore current vacancies. Some jobseekers reported that their FA stressed that this was a condition of receiving benefit. Others did not recall that they were told what would happen next or why, but were simply asked to wait to see another Adviser. Where combined FA and WFIs were held, the discussions moved on to cover work.

5.2.6 Handover to the Personal Adviser

JSA customers who attended a separate WFI with a PA were usually asked by the FA to take a seat in the waiting area until their adviser was ready. In some cases, usually within larger offices, FAs escorted customers to the appropriate section of the office where the WFI would take place. Jobseekers typically waited for a short time, no more than five minutes, until they were either collected by a PA or called over.

5.2.7 Overall perceptions of the Financial Assessor meeting

JSA customers were generally positive about their meeting with an FA and felt that the FA was professional, efficient and helpful. Their overall perceptions of the content of the meeting varied, according to their priorities at the time. Some jobseekers were grateful for the FA's assistance with checking their completed claim forms and felt that this was an important service, particularly amongst those who struggled with forms. These individuals were anxious about making mistakes on the forms and were concerned about the potential delay in receiving money that could result if they submitted an incomplete claim. FAs were able to put these customers

at ease and increased their confidence that the forms were filled in correctly. Other JSA customers were more concerned with finding work. These customers perceived the FA meeting to be necessary but did not feel that it was of immediate benefit to their situation. In some cases, time was of the essence and so they were relieved that they saw an FA promptly and that their claim was dealt with quickly and efficiently.

'They were really good. I think it's a good process because at least they double check. You can miss something out and it would take another six weeks to sort out your claim.'

(Female Jobseeker, aged 28 yrs)

'I felt happy that he was dealing with it in the best way. I was very confident that my benefit was going to be sorted because he explained it all.'

(Male Jobseeker, aged 22)

'It was alright, friendly enough. It was good for me because he didn't drag on, asking me all sorts of questions, so I could get out quick.'

((Male Jobseeker, aged 24)

5.3 Meetings with Personal Advisers

5.3.1 Explaining the purpose of the meeting with a Personal Adviser

PAs were reported to introduce themselves to JSA customers by name, explained the purpose of the meeting and the individual's requirement to participate as a condition of benefit entitlement. Some jobseekers were asked at the outset of the meeting whether they were willing and able to work. The explanations provided to jobseekers by PAs varied, and can be grouped as follows:

- **Goal or outcome orientated.** Some JSA customers reported that their PA explained that the purpose of the WFI was to help them into work or to find a job. These explanations were usually more focused on the customer and what the meeting intended to achieve.
- **Process orientated.** Here, explanations outlined what would occur during the interview such as discussing the type of work the individual wanted and looking for relevant jobs. In some cases, these descriptions concentrated on what the PA would do during the interview, with little or no reference to the jobseeker's role. In other examples, the description was closely aligned with the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg), following its content and order so that the jobseeker understood what was going to happen and that they were expected to actively seek work.

- **Information gathering.** Some jobseekers recalled that their PA focused on the need to collect labour market information, such as their previous employment and the type of work the individual wanted. Explanations of this nature were often associated with the need to input information onto the Labour Market System (LMS) or to make sure that the data held was up-to-date.
- **Combined explanations,** often involving information gathering and process orientated descriptions.

In general, JSA customers understood the explanations provided and knew that the discussion was principally concerned with the *'job side of things'*. Some jobseekers, often with little or no experience of claiming or who had previously found work through the Jobcentre, welcomed the opportunity to talk about work and how to find a job, and adopted a positive attitude to the meeting. Others, who were familiar with the general format and content of the meeting due to previous experience, were relatively indifferent but were interested to know what jobs were available. Some JSA customers, usually with significant experience of claiming, were more sceptical and did not believe that the PA would be able to assist them in finding work. Their understanding of the jobs available through the Jobcentre and previous experience of New Jobseeker Interviews (NJIs) tended to shape their expectations.

5.3.2 Discussions about work

JSA customers were then often engaged in a discussion about work straight after the introduction. They were typically asked about the type of work they wanted or were looking for, the details of their last job held and any other work experience. Jobseekers were occasionally asked to provide details of their qualifications and some discussed potential barriers to work, such as computer skills, health problems, and access to transport in rural areas. JSA customers rarely recalled talking about their skills, particularly softer or transferable skills, or their job prospects.

PAs usually led discussions in the WFI but the extent to which jobseekers participated, or felt able to participate, varied. This finding supports evidence from observations of WFIs (see Section 4.1.8). Three different experiences were found, in both separate WFIs and where WFIs were combined with an FA meeting, as follows:

- Some JSA customers reported that their interview was a full and frank exchange, covering a range of topics including their work experience, qualifications, job aspirations, other work opportunities, and ways of looking for work. These individuals felt that they were fully involved in the conversation, were given the opportunity to ask questions, and that the PA listened to their suggestions or concerns. As a result, they felt that the nature and focus of the discussions were tailored to their situation and appropriate to their needs.
- In other cases, jobseekers felt that their interview was curtailed. Discussions with PAs were more focused on the individual's work experience, the type of work that they were looking for and, occasionally, barriers to work. While these JSA customers participated in the meeting, they did not feel that their PA was fully

engaged in the conversation or that the PA responded to the individual's contributions. Some highlighted potential barriers to work that they felt were important, such as the absence of driving or IT skills, but these were not always acknowledged or addressed by the PA. Consequently, these individuals did not feel that the discussions held were sufficiently detailed or substantive, and some felt that they would have benefited from a more in-depth meeting.

- Some jobseekers' participation in the WFI with a PA was superficial, whereby they simply responded to the questions asked by the PA. In these examples, the scope of discussions was usually narrow, focusing on the type of work sought, the preferred working hours, and how far they were willing to travel for work. These JSA customers were rarely challenged by the PA or asked to elaborate on their responses to the questions asked.

5.3.3 Discussions about benefits

There were some instances where jobseekers discussed their current benefit claim with their PA at the outset of the meeting, but these were rare and usually as background information on the individual and in the context of work. In other cases, jobseekers raised questions about benefits towards the end of the meeting with a PA. These questions were usually concerned with the amount of benefit that the JSA customer was entitled to and when they could expect to receive money. Benefit-related queries were raised by jobseekers when the FA did not address them prior to the WFI. There was little evidence that these concerns diverted JSA customers' attention from the primary focus of work in discussions with PAs.

5.3.4 Providing information and advice, and making referrals

JSA customers consistently recalled that their PA asked how they planned to look for work, usually alongside completing their JSAg. They were also offered advice from the PA on different places and ways to look for jobs. Some were either shown how to use the job points located in Jobcentres or were told how to use them, and others were directed to the Internet facilities also available. Some JSA customers were provided with details of recruitment/employment websites, Jobseeker Direct and the days when local newspapers carried job advertisements. Occasionally, JSA customers were advised to register with a local employment agency or to approach potential employers.

For some, information offered by PAs was new and provided them with a useful starting point in their search for work or allowed them to widen their job search strategy. Others were already aware of the various methods suggested. Some of these individuals were confident about their existing strategy to look for work and were often already using the information sources suggested. Some, with no clear job search strategy, were indifferent to the advice offered. These customers were not convinced of the usefulness or appropriateness of the advice, and so did not change the way they looked for work. In exceptional cases, jobseekers felt that the information they received was inappropriate or irrelevant to their situation. These

individuals did not believe that the job sources suggested would yield opportunities in their targeted sector or occupation. As a result, they tended to ignore the advice given.

The extent to which other information and advice was offered by PAs was limited. The only cases where this occurred was with some young people, under the age of 24, who were told of the support available through New Deal for Young People (NDYP). None of these young jobseekers were, however, referred on as an early entrant to NDYP.

Further information or advice was given to some jobseekers in response to a specific query. Some asked whether they could receive computer training. PAs were reported to inform these customers that courses were available, but either no further information was provided or the jobseeker was told that there were very long waiting lists. As a result, these individuals did not feel that their needs were addressed.

Some JSA customers were referred to another adviser or agency for follow-on support. Some young jobseekers, who were uncertain about the work they wanted, were referred to the Careers Service for an appointment with an adviser. Others were informed about additional assistance available from specialist advisers or programmes, such as a Disability Employment Adviser (DEA) and Progress2Work, and were given the details of a meeting arranged on their behalf. These jobseekers felt that the referrals made were appropriate because the additional support was tailored to their needs and addressed specific barriers to, or issues regarding, work.

5.3.5 Conducting job searches and job submissions

Jobseekers were usually asked what type of jobs they wanted and PAs were reported to enter this information onto their computer. In some cases, customers recalled that the PA referred to previous job areas held on their computer for the individual and confirmed that these were still relevant. Other JSA customers reported that the categories on the computer did not match the type of jobs they were seeking and so the PA chose what was considered to be a 'best fit'. Despite this process, some jobseekers reported that they did not agree with the selections made. The reasons for such disagreement included: the fields chosen did not reflect the jobseeker's target labour market; individuals did not feel that the jobs available in the associated sectors were suitable for them; and some JSA customers felt that the PA made the decision without the customer's full agreement.

Job searches were often conducted during the WFI with a PA and vacancies were found for some jobseekers. Information on these vacancies was always provided to customers and applications were usually submitted for at least one job. Occasionally, JSA customers chose not to apply for the vacancies found because they did not feel that the jobs were suitable for them. In some of these cases, individuals considered the pay offered to be too low or they were looking for full-time, permanent employment but the vacancies available were only for part-time or temporary work.

In other instances, jobseekers were not interested in the jobs offered because they were not the type or area of work they wanted. This was sometimes a result of the mismatch between individual's targeted labour market and the categories available on the Jobcentre's database, or because the jobseeker was not committed to looking for work in an area chosen by the PA. Some jobseekers did not recall that a job search was conducted during their meeting with a PA. It is not always clear why this did not occur, although in a couple of examples the JSA customer indicated that their PA recognised that jobs within a particular sector, such as media or heavy industry, were rarely available through the Jobcentre. This supports research with staff; job searches tended to form part of the WFI with a jobseeker but there were examples when this was not done (see Section 4.1.12).

5.3.6 Action plans

In general, JSA customers reviewed the content of the JSAg drawn up by their PA and verbally agreed to follow the actions set out in the plan as well as signing the Agreement. Actions usually involved looking for work in two or three different occupations or sectors, where the individual would look for work and how often. Jobseekers recalled that they were made aware that they risked losing their benefit if they did not adhere to the JSAg, and they understood that they were required to make this commitment. Some JSA customers felt that the JSAg was '*pointless*' or '*irrelevant*' to them because it was either not sufficiently tailored to their work aspirations or because it was just perceived to be a document they were required to sign.

5.3.7 Ending Work-focused Interviews

At the end of the WFI, JSA customers were usually told how and when to sign on and they understood that this was mandatory, as found in the staff research (see Section 4.1.13). Some jobseekers were given the PA's contact details in case they wanted further information or assistance but no firm agreements were made for such follow-up contact. Occasionally, JSA customers were told that they were expected to attend a 13-week interview and that this was compulsory if they were still claiming at that time.

5.3.8 Overall perceptions of the meeting with a Personal Adviser

In general, JSA customers perceived their PA to be friendly and helpful. Their experiences of the WFIs were, however, mixed. Some jobseekers felt that the WFI was useful and productive, particularly when they felt they engaged in a meaningful, relevant and substantive discussion about work with their adviser or when suitable vacancies were found. These individuals reported that their PA listened, understood their work aspirations, and tailored the discussions and job searches to the customer's needs. Others, from across the range of jobseekers interviewed, perceived the meeting to be perfunctory. These JSA customers felt that the discussions were not tailored to their situation, were not sufficiently detailed, or did not tell the individual something they did not already know. Some of these

jobseekers specifically wanted further advice from the PA on ways in which they could improve their job prospects. Other jobseekers were unhappy with the service they received during the WFI. These individuals felt '*processed*', did not feel involved in the meeting, and did not believe that sufficient information or advice was provided on the different options available to them. Job searches rarely produced suitable job opportunities for these JSA customers and were not conducted in some cases.

5.4 The impact of Jobcentre Plus on JSA customers

At the end of the Jobcentre Plus process, JSA customers felt that they understood which benefits they were entitled to and were confident that their claim would proceed. Some of these customers knew what to claim from the outset, usually due to previous experience, and their understanding was confirmed at their meeting with an FA. Others, who were less sure, received support and advice from either an FCO and/or an FA. As a result, jobseekers rarely wanted to ask further queries regarding their eligibility to claim. In some exceptional cases, jobseekers were not told how much money they could expect to receive or when it would be paid and so they remained concerned about this after their meetings at a Jobcentre Plus public office.

Jobseekers' understanding of the services available through Jobcentre Plus was generally poor. This information was rarely provided by FCOs at First Contact and while PAs occasionally outlined some of the services, customers either did not feel that they received sufficient information or were not clear how the services were relevant to them. In some cases, JSA customers were informed of IT training that was available but they were neither referred nor told how they could access the training. There were some exceptions: jobseekers who were directly referred to agencies, advisers or programmes by their PA for specialist support; and JSA customers who were made aware of the facilities, such as job points and internet access, located in Jobcentre Plus public offices.

The extent to which Jobcentre Plus helped JSA customers to move into work was mixed. In some cases it appeared as though opportunities were missed. JSA customers were interested to hear about job opportunities over the telephone, at First Contact, but rarely discussed looking for work with an FCO. JSA customers also wanted more appropriate advice or support from their PA with looking for work. Some of these individuals felt that their PA did not listen to them during the WFI, particularly regarding the type and nature of work they wanted to do. They were often presented with the results of a job search that did not meet their goals, either because the hours were not appropriate or because the type of work was not what they wanted. Where job searches were not conducted during WFIs, customers were disappointed and did not feel that their PA was interested in helping them. Their perceptions and confidence in Jobcentre Plus tended to suffer as a result, and customers were unsure that they would use the services again. In other cases, skill needs were identified and discussed with a PA and, in an exceptional case, referred

for assessment but the needs were not subsequently addressed. These individuals felt that they needed support or training to tackle the identified needs (possibly more so as a result of the WFI) and were disappointed not to receive further assistance.

Jobseekers were typically highly motivated at the outset of their claim and some found work relatively quickly (within six weeks). Although these individuals received advice from PAs on where to look for job vacancies, they tended to find work through other routes and so secured employment independently of Jobcentre Plus. FCOs made a direct impact on the job search activity of JSA customers who discussed work at First Contact. Similarly, PAs influenced where and how some JSA customers looked for work when this was covered in the WFI. These individuals often lacked a clear job search strategy or were limiting their search to a small number of places. They participated fully in discussions about work with their PA and were given clear advice about alternative sources of jobs that were not already being used. Consequently, these jobseekers felt that their search for work was more focused and they were more motivated to find a job.

In some cases, PAs referred JSA customers to other agencies, advisers or programmes for specialist support. These individuals received training and further advice, and perceived the additional support to be effective in addressing issues that hindered their search for work. As a result, they moved closer to the labour market.

5.5 Conclusions

Overall, First Contact provided an efficient service to JSA customers. Information on the benefits sought by jobseekers was collected, claim forms were despatched, and WFIs were arranged to occur within four working days. It appeared, however, that First Contact was not effective in promoting the work-focused services of Jobcentre Plus to jobseekers. Customers recalled answering questions about work, but these tended to be limited to the context of the individual's claim. Some JSA customers received information on the work-related services available from Jobcentre Plus, such as Jobseeker Direct, and reported that their FCO conducted a job search at First Contact. These services were not, however, routinely delivered to jobseekers. Some JSA customers knew that they were required to attend a meeting as a condition of benefit entitlement but did not know that this was intended to be a WFI or that it was primarily to discuss work.

FAs were generally reported to deliver an effective service to jobseekers. JSA customers consistently reported that the FA checked their claim forms, verified the information presented, collected evidence when requested, and filled in gaps on the forms as and when necessary. They also routinely reported that information on the status of the claim was given, although the exact details varied. The extent to which JSA customers were informed that their claim was dependent on satisfactory completion of a WFI was, however, mixed. Some jobseekers recalled that the FA explained that they were required to meet with an adviser to discuss work and that

this was a condition of receiving benefit. Others did not remember what they were told would happen next, why, or the consequences associated with non-attendance or non-participation.

JSA customers were typically informed of the purpose of the WFI and the requirement to participate by a PA. They consistently recalled that their PA asked what work they wanted, their previous work experience, and how they planned to look for work. The depth of discussions in WFIs, and the extent to which jobseekers participated, was also mixed. While some jobseekers reported a full and frank exchange with their PA, others did not feel that discussions about work were sufficiently detailed or tailored to their needs. In some cases, PAs were reported not to challenge JSA customers' assumptions about work. There was some evidence that jobseekers were encouraged to take up additional support or provision available through Jobcentre Plus, but this was not routinely offered and, in some exceptional cases, jobseekers appeared to be discouraged from enlisting on a training course. Job searches were usually conducted, and job submissions were made when suitable vacancies were found. Only in unusual instances was this not found to be the case. JSA customers also routinely reported that they reviewed the content of the JSAg drawn up by their PA and agreed to follow the actions set out in the agreement.

6 The experiences and perceptions of non-JSA customers

This chapter presents the experiences and perceptions of non-JSA customers who used Jobcentre Plus in late spring/early summer 2003. It is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals who made a claim for benefits other than Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). There are three different groups, determined by the type of benefit claimed: lone parents; carers; and people claiming sickness or disability benefits. The different experiences of these groups are highlighted throughout and references to non-JSA customers cover all three groups. The findings presented here detail how non-JSA customers interacted with the different stages of Jobcentre Plus, their perceptions of the service delivered, and its impact on their understanding of the services available and propensity to move into work. It begins by looking at the ways in which individuals started their claim for benefit and the nature of discussions held with First Contact Officers (FCOs) (Section 6.1). The timing and content of meetings with Financial Assessors (FAs) are then discussed (Section 6.2) before turning to Work-focused Interviews (WFIs) with Personal Advisers (PAs) (Section 6.3). Finally, the chapter explores the impact of non-JSA customers' experiences on their understanding of benefits, the services available through Jobcentre Plus, and their propensity to make the transition into work (Section 6.4).

6.1 First Contact

The Jobcentre Plus contact centre is intended to be the first point of contact for all individuals of working age who want to make a new or repeat claim for benefit. Some non-JSA customers interviewed for this research did not, however, speak with an FCO at a contact centre. Instead, Jobcentre Plus public offices occasionally handled 'First Contact' for some people claiming sickness or disability benefits and lone parents. In these instances, claims forms were usually handed out to customers and an appointment was booked at the same time.

Some non-JSA customers, particularly carers and those claiming sickness or disability benefits, sought advice from local welfare agencies, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), on the benefits they could claim before they were in touch with Jobcentre Plus. These agencies, often called the contact centre on the customer's behalf, handled any discussions and informed the customer of the date and time of their appointment. Other friends, family and professionals also telephoned the contact centre for carers, lone parents and people with health problems, including partners, daughters, health or social workers, a Lone Parent Adviser, and a representative from the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) section of Jobcentre Plus. As a result, these non-JSA customers did not personally experience First Contact.

Even where non-JSA customers did call the contact centre, their recall of the content of discussions was generally poor. This may be due to the lapse of time between First Contact and the research, the method of contact (telephone) and the usually brief discussions held. Consequently, evidence collected from non-JSA customers on the appropriateness and effectiveness of First Contact was limited, particularly in relation to discussions about work. The findings presented in the rest of this section should, therefore, be read alongside those gleaned from staff interviews and observations of First Contact in Chapter 2.

6.1.1 Route taken to the contact centre

When non-JSA customers did call the contact centre themselves, they tended to follow two main routes, as follows:

- Some non-JSA customers, from all customer groups, called the contact centre from home. These customers often rang a telephone number found in a phone directory, from a booklet, from a friend or relative, or on an old benefit book. In some cases, people claiming sickness or disability benefits were making enquiries with their Local Authority about Housing Benefit (HB), Council Tax Benefit (CTB) or rent arrears, and were advised to make a claim through Jobcentre Plus. Customers who called from home were usually connected to either a Jobcentre Plus public office or another department. They were subsequently transferred to the contact centre or given the correct telephone number to ring. In general, these non-JSA customers were passed on to the contact centre quite quickly but some were put through to various departments before they were connected to the contact centre. Some customers who were claiming sickness or disability benefits visited the Jobcentre or an old Benefits Agency (BA) office to enquire about making a new claim for Incapacity Benefit (IB) and were given the contact centre telephone number to ring. These individuals took the number and called from home, often because they were unaware that they could call from warm phones in the Jobcentre.
- Some non-JSA customers visited the Jobcentre Plus public office and used the warm phones to start their new benefit claim. These individuals were advised to visit their local Jobcentre by local welfare agencies, Working Links, old BA sites and post offices. Some people with health problems were using the Jobcentre

Plus public offices already, to enquire about other financial support available for example, or to hand in completed claim forms sent to them by their employer. These individuals were advised by public office staff to call the contact centre to enquire about making a new benefit claim or to arrange an appointment for a WFI as appropriate.

Some lone parents and people with health problems recalled that someone initially called them at home to set up an appointment at a Jobcentre Plus public office regarding a new claim for benefit. This was usually a follow-up call to previous contact made by a local welfare agency. Some customers claiming sickness or disability benefits also received letters regarding their current benefit, advising them that they were either no longer eligible for IB or that they needed to reapply to claim Income Support (IS). The correspondence also provided a date and time for an interview at a Jobcentre Plus public office. It is unclear what prompted this contact since customers did not recall calling a contact centre or making enquiries about their benefit, and the letter was unexpected.

6.1.2 Establishing customers' benefit needs

At First Contact, non-JSA customers were usually asked what they wanted to claim. The different experiences of each customer group are outlined below.

Carers

Some carers knew what they wanted to claim before they called the contact centre. Friends, family, CAB or other local welfare advice agencies, and Jobcentre Plus staff had advised these customers before they started their claim. In other cases, the individual knew what benefit to apply for either from previous experience of claiming or from knowledge gained when working. During telephone conversations with an FCO, carers recalled that they were asked to provide details about themselves and their circumstances. Typically they were asked to provide personal details, such as their name, address, date of birth and National Insurance number (NINO), and information on their current circumstances, including why they wanted to make a claim, who they were caring for and, occasionally, their ability to work. Some were asked for information on any other benefits they received. Carers rarely recalled that they were told by an FCO whether they were eligible for the benefit they requested. While some were confident that they would receive the benefit they wanted to claim, on the basis of previous advice received, others were less sure and wanted reassurance.

People claiming sickness or disability benefits

Some customers with health problems also knew what benefit they wanted to claim, often based on their previous experience of claiming. Friends, family, doctors, employers, CAB or other local welfare agencies, and Jobcentre Plus staff also advised some customers. As found with carers, those starting a new claim for a sickness or disability benefit were typically asked to provide their personal details and information on their current circumstances, including the reason for their claim,

the nature of any health problems, and any other relevant medical history. Some were also asked whether their partner worked, if they received any other benefits, and their intentions with regards to work. People claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that they were told about the eligibility criteria for the benefit they requested or whether they were eligible. In some instances, the FCO told customers that they were unsure if they were eligible for IB but said they would book an appointment at a Jobcentre Plus public office when the claim would be checked.

Other customers with health problems or with disabilities were less certain about what they could claim. In these instances, they recalled discussing their situation with an FCO, particularly their ability to work, and were subsequently advised that they should claim JSA, IB or IS as appropriate. Some of these individuals were not confident about the advice they received, either because they were unclear how the FCO decided or because they knew that they had not paid sufficient contributions to qualify for IB.

Lone parents

Lone parents' understanding about which benefits they could claim prior to calling the contact centre was also mixed. Some knew which benefit they wanted, often due to knowledge gained through previous experience of claiming. These customers were also asked for their personal details and information on their current circumstances, including the reason for their claim, the number of dependants, their age, details of any recent work held, and, occasionally, who else lived at their address and whether the customer was separated from their husband or wife. Some lone parents were asked what type of IS they wanted to claim, but were unsure how to respond. In an exceptional case, the FCO stated that they were not sure that the customer was eligible for IS and offered to check and call the customer back. Other lone parents, who were less sure about which benefit they could apply for, were generally advised to claim IS. A few were unclear why this was more appropriate than JSA because the FCO did not fully explain the rationale behind their decision.

6.1.3 Additional benefit advice

Non-JSA customers, from across all customer groups, rarely recalled the FCO providing further advice or information on benefits at First Contact. Some lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits reported that they were asked if they wanted to claim HB or CTB.

Non-JSA customers rarely asked for further information or advice. In some cases, they did not feel that there was an opportunity to ask questions during the telephone conversation. In others, customers were offered the opportunity but did not know what to ask at that stage. Some non-JSA customers who were concerned about their financial situation or the implications of making a claim did ask for further information or advice. These enquiries tended to focus on either the financial basis of their claim, whether Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) was income-related for example, or interim, emergency sources of financial support. FCOs were unable to

address unusual questions concerning carers' benefits and advised customers to raise their query at their meeting in the Jobcentre Plus public office. Some lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits were given information on crisis loans in response to their concerns about money in the interim period until they received benefit. An appointment for a crisis loan was set-up for some of these customers and, in an exceptional case, a lone parent was immediately transferred to the appropriate department where a crisis loan was agreed.

6.1.4 Discussions about work

The extent to which work was discussed with non-JSA customers at First Contact was very limited. This finding reflects the practice of staff in contact centres where the subject of work was found to be couched in broader discussions of the help and support available to non-JSA customers. In general, non-JSA customers either did not recall that work was discussed at all or reported that it was only covered as background information to their claim. In some instances, non-JSA customers from all groups explained their situation at the outset of the conversation with an FCO, making it clear that they were not able or available for work. FCOs appeared to follow the customers' lead and did not raise work at all. Once all other information requested by FCOs was provided, a WFI was booked and the customer was simply told that their claim forms were in the post.

'I told them I'm not working because I've just had a little baby.'

(Female lone parent, aged 30 yrs)

'I explained to them that I was currently in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, and that I was having an operation, and they said, "No problem, we'll send you the forms".'

(Female recovering from an operation, aged 35 yrs)

'They asked me if I was working so I told them I had two jobs but wanted to give one of them up because I couldn't cope.'

(Female lone parent, aged 34 yrs)

In other cases, work was briefly discussed within the context of the individual's circumstances and hence their eligibility to claim benefit. Some carers and lone parents were asked about their recent employment and why they had to leave. The reasons given were often associated with their caring responsibilities and indicated that the customer was not able or available for work. FCOs occasionally followed this up with lone parents, asking them when they would be available for work. People claiming sickness or disability benefits were asked about their current work situation, if they were employed or whether they were able to work and, occasionally, when they thought they might be able to work. Their responses were rarely explored further, either because the individual was already employed or because it was not appropriate given the nature and/or severity of the customers' condition. As a result, these discussions were usually short.

Some lone parents and carers felt that it was inappropriate for their FCO to ask about work. These individuals believed that they had already indicated that they were neither able nor available to work and they resented being asked by the FCO. In general, however, non-JSA customers did not mind being asked about their work plans at First Contact provided that the questions took account of the information already supplied.

Work was only discussed in more depth in exceptional cases. Some lone parents and an individual starting a claim for IB reported slightly more detailed discussions about work at First Contact. In these cases, customers were typically informed about the specialist support services available under Jobcentre Plus to help people back into work. A lone parent was asked how they looked for work by an FCO, but this individual was not prepared to talk about work at this time and so no further questions were asked. Some lone parents were also told that the FCO could search for jobs over the phone, but these customers did not feel that it was appropriate at that time.

6.1.5 Job searches and job submissions

Job searches and job submissions are intended to occur for customers who are job ready. There was no evidence from interviews with non-JSA customers that job searches or job submissions were conducted by FCOs for carers, lone parents or people with a health problem or disability. As a result, it is not possible to report on the appropriateness or effectiveness of this aspect of the Jobcentre Plus service for non-JSA customer groups.

6.1.6 Caseloading

There were no examples of non-JSA customers who were caseloaded by an FCO at First Contact. As a result, it is not possible to report on customers' perceptions of the impact or effectiveness of this aspect of the Jobcentre Plus service for carers, lone parents, or people with health problems or disabilities.

6.1.7 Booking appointments and next steps

Non-JSA customers were generally aware that they were required to attend a meeting at a public office, either because they were informed by the FCO or because they recalled their appointment letter setting out the requirement. Carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that the FCO explicitly told them that the meeting was a condition of benefit entitlement. In addition, they did not routinely understand that this meeting was intended to be a WFI or that the principal purpose was to discuss work. Some lone parents and people with health problems recalled that their FCO explicitly told them that the meeting was concerned with work. In contrast, others, from across all customer groups, either recalled that the FCO said that their claim would be checked at the meeting or they assumed that the meeting was regarding their benefit. Some carers, people claiming sickness or disability benefits, and, in exceptional cases, lone parents did not recall that they were told what the meeting was for or what would

happen. As a result, they did not know what to expect. These findings do not support the evidence from research with staff, possibly due to customers' recall, the extent to which they absorbed information provided by FCOs, and the emphasis placed by FCOs when outlining the next steps of the Jobcentre Plus process (see Section 2.4.3).

'The purpose of the meeting would be to assess my current capabilities and if everything was fine then try to direct me towards the right job and hopefully find me one as well.'

(Male with a back problem, aged 36yrs)

'All I knew was that I would see one person to sort my claim out.'

(Female lone parent, aged 28 yrs)

'I presumed that it would be to go over the forms and discuss my claim for Invalid Care Allowance.'

(Female carer, age not known, looking after her elderly mother)

'I didn't understand, I really didn't understand why I was going there.'

(Female carer, aged 53 yrs, looking after both parents)

Some lone parents and individuals claiming sickness or disability benefits were told by an FCO that they would attend two meetings at a Jobcentre Plus public office: one to check the claim form; and one with a PA to discuss work. This finding supports evidence from interviews with staff and observations of First Contact (see Section 2.4). Others were already familiar with the process of claiming under Jobcentre Plus and so knew that they would attend two meetings.

Non-JSA customers, from across all groups, rarely recalled that they were told that they were required to attend the meeting as a condition of benefit entitlement. Instead, carers, lone parents and people with health problems or disabilities simply assumed that if they did not attend their claim might be affected or would not proceed. These customers perceived the meeting to be part of the claiming process that they were expected to follow. Non-JSA customers with previous experience of claiming under Jobcentre Plus were usually better informed. Other non-JSA customers did not consider the potential implications of not attending, some of whom did not realise that they would not be entitled to benefit if they did not attend.

'If I didn't attend, my benefits wouldn't have been reinstated.'

(Female lone parent, aged 32 yrs)

'If you don't attend then your benefit may be stopped.'

(Female recovering after an operation, aged 35 yrs)

'No I don't think I did really [have an option]. But then again they'd made the appointment, to take your Benefit claim so you go in like. I didn't think I was forced to go in, or not go.'

(Male with physical disabilities, aged 29yrs)

WFIs were generally booked to take place within four working days of First Contact and some lone parents were booked appointments for the next day. In general, non-JSA customers were content with the date and time of their appointment because the FCO took their preferences into consideration and they did not feel that four days was too long. Some lone parents and carers wanted an earlier meeting than the one offered because they were concerned or distressed about money. In some of these instances, the contact centre called the lone parents back when appointments were cancelled and offered them the opportunity to attend an earlier meeting. For some non-JSA customers, however, the WFI was booked to occur between five and ten days after their initial call to the contact centre. In some cases, this was convenient for the customer and fitted in with their plans. On other occasions, non-JSA customers (and particularly lone parents) felt that this was too long to wait to sort out their claim and were very concerned about getting money to live on.

'I was shocked that you know, I got an appointment so quickly. I thought I would have to wait about a week or something like that.'

(Female lone parent, aged 26 yrs)

'It was about four days, because I can remember...forms come through I thought the quicker the better.'

(Female with anxiety and depression, aged 22 yrs)

'I'm on my own with three children, with nothing and I had to wait two weeks.'

(Male lone parent, aged 34 yrs)

'I was devastated wasn't I. I couldn't stop crying. I was so frustrated because trying to get through to the crisis loan was ridiculous as well.'

(Female lone parent, aged 39 yrs)

6.1.8 Deferrals and waivers

The WFI was deferred for some people claiming sickness or disability benefits, usually because the customer was due to go into hospital or was in hospital when they started their claim. In exceptional cases, customers with a terminal illness or severe health problem were also offered deferred appointments by an FCO but chose to decline so that they could get their claim sorted. In contrast, there were some instances when a deferral or waiver was not made or offered but was appropriate, including customers who were due operations, signed off work for life, diagnosed with a terminal illness, or who had a job to return to once they recovered from an illness or injury.

6.1.9 Customers' receipt of claim forms

In general, non-JSA customers received their claim forms and a letter through the post confirming the date, time and location of their meeting after calling the contact centre. Where WFIs were booked to occur the day after First Contact, lone parents were told to visit the Jobcentre Plus public office ahead of their scheduled meeting to pick up and complete their forms. In some cases, lone parents and an IB customer did not receive claim forms, although the reasons for this are unknown. Non-JSA customers generally understood that they were expected to fill in the forms prior to their meeting at a Jobcentre Plus public office. In a few instances, carers and people claiming sickness or disability benefits posted the completed forms back to Jobcentre Plus rather than taking them to the FA meeting. The forms were lost in an exceptional case. These customers were not aware that they could take the forms to their appointment.

6.1.10 Overall perceptions of First Contact

Non-JSA customers were generally positive about their experiences of First Contact. They found calling the contact centre a quick, efficient and straightforward process. FCOs were perceived to be friendly and helpful, particularly with those customers who were unfamiliar with claiming and needed some guidance. Some non-JSA customers, from across all groups, were less happy with the service delivered at First Contact. These individuals were not confident that the FCO knew enough about the benefits that they wanted to claim and did not receive all the information they needed.

'Very helpful and explained a lot of stuff I didn't understand... what was best to apply for, because I hadn't got a clue.'

(Female with depression, aged 25 yrs)

'The fact that I couldn't claim when I got to me appointment was quite annoying really, she told me the wrong information.'

(Male with depression, aged 28 yrs)

'I think I knew a bit more about Income Support than what she did.'

(Female lone parent, aged 22 yrs)

Non-JSA customers' views about starting their claim by telephone were mixed. For some, the telephone was convenient, helped to speed up the process, and meant that non-JSA customers from all groups could call from home rather than making a trip to a Jobcentre Plus public office. In other cases, individuals from all customer groups were reluctant to use the phone and preferred to speak with someone face-to-face. Some were also puzzled as to why they could not pick up their claim forms from a Jobcentre Plus public office, especially when they had already made the trip to the office, and were required to initiate the claim by phone.

'The phone call was useful, I prefer making an appointment this way because I can do it from home.'

(Female carer, age not known, looking after her elderly mother)

'I told her twice that I didn't want to use the phones, but she insisted that I had to, she said if you want to make a fresh claim then you've got to use the phone.'

(Female lone parent, aged 28 yrs)

Some non-JSA customers felt that First Contact did not provide enough information or did not sufficiently prepare them for the meeting at a Jobcentre Plus public office. In some cases, individuals wanted to know how long the meetings were going to take so that they could organise childcare, for example, or warn the FCO that their health problem would preclude a long meeting or interview.

'If I'd been told the length of the appointment and that I was going to see so many people, I would have been maybe a little more prepared.'

(Female lone parent, aged 33 yrs)

6.2 Meetings with a Financial Assessor

On arrival at the Jobcentre, non-JSA customers were usually either met by staff at the reception area or were approached by a Floorwalker Manager and handed in their completed claim forms. At some of the larger public offices, a security guard met some non-JSA customers and escorted them to the relevant waiting area. In general, customers felt that staff were polite, friendly and helpful, providing clear guidance to customers who were unfamiliar with the offices and asking them to wait until their adviser was available. Some non-JSA customers were not impressed by the attitude of staff in some offices, primarily because they felt that they were rude and abrupt and didn't really talk to the individuals concerned. In exceptional cases, a carer reported that they stood around in a queue for ten minutes waiting to be seen and a lone parent was *'passed around four different people'*.

In general, non-JSA customers from all groups reported that they met with an FA before their WFI with a PA and did not see them again afterwards. Only some customers reported that they saw the FA after their WFI, either because they were late for their appointment or because the office was *'running behind'*. These individuals were not concerned that they saw the FA after the PA as long as their benefit claim was dealt with and went off to be processed. Other individuals, from across both day two and Pathfinder offices, only recalled one meeting covering both benefits and work, suggesting that the FA and WFIs were combined. Some lone parents and people with a health problem or disability did not see an FA at all because their meeting was either deferred at First Contact or because they cancelled their original appointment and specifically asked for it to be deferred. Some carers, lone parents and people with either chronic health problems or who were awaiting

surgery whose appointments were not deferred, reported that they only saw the FA. In these instances, it appears that the FA deduced that a WFI was not appropriate for the individuals concerned.

Non-JSA customers were either seen promptly by an FA or PA, or within ten minutes. FAs either approached the individual in the waiting area or, in smaller offices and where the waiting area was close by, called the customer over for the meeting. In some cases, customers who struggle to use stairs were directed to a meeting in an upstairs office with no disabled access. These individuals had difficulty getting up the stairs and no alternatives were offered. There were examples from all customer groups of waits lasting more than ten minutes, and exceptional delays of up to 45 minutes. Generally, customers did not mind waiting for up to 20 minutes but longer delays, often a result of other appointments running late, annoyed customers and were highly uncomfortable for some people with severe health problems or disabilities. In some of these cases, Jobcentre Plus staff were reported to seek to make customers as comfortable as possible.

6.2.1 Explanations of the purpose of the Financial Assessor meeting

Non-JSA customers were usually informed that the purpose of their meeting with an FA was to check the completed claim forms and to make sure that all the relevant documentation was ready for the claim to be processed. This was also often the case where combined FA and WFIs were held. There was no evidence of varied explanations given to different non-JSA customer groups or types of customers.

6.2.2 Customers' completion of claim forms

The extent to which non-JSA customers were able to complete the forms ahead of their meeting with an FA varied. Carers generally completed the forms before the meeting, occasionally seeking help from a local welfare agency to fill in aspects of the form. Some non-JSA customers, from across all groups, struggled with the forms because they were dyslexic, were unsure how to answer some of the questions, or were unclear which questions they were meant to complete. Some of these individuals sought help from family or their social worker, and, in an exceptional case, approached the CAB for help after being refused help by staff in Jobcentre Plus. Customers who received claim forms for both IB and IS, typically lone parents or individuals with a health problem, were often unsure which to complete. These individuals usually completed one or both forms prior to meeting with an FA, except in highly unusual circumstances where the forms were left blank until the FA meeting. In general, non-JSA customers from all groups completed most if not all of the forms they received. Some wanted to ask questions regarding some parts of the form and left these for their meeting with an FA.

6.2.3 The claim check

At the start of meetings with an FA, some non-JSA customers were asked to outline their current circumstances. The FA checked which forms the customer provided to make sure that they were appropriate. In some cases, usually with carers and those claiming sickness or disability benefits, customers sent their completed forms to Jobcentre Plus ahead of their meeting. This often caused some confusion and delay at the outset of the FA meeting and some time was needed to find the returned claims.

Where non-JSA customers completed their claim forms before attending the public office, FAs were reported to focus on checking through the documentation during the meeting. Carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits recalled the FA asking to see the evidence to accompany their claim. The following was usually presented: their passport, birth certificate or driving licence as proof of identification; wage slips, P45s and bank account statements for proof of income; and household bills or other official correspondence for proof of address. In addition, lone parents consistently produced their Child Benefit book and customers with a health problem presented a sick note. Some lone parents did not bring all the documentation required to support their claim, particularly wage slips from their last job and, in some instances, proof of their identification. In an exceptional case, a customer claiming sickness or disability benefits did not provide a note from their doctor that signed them off work. FAs were reported to ask these customers to return to the office with the missing evidence within a few days. Supporting evidence for non-JSA customers' claim was usually checked and photocopied. Some carers did not recall that they were asked by an FA to provide any identification or evidence to support their claim and did not produce any. In exceptional cases, where the FA and WFI was combined, customers' claims were significantly delayed because there was no supporting evidence.

The content of FA meetings varied for different types of customers as outlined below.

Carers

For carers, the FA was reported to just check their forms with few or no questions. As a result, the meetings were usually short and rarely lasted more than 15 minutes. In some cases, the FA discussed the carer's current circumstances while checking the form. In an exceptional case, when the forms were sent ahead of the meeting, a carer recalled that the FA also checked that there were no changes to the individual's circumstances since the form was submitted. Minor changes were made to the completed forms and carers were asked to initial these amendments.

People claiming sickness or disability benefits

The FA meeting was also principally concerned with checking completed claim forms with customers who were claiming sickness or disability benefits and who arrived with (partially) completed forms. These customers reported more detailed

discussions with the FA than found for carers, and were routinely asked questions throughout the meeting to verify information provided and to fill in gaps. These meetings were also relatively short, with customers reporting that they lasted between ten and 20 minutes. Some customers asked the FA to check the information they entered in their claim, such as previous dates of claiming, or to chase information that was needed to support the claim, such as an employer's verification of an individual's circumstances.

In some cases, people with a health problem or a disability were unable to fill in the forms fully, ahead of the meeting. This was because some were unsure whether to complete the IB or IS forms, some were dyslexic, and others found the forms too complex to complete. Customers with health problems who were previously self-employed found the forms particularly daunting and confusing. Where forms were not completed, FAs were reported to fill them in during the meeting with the customer's assistance. In an unusual case, an assessor started completing the form without consulting the customer. This annoyed the individual and they asked the FA to start again. Meetings in which FAs filled in customer's forms tended to take longer and, in an unusual case, lasted 40 minutes. The extended length of the meeting was typically because the FA also thoroughly checked the forms once they were completed. In exceptional cases, customers with a health problem who presented a completed form but for an inappropriate benefit were given the correct forms to fill in and asked to return the next day once their forms were completed.

Lone parents

Checking forms made up most of lone parents' meeting with an FA. For these customers, FAs typically checked the information provided, corrected mistakes and addressed any gaps in the information. On some occasions, FAs were reported to ask lone parents for further details regarding their circumstances or why they wanted to move from Working Families' Tax Credit (WFTC) to IS¹⁰. Where lone parents did not fill in their claim forms beforehand, the FA was reported to complete it during the meeting. They sometimes sought advice from other colleagues working in the Jobcentre Plus public office, particularly when customers were previously self-employed.

6.2.4 Expected amount of benefit entitlement

Some non-JSA customers, from across all customer groups, received further information and advice from their FA during the meeting, in addition to having their claim forms checked. This information was usually related to individuals' current claim for benefit and was concerned with the amount they could expect to receive, when, or what would happen next with the claim. The experiences of each customer group are outlined below.

¹⁰ New Tax Credits (NTCs) replaced Working Families' Tax Credit (WFTC) and Disabled Person's Tax Credit (DPTC) in April 2003. The Jobcentre Plus customers interviewed for this research continued to refer to WFTC or DPTC however, and so these terms are used throughout this chapter.

Carers

Carers rarely recalled that their FA explained the status of their claim at the end of the meeting or how long the process would take. Instead, these non-JSA customers were simply told that their forms would be processed and someone would be in touch with a decision. This was found not to be the case only in exceptional cases, when carers were told the likely rate of benefit that they could expect to receive. When carers were not informed of the status of their claim, some asked further questions about their entitlement and when they would hear about the decision on their claim.

People claiming sickness or disability benefits

Customers with a health problem, injury or disability were consistently told how long the claim would take to process (usually between seven and ten days) by the FA and when they could expect to receive a decision. Customers who did not receive this information usually asked questions to obtain the FA's advice. Some customers with health problems were also informed how much benefit they could expect to receive and when it would be paid. Information on the expected amount of benefit entitlement was not, however, routinely provided. On occasions, customers claiming sickness or disability benefits asked for this information from their FA. Some recalled that the FA said that they were unable to advise on the individual's entitlement or how much money they would receive. The variety of customers' experiences reflects the diversity of practice amongst staff (see Section 3.3.1). These customers perceived such decisions and information to be outside the FAs' remit.

Lone parents

Lone parents also asked further questions during the meeting with an FA, usually to find out how much money they would receive and when, or to see whether they were entitled to any other benefits. FAs were generally able to answer questions concerning the status of lone parents' current benefit claim but rarely addressed queries about other benefits or the conditions of a particular benefit. As a result, lone parents did not feel that they received the information they needed or wanted. If lone parents did not ask about the amount of money they could expect to receive and when, they rarely recalled the FA offering this information.

6.2.5 Wider information and advice

There were also some instances in which non-JSA customers were given wider information or advice regarding their eligibility for their current claim or for other benefits by an FA. The level and type of information provided varied across and within customer groups, as outlined below.

Carers

Carers rarely recalled that they received further information from the FA about benefits. However, there were examples of additional information being provided. In some cases, they were asked whether they wanted to claim Council Tax Benefit. Other advice provided by an FA tended to be specific to an individual's circumstances and so examples were isolated to exceptional cases. An FA, for example, advised a customer to claim Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA) while another informed a carer that they could earn a certain amount of money working which would not affect their benefit. Some carers asked further questions, usually regarding their entitlement (see Section 6.2.4).

People claiming sickness or disability benefits

Some customers who were claiming sickness or disability benefits were advised about their eligibility to claim different types of benefit by an FA. In some cases, these customers were advised just to claim IB because the FA did not believe they were eligible for IS. Conversely, others were told to apply for IS because the FA did not think they had made sufficient contributions to qualify for IB. Some people with health problems were advised to apply for both IS and IB as the FA was unsure which was most appropriate for the individual and the customers were informed that this approach ensured that they would receive the most applicable benefit. In an exceptional case, a customer with ill-health was advised not to claim WFTC because they would not be better off financially. Customers generally welcomed this guidance from their FA although some felt that suggestions to apply for both IS and IB were a sign of poor knowledge about the benefits to which they were entitled. In some instances, customers declined the advice to claim IS, HB or CTB because they knew that they were not eligible.

Customers claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely asked further questions during their meeting with an FA. The reasons for this were mixed. Some customers could not think of anything to ask at the time, while others were confident that the FA knew what they were doing. In an exceptional case, a customer was not given the opportunity to ask questions and did not feel able to ask because they felt that their FA assumed that they already knew everything based on their prior experience of claiming. Here they wanted guidance on claiming HB and CTB, and information regarding travel and prescription costs. On some occasions, people with a health problem or disability thought it was more appropriate to raise any queries with their PA although the reasons for this were unclear. Other customers claiming sickness or disability benefits asked questions specific to their circumstances, such as mortgage protection and Child Benefit (ChB). FAs were generally reported to be able to answer these queries, either based on their own knowledge and experience or by asking colleagues in the office and over the phone. Only in exceptional cases did FAs not address customers' questions. When this occurred, customers were unsure whether the FA was able to answer their queries or was just rude.

Lone parents

Lone parents received further advice regarding either their eligibility for the current claim or other benefits available to them. Information on WFTC, HB, CTB and a crisis loan was routinely provided and, where appropriate, forms were handed out to customers and relevant appointments were made. Other information or advice provided was specific to individual's circumstances. An example was an FA who conducted a better off calculation with a lone parent to see whether an individual would receive more money in work. In an exceptional case, a lone parent was advised to claim IS rather than JSA given their childcare responsibilities. This customer was unclear, however, why JSA was more appropriate since they were actively seeking work. Here, the lone parent wanted further information so they could understand the decision made by the FA. In other instances, FAs were unsure that a lone parent was eligible for the benefit they were claiming but suggested that they submit the claim anyway to see the result and, if not entitled, the reasons why.

6.2.6 Deferrals at the end of Financial Assessor meetings

Some lone parents, carers, and people with health problems were not asked to see another adviser by their FA. In these cases, it appears that the FA decided that a WFI was not appropriate for the individual concerned. These customers felt that this decision was appropriate given the nature and/or severity of their condition, and the timing of the appointment in relation to, for example, a birth or operation. Carers also felt the FA's assessment was appropriate because the level of their caring responsibilities meant that work was not an option for the time being.

6.2.7 Explanations of the meeting with a Personal Adviser

At the end of their meeting with an FA, non-JSA customers from all groups were informed that they were required to see another adviser but they rarely recalled that they were told why or that the meeting was about work. Instead, carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits alike were asked to take a seat until their next adviser was ready with little or no further explanation. When descriptions were given, some referred to work and outlined that the subsequent meeting would explore different options, discuss getting back to work or plans for the future, and whether the customer would gain financially if they were in work. In other cases, however, the explanations provided by FAs focused on benefits, particularly for lone parents and people with health problems. In these instances, customers were varyingly told that the PA would: explain how the benefits work and how much the individual was likely to receive; discuss any other benefits that they might be entitled to; and process the claim. FAs were also reported to tell some lone parents that their next meeting was for child maintenance and that all lone parents who claimed benefits were required to attend such a meeting.

Non-JSA customers generally only expected one meeting at a Jobcentre Plus public office, to sort out their claim, and were surprised when they were told to attend another. This was particularly difficult for some lone parents who were booked three interviews (FA, CSA and WFI) but thought they were only attending one. These

customers were concerned about the time taken up with the different meetings and felt that they should have known beforehand. Customers who recently claimed under Jobcentre Plus or who were explicitly told at First Contact that they were required to attend two meetings knew what to expect.

6.2.8 Handover to the Personal Adviser

Non-JSA customers who attended a separate WFI with a PA straight after their FA meeting were usually asked to take a seat in the waiting area until their adviser was ready. In some cases, usually within larger offices, FAs escorted customers to the appropriate section of the office where the WFI would take place. Customers typically waited for a short time, no more than five minutes, until they were either collected by a PA or called over. Some non-JSA customers were asked to wait longer, from between ten minutes and 40 minutes. In general, these customers did not mind waiting and appreciated that it was difficult to keep to schedule. Some people with disabilities, injuries or health problems who had difficulties standing or sitting for long periods of time found the wait uncomfortable. Some of these customers were also disappointed with the length of time they waited and felt that staff should explain any delays and apologise to customers.

6.2.9 Further customer contact with a Financial Assessor

Non-JSA customers, across all groups, rarely saw the FA again after their initial meeting. This only occurred in exceptional cases where further information was needed for the claim forms or when individuals returned to the office at a later time with any previously missing supporting evidence for the claim.

6.2.10 Overall perceptions of the Financial Assessor meeting

Non-JSA customers, across all groups, were positive about their meeting with an FA and were comforted that their claim form was checked. These customers were confident that their forms were completed correctly and felt that this would minimise any delay in processing the claim and receiving benefit. Some also appreciated any additional advice or information that the FA could provide, particularly when they were alerted to other benefits that they could receive or were given clear guidance on their entitlement with regards to the current claim. In these cases, FAs were perceived to be helpful, professional, efficient and, in some instances, knowledgeable.

'I've claimed benefits before and it was just a case of handing in your form and hoping for the best that you hadn't missed any questions whereas this way they made sure I had everything.'

(Female lone parent, aged 31 yrs)

'It's important that you filled it in right. We know he's done it right. Otherwise they'll send it back to you and you won't get any money for another two weeks. And then you don't get nothing and we really needed something.'

(Male with a dislocated elbow, aged 35 yrs)

'It was very helpful that she mentioned the Severe Disablement Allowance. I thought the advice was very good and they seemed knowledgeable.'

(Female carer, aged 54, looking after her disabled husband)

Other non-JSA customers held more negative views about their FA and the meeting. Some were disappointed that the FA was not able to answer their queries or provide information about further benefits that they could claim. Others were sceptical about the advice they received, either because they knew differently from previous experience of claiming or because it conflicted with other advice that they received. Customers who subsequently encountered delays with their claim because information or supporting evidence was missing were frustrated that they had to attend a meeting for their claim to be checked and yet the FA did not make sure that all the documentation needed was there. As a result, these customers were not confident that their FA was able to deal with their case and they did not see the purpose of the meeting.

Non-JSA customers from all groups consistently reported that the way the FA treated them was important. In some cases, customers appreciated it when the FA handled their circumstances sensitively but practically, without making too much fuss. These individuals perceived the FA to be kind and approachable and had no misgivings about using the service again. Others did not feel that the FA understood their situation and felt that the FA asked inappropriate questions. Some customers did not feel that they were engaged in the meeting and that the check could be done without them.

'I explained that I was dyslexic, either she doesn't know what dyslexia means, or she just thinks if you can't read or write you're thick...that's the impression I got.'

(Male, partially paralysed, aged 34 yrs)

'It was a bit impersonal really, like a bit of meat on a butcher's counter, next please!'

(Female lone parent, aged 29 yrs)

'[FA] came across as a bit cold...her head was always down in the paperwork ... she could have looked at you or had eye contact a bit more and be a little cheerful. I felt like I was at a Police Station almost.'

(Female with hip and lower spine difficulties, aged 37 yrs)

6.3 Meetings with Personal Advisers

This section outlines the nature, content and depth of discussions held between non-JSA customers and PAs. More specifically, it covers: deferrals and waivers at PA meetings (Section 6.3.1); explaining the purpose of a meeting with a PA (Section 6.3.2); discussions about work (Section 6.3.3); discussions about benefits (Section 6.3.4); providing information, advice and making referrals (Section 6.3.5); conducting job searches and job submissions (Section 6.3.6); action plans (Section 6.3.7); ending WFIs (Section 6.3.8); and non-JSA customers' overall perceptions of WFIs with a PA (Section 6.3.9).

6.3.1 Deferrals and waivers at PA interviews

PAs were reported to decide that a WFI was not appropriate for some lone parents, some customers who were claiming sickness or disability benefits and, in an exceptional case, a carer. In these cases, individuals recalled that their PA immediately acknowledged, before explaining the purpose of the meeting, that it was not an appropriate time to discuss work. The meeting appeared to be deferred for lone parents who recently gave birth and customers who were heavily pregnant. WFIs for some customers with acute mental health problems, disabilities and individuals who were off work with an injury or illness but planned to return to their job, were also either deferred or waived. In some of these cases, customers with mental health problems and disabilities recalled that their PA suggested it would be more appropriate to discuss work at a later stage when their health improved. In an exceptional case, the WFI was deferred for a carer who was looking after their mother-in-law and grandchild. Customers whose meeting was deferred by a PA consistently perceived this to be the right decision given their situation and/or the severity of their condition.

6.3.2 Explaining the purpose of the interview with a Personal Adviser

PAs often introduced themselves to non-JSA customers by name, explained their role and the purpose of the meeting and, in exceptional circumstances, the individual's requirement to participate as a condition of benefit entitlement. Some non-JSA customers, from across all groups, reported tailored explanations from the PA to reflect the individual's circumstances. Some lone parents, for example, recalled the PA saying that the meeting was about work and any childcare help required. Some people claiming sickness or disability benefits reported that they were informed that the discussion would focus on their future plans for work. In these instances, PAs stressed that they were not concerned with work as an immediate priority because it was not appropriate given the individual's current health.

Other non-JSA customers, also from across all customer groups, were given more general explanations. In these cases, customers reported that they were told that the meeting would discuss work and specifically to explore what type of work the

customer was able to do, and the support available through Jobcentre Plus. In some exceptional cases, non-JSA customers from different public offices and across all customer groups recalled that they were informed by a PA that the meeting was to check and process their benefit, or to make sure that the individual received all the benefits to which they were entitled. There were no common features to these cases. Instead, the type of explanation given appeared to be determined by the PA rather than associated with the type of customers involved.

In general, non-JSA customers understanding about the purpose of their meeting with a PA reflected the explanations provided. In some cases, they were clear that the interview was intended to focus on work and the support available under Jobcentre Plus. In other cases, non-JSA customers believed that it was principally concerned with their benefit and making sure that the claim proceeded without any hitches. For individuals who attended a combined FA and WFI, they understood that the meeting was principally concerned with sorting out their claim. Where customers did not recall that their PA explained the purpose of the meeting, they did not know what to expect. There was no clear evidence to suggest that the content of the explanations provided by PAs influenced the extent to which work was discussed in the WFI.

6.3.3 Discussions about work

The content of WFIs for each customer group are now considered in turn.

Carers

Two different approaches to the WFI with carers were found, as follows:

- Carers were usually engaged in a discussion about work straight after the introduction. They were asked about their employment history, why they left their last job and, occasionally, what work they were interested in or wanted to do in the future. Carers typically explained that work was not an option at the time, either because they were caring full-time and (in exceptional cases) had health problems themselves or because they were caring and working part-time. PAs generally accepted the individual's response, acknowledging that work was not a possibility. Carers felt that this was appropriate and that the PA handled the situation sensitively. Some people claiming ICA felt that the initial focus on work made them feel pressured into thinking about work, particularly when PAs did not address such concerns at the outset of the meeting. When carers indicated that it was an inappropriate time to discuss work, some PAs were reported to refer back to the customer's claim and outline the claim process, including when they could expect to hear a decision. WFIs ended shortly afterwards, and customers did not recall that they were told of any other meetings that they were required to attend. In an exceptional case, a carer who was interested in returning to work and was considering starting a training course recalled that the PA engaged them in a more detailed discussion about work, the courses available, in-work tax credits, and the support offered by Jobcentre Plus.

- In contrast, some PAs were reported to enquire about the customer's caring responsibilities at the outset of the WFI. This usually included a short discussion about the nature of the illness or disability of the person cared for and, occasionally, what this meant for the carer. Here, individuals explained the level and intensity of their caring responsibilities, making it clear that they were caring full-time and so were unable to work. In response, PAs were said to acknowledge the customer's responsibilities and typically drew the meeting to a close with little or no discussion of work. As a result, carers felt that their PA understood their situation and handled the meeting appropriately. No work-related action was agreed and the customer was not aware that they were required to attend another meeting.

People claiming sickness or disability benefits

PAs were reported to adopt different approaches to raising work in the WFI with people claiming sickness or disability benefits. Some customers with mental health problems, slow healing injuries, disabilities, terminal illnesses and severe health problems recalled that their PA began discussions about work straight after the introduction. The subject of work was framed in various ways, including as an option for the future, as an option now, or as background information on the customer to find out more about their previous work experience. When work was raised as an option for the future, some customers recalled that their PA made it clear from the outset that they recognised work was not possible at that time due to the individual's health problems. In these instances, PAs were reported to emphasise that the discussion would focus on the future and what type of work the customer might want. This approach worked well, making customers feel at ease and not pressured into returning to work.

'She made it very clear, you don't have to do this now, we're not pushing you back into work but so that you know that it's there when you're ready.'

(Female with anxiety and depression, aged 22 yrs)

Some people with disabilities, mental health problems, severe health problems and terminal illnesses perceived their PA to approach work as an immediate option. This approach received a mixed response. In some cases, individuals followed the PA's lead. In others, customers with mental health problems, severe health problems and terminal illnesses made it clear to the PA early on in the interview that they did not feel that it was appropriate to discuss work. In some of these cases, particularly for customers with severe health problems or terminal illnesses, PAs drew the meeting to a close shortly after the customer explained that they did not feel that work was an option, either now or in the future. In other instances, PAs were reported to change their approach to the discussion to focus on the implications of the individual's health problems in relation to work. In exceptional cases, PAs continued to focus on work with some customers with mental health problems and severe health problems.

PAs were reported to approach some meetings with customers with mental health problems, disabilities, serious illnesses and more complex health issues by asking customers about their health problem or disabilities, the implications of this on a day-to-day basis, the progress being made, and/or the support already available to the customer. These customers reported that this approach enabled the PA to understand their circumstances better and so subsequent discussions about work were more tailored to their needs. When PAs also acknowledged that an individual was not able to work at that time, customers felt more at ease. In exceptional cases, however, customers with disabilities and those who had recently undergone surgery of a sensitive and personal nature felt that their PA did not understand their situation and that some of the questions asked about their health were intrusive.

PAs usually led discussions in WFIs with people claiming sickness or disability benefits. There was considerable variation in the depth and coverage of discussions about work, as follows:

In-depth discussions about work

Some customers with mental health problems, disabilities, neurological disorders, injuries and complex health problems reported in-depth discussions with their PA about work as an option in the future. Customers were asked about their previous employment, qualifications, skills, education, and what their current situation meant in terms of work. This information was then used to explore individuals' interests, what work they would like in the future, new careers, plans or goals for the future, when they might be able to work, the possible options, and some of the support available from Jobcentre Plus. In exceptional circumstances, PAs were reported to query the feasibility or appropriateness of customers' responses. This was mainly in relation to the type of work they wanted and its appropriateness given an injury, disability or illness, and whether individuals were realistic about when they might return to work. In exceptional cases, PAs talked about learning opportunities, Permitted Work, tax credits, and ways of looking for work. There was no evidence that better-off calculations were conducted during these meetings. These in-depth, forward-looking discussions were generally full and frank exchanges and customers were engaged throughout. The focus on work as a future option was felt to be appropriate since these customers were not able to work at the time of the WFI, but they recognised that they needed to consider what they would do in the future. Customers appreciated that the PA was not pushing them into work but exploring options with them. Discussions that were tailored to the individual's circumstances were perceived to be the most relevant.

'It was very useful. They explained the benefits and talked about future options which was fine, I just couldn't take anything up at the time. She was absolutely brilliant...She listened...she knew what I was getting at.'

(Female with depression, aged 25 yrs)

'I was [encouraged], I didn't want to feel at my age I was just written off.'

(Female with arthritis, aged 55 years)

'She was very, very gentle when she explained everything, she was very caring, very kind, she put things across to me and made sure that I understood what she meant and no pressure.'

(Female with respiratory problems, aged 39 yrs)

In exceptional cases, customers with severe health problems and muscle-related problems recalled in-depth discussions about work, but with the focus on work as an immediate option. In these instances, PAs were reported to enquire about the type of jobs individuals were looking for, where and how. Although these customers participated in the WFI, their perceptions of the appropriateness of the discussions were mixed. People with severe health problems did not feel that the meeting was appropriate or useful because they were not able to work at the time. Instead, they believed that it should occur at a later stage, when they were in a position to think about work more actively. In contrast, others deemed the focus and content of the meeting to be appropriate because they wanted to return to work.

Limited discussions about work

Discussions about work were limited for some non-JSA customers with disabilities, acute or complex health problems. PAs approached the subject of work by enquiring about the individual's health problem or their previous employment. In exceptional cases, PAs asked about the customer's skills or qualifications. PAs were then reported to ask customers what type of work they could do. In some cases, individuals thought the PA was exploring work as an immediate option or something that was a realistic option in the near future. These customers felt that this was inappropriate given their condition and, in an exceptional case, became angry. They reiterated that they were unable to work until their health improved or was reassessed. PAs typically drew these meetings to a close shortly afterwards, briefly outlining some of the support available from Jobcentre Plus.

In other cases, customers with acute or complex health problems understood that the PA was asking about work as an option for the future. Some of these individuals were uncertain about what type of work they could or would be able to do, either because their condition precluded working in similar jobs they held previously or because they were still awaiting a diagnosis and so were uncertain about the implications of their condition on their work options. In these instances, PAs did not appear to discuss individuals' skills or qualifications to inform choices about work or to explore different options with customers. As a result, it appeared that opportunities to discuss work in more depth were missed, particularly with some customers with acute or complex health problems who wanted to return to work in the future. Instead, PAs were reported to outline some of the support available through Jobcentre Plus and suggested that customers return when their health improved or

when they knew more about their condition. These customers perceived the approach adopted by PAs to be appropriate given their situation. They were generally comfortable talking about work as they did want to return, although some felt that the discussions were too soon after recent spells in hospital.

People with mental health problems reported that the PA started talking about work early on in the meeting. They were asked about previous jobs held and, occasionally, their skills before the discussion moved on to consider the customer's options in relation to work. In some cases, the options for work were discussed within the context of the individual's mental health. While these customers felt comfortable discussing their employment history, they either did not feel able to think about work because of their condition or did not feel that it was an appropriate time to discuss work given the acuteness of their condition. In some cases, PAs were reported to recognise that the WFI was not timely for people with acute mental health problems and drew the interview to a close. These customers felt that this was appropriate. In other cases, customers recalled that the PA continued to explore work as an option, either on a part-time or voluntary basis or as an option for the future. PAs occasionally highlighted the financial benefits of being in work to these customers, although there was no evidence that better-off calculations were conducted. In some cases, PAs outlined the opportunity to take up Permitted Work and other support available from Jobcentre Plus. In these instances, people with mental health problems continued to participate in the meeting but felt pressured into talking about and looking for work. The extent to which they engaged in these more specific discussions about work was, therefore, limited. In an exceptional case, similar discussions about work options were held with a customer with acute mental health problems but with what was felt to be little consideration of their condition. In this case, the customer perceived the discussion to be highly inappropriate given their vulnerable condition, and felt that the PA did not believe or understand their situation.

'It was like they was trying to force me into having a job, and I wasn't ready because I ain't done me detox yet.'

(Male with co-existent acute mental health and alcohol issues, aged 27 yrs)

Very limited discussions about work

There were some examples of very short WFIs for customers with severe health problems or mental health problems, lasting no more than ten minutes. In some cases, PAs asked these individuals about work, touching upon their last job held, qualifications, and their current interest in work. These meetings were then brought to a close with little or no exploration of the responses provided by the customer. It is unclear why such WFIs were so short as the customers involved were often either willing to be engaged in discussions about work or actively wanted to talk about their work options. While these interviews did focus on work, the level of customer participation and/or the extent to which it was a meaningful discussion was less clear. In other examples, PAs were reported to draw the meeting to a close after a discussion about the nature and implications of the customer's health.

'Really it was pointless them making the appointment to see her...because there was nothing she could say to change the circumstances. It was a waste of her time.'

(Male with a dislocated elbow, aged 35 yrs)

Combined FA and Work-focused Interviews

Where people claiming sickness or disability benefits only met a PA, either because it was a combined FA and WFI or because the individual's WFI was deferred when they first started their claim, discussions focused on benefits and checking/completing the claim forms at the start of the interview and then moved on to talk about work. While benefits did form part of the interview, work was often covered in some detail, including employment history, qualifications, skills, type of work the customer could do (given the nature of their illness/injury) and wanted to do, the likely timeframe for returning to work, and information on the availability of help/support with work from local organisations.

Lone parents

PAs usually led discussions in the WFI with lone parents, but the depth of discussions varied considerably. Some lone parents reported that their interview was a full and frank exchange, covering a range of topics including their work experience, qualifications, training, job aspirations, and ways of looking for work. These customers recalled that their PA often discussed tax credits available to lone parents who were working and occasionally conducted a better off calculation. These individuals felt that they were fully involved in the conversation, were given the opportunity to ask questions, and that the PA listened to their suggestions or concerns. As a result, they felt that they trusted their PA and that the nature and focus of the discussions were tailored to their situation and appropriate to their needs.

'She was caring, compassionate and very helpful. She understood my situation and took into account that I was only interested in part-time work.'

(Female lone parent, aged 37 yrs)

'He was really, really nice. He knew his stuff, we covered a lot of ground, and they're all set up so that people like me can work as well as be a parent. I guess he gained my trust...Which I think is important.'

(Female lone parent, aged 35 yrs)

Some lone parents recalled limited discussions about work. In some of these cases, customers reported that their meeting was relatively short, between 20 and 30 minutes, focusing on one or two areas such as training opportunities/plans and the type of jobs that the customer was interested in. PAs appeared to curtail meetings with those customers who already had definite plans to move towards work and lone parents felt that this was appropriate. For some, a range of work-related issues

was covered, including employment history, qualifications and future work plans. PAs did not seem, however, to explore any issues raised by customers or follow-through responses given to questions by the PA. As a result, these lone parents did not feel that they were fully involved and felt that they would benefit from a more in-depth and balanced discussion. Some lone parents felt that their adviser did not pay sufficient attention to their circumstances and so perceived their discussion to be a partial exchange. While a range of issues were covered in these instances, the customers did not fully engage as a result of the PA's approach and so discussions were less meaningful

'We talked about my course in September, to become a teaching assistant, but not much else. She was very understanding, especially with the baby bawling, but it was very brief, maybe 15 minutes?'

(Female lone parent, aged 21 yrs)

'I didn't really feel that I got support or advice. She didn't seem to have the patience to work it all through with me.'

(Female lone parent, aged 34 yrs)

'She wasn't really talking to me, she was just asking me questions and filling in these forms, blah, blah, blah. I didn't feel that she was aware of my disability and what that meant.'

(Female lone parent, aged 31 yrs)

Some WFIs for lone parents were very short, with little or no discussion about work. These customers usually made it clear to their PA at the outset of the meeting that they were either already in work or were not willing to work at that point given the young age of their child/children. Lone parents recalled that their PA was usually understanding and sympathetic. They appeared to follow the customer's lead and drew the meeting to a close early on, providing the customer with their contact details in case they wanted any advice or information in the future.

6.3.4 Discussions about customers' benefit claim

Benefits did not form a significant part of the Work-focused Interview when non-JSA customers met with an FA before the PA. Instead, benefits were briefly discussed in the following circumstances:

At the start of Work-focused Interviews

Some individuals from all customer groups recalled that the PA looked over their claim form at the start of the WFI, either to become familiar with the customer, their circumstances and what benefit(s) they were claiming or, as some carers and lone parents perceived it, to check the form again. In exceptional cases, the PA was reported to check that a lone parent and a customer with chronic mental health issues were also claiming HB and CTB. Advice or information on these benefits was

not previously provided by the FA. In another unusual case, a lone parent recalled that her PA telephoned the Child Benefit (ChB) office to find out the number of the customer's ChB case to include on the forms so that the claim would not be delayed.

In the context of work

Benefits were discussed with some people claiming sickness or disability benefits in the context of work. Here, PAs were typically reported to inform customers of the opportunity to undertake Permitted Work without affecting the benefits they received.

At the end of Work-focused Interviews

At, or towards, the end of WFIs, some non-JSA customers, from across all groups, either asked the PA for further information on how long the claim would take and how much they could expect to receive or reported that the PA offered this information. These customers rarely received or asked for this information from an FA prior to the WFI. In general, PAs addressed these queries either themselves or by asking a colleague in the office. In a highly exceptional case, a PA explained to the customer that it was not her area and did not provide any further information or guidance.

At different points in the interview

Either at the start or towards the end of WFIs, some carers and lone parents recalled that the PA outlined the claiming process. On rare occasions, PAs were reported to use the information from claim forms to reassure people with mental health problems, complex health issues and, in an exceptional case, a lone parent that they were submitting a claim for the correct benefit. The reasons for this are unclear, but appear to be related to the approach of individual PAs since the customers involved were not more or less concerned about their benefit than others. In exceptional circumstances, where individuals who were previously claiming IB and were informed that they were no longer eligible just prior to their recent claim, PAs were reported to suggest that customers with health problems appeal against decisions made about their eligibility for IB.

6.3.5 Providing information, advice and making referrals

Lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits who discussed work with a PA were routinely given advice or information on the different services available through Jobcentre Plus. However, this was typically only introductory verbal information with little elaboration on the purpose, content or usefulness of the support offered. PAs were also reported to hand out leaflets to some of these customers, usually concerning a New Deal programme, other programmes of support, and specialist organisations who help people with disabilities back into work. Customers took this information but rarely read the content. Instead, they wanted their adviser to provide more information during the interview so that they could determine whether it was appropriate for them. This further information was rarely requested by the customer or offered by the PA.

Advice on ways to look for work

Some lone parents and people with mental health problems or complex health issues were offered advice from the PA on places and ways to look for work. Some of these non-JSA customers were told about the job points located in Jobcentre Plus public offices and some were directed to the Internet facilities also available. Occasionally, PAs outlined that further help was available with preparing CVs, travelling to interviews, and looking for work, but further information was rarely given. Lone parents and people with mental health or complex health problems did not tend to follow-up this advice, usually because they did not feel that they needed such assistance and believed that they were able to find work themselves when ready.

Education and training

Non-JSA customers were rarely told about the training opportunities available to them while on benefits. Some lone parents and, in unusual cases, people claiming sickness or disability benefits were told that training was available but these customers were rarely told of the nature or content of the training. As a result, these individuals did not know what was available or whether it was appropriate to them. In other cases, PAs gave lone parents a leaflet on training to read at their leisure.

'She didn't go into detail, but she said if I did want to, she gave me leaflet, she said have a read through it, think about it and then you can come down and have a talk with someone and discuss everything.'

(Female lone parent, aged 23 yrs)

PAs were able to provide lone parents and, in an exceptional case, a carer with more information on training opportunities when the customer identified a particular skill or subject that they wanted to learn. In these instances, advisers discussed the appropriateness and relevance of the course with each individual. They encouraged them to collect further information from various local providers, in some cases using the free phone available in the Jobcentre Plus public office, or the PA passed on the relevant contact details.

New Deal for Lone Parents

Some lone parents recalled that their PA provided information about New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) during the WFI but this was not routinely found. Where information was given, PAs were reported to emphasise the additional support available to lone parents through NDLP, highlighting those aspects that were particularly relevant or appropriate to individuals. Some lone parents who were actively seeking work were told of the help they could receive with meeting the travel expenses of attending interviews for jobs and the extra advice available on ways to look for work. Others, who did not feel that work was an immediate option but who were interested in learning and/or updating their skills, were informed about the support available under NDLP with finding and starting education or training. In exceptional cases, including an instance with a carer looking after a son

with autism, PAs were reported to hand out written information on NDLP for customers to take away and read. These individuals received little or no further explanation of the programme during the WFI.

Generally, lone parents who were motivated to find work or learning opportunities and who were provided verbal information on NDLP in the WFI were caseloaded or referred by their PA for an appointment with an NDLP adviser. In other cases, lone parents were left either to consider joining NDLP or to read the written information handed out. Some of these customers struggled to recall the content of the information provided because they felt overwhelmed with the advice given by a PA, they did not read the leaflet, or because they had recently separated from a partner and were more concerned with sorting out their benefits when they visited the Jobcentre Plus public office.

New Deal for Disabled People

Customers claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that their PA informed them of the help or support available under New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP). People with health problems only remembered that they were informed about NDDP in exceptional cases, usually when they received a leaflet from their PA. Instead, customers with mental health problems complex health issues, neurological disorders, disabilities and injuries were varyingly informed about: organisations that help people with disabilities into work; job brokers; organisations that can help with CVs and applying for jobs; a person who comes to Jobcentres every month to help people find work and, possibly, retraining; and other organisations who could help people to get work in the future.

Some PAs were reported to briefly describe the organisation and their purpose (as outlined above), and/or to hand out leaflets on them to customers. In these circumstances, customers generally felt that they received insufficient information about NDDP, job brokers or other organisations to decide whether such support was appropriate for them. Some customers suspected that their adviser was not familiar with the organisations involved or the services available. They wanted the PA to elaborate but did not ask and no further information was supplied. Some people with mental health problems or disabilities believed that the organisations were not appropriate to their needs but that instead they were more appropriate for people who had been out of work for longer, people who did not have a CV, or people who were not confident about finding work. In an exceptional case, a customer also felt that their PA suggested that the organisations involved were not very good and so the individual was discouraged to find out more. People with health problems who found the information provided useful and informative were highly unusual and there was only an exceptional example of a customer with complex health issues who was caseloaded or referred to an appointment with a job broker.

Tax credits, in-work benefits and better-off calculations

The extent to which advice or information on tax credits or in-work benefits was provided to non-JSA customers was mixed. In general, carers and people claiming sickness or disability benefits did not recall receiving such information, or that a better-off calculation was conducted by their PA in the WFI. In contrast, some lone parents were provided with information on the support available with childcare and/or tax credits, and better-off calculations were conducted in some cases.

Carers

In general, carers did not receive advice or information on tax credits or in work benefits from a PA during the WFI. In an exceptional case, a carer who was looking after a son with autism and a partner with a disability recalled that the PA mentioned in-work tax credits during the WFI but did not remember the details of what was said. This customer was interested in starting a training course with a view to returning to work in the future but was not confident that this was feasible given their caring responsibilities. There was no evidence that better-off calculations were conducted for carers.

People claiming sickness or disability benefits

People claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely received information on tax credits or other in-work benefits, except in relation to the opportunity to take-up Permitted Work. There was no evidence that better-off calculations were conducted with this group of customers.

Lone parents

Some lone parents, particularly those who were actively seeking work or either in or about to start education, were told about the financial support they could receive to help meet the costs of childcare. In some cases, PAs were reported to outline how this support would work and the requirements to use registered childminders. This level of information improved lone parents' understanding of how to access such support and allowed some to determine whether the support available was appropriate for them. In other cases, lone parents recalled that help with childcare was one of a number of benefits available to them but no detailed information was given. In some exceptional cases, PAs appeared to challenge some lone parents' perceptions about the financial viability of working given the outlay required for childcare by explaining that help was available. Here, however, PAs did not appear to provide sufficient information to change these lone parents' perceptions.

Tax credits were mentioned to some lone parents, particularly those who were actively seeking work and those who were thinking about work, but this was not consistently found. The information provided on tax credits tended to be cursory, highlighted either as part of a wider package of in work benefits available to lone parents or in isolation. In some cases, lone parents indicated to their PA that they were already familiar with the financial benefits of tax credits and so, appropriately,

further detailed information was not given. In other cases, more detailed information was rarely offered unless specifically asked for by the customer.

Better-off calculations were also conducted for some lone parents with different intentions regarding work, including those who were actively seeking work, interested in work, planning to start education, and those who believed that work would not compensate for the loss of benefits and meeting childcare costs. In some cases, better-off calculations were conducted as part of wider discussions about in-work benefits, such as help with childcare and tax credits, while in others they appeared to be carried ad hoc. Better-off calculations were typically based on hypothetical jobs although in an exceptional case the calculation was made on the basis of a job found through a job search. For some, the results of the calculation reinforced their decision to look for work. For others, however, it appeared to have little influence on their decisions. The reasons for this are unclear, although in some cases the type or nature of the jobs used as the basis for the calculation did not match those sought or considered by the customer. There was no evidence that the results of a better-off calculation changed the attitudes or perceptions of those lone parents who were sceptical about the financial benefits of being in work.

6.3.6 Conducting job searches and job submissions

Non-JSA customers rarely recalled that their PA conducted a job search during the WFI. Job search was not generally discussed with carers, and PAs were consistently reported to acknowledge that it was not an appropriate time for people claiming sickness or disability benefits. These customers agreed with the PA's assessment. Lone parents also routinely reported that their PA did not offer a job search during the meeting. The reasons for this are not always clear. In some instances, lone parents were more focused on training. In other cases, they were booked a meeting with a Lone Parent Adviser (LPA) to discuss looking for work under New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). Other lone parent customers did not feel that work was an option at that time.

Some lone parents and people with mental health problems or complex health issues reported that a job search was conducted on their behalf during the WFI and vacancies were found. Information on these vacancies was routinely provided to the customer but applications were rarely made. Lone parents chose not to apply for the vacancies found because they did not feel that they were suitable for them or because they believed that they were just shown as examples. Jobs were considered to be unsuitable because either the hours did not fit in with caring responsibilities or the location was not convenient and/or required private transport that was not available to the customer. The reaction of people with mental health problems or complex health issues was more mixed. In a highly unusual case, a customer with muscle-related problems felt that the job search was inappropriate and did not apply for the vacancies found because they were unable to work at that time. Some customers with depression did subsequently apply for work. These individuals either felt pressured into looking but did not feel ready and so did not follow-up the application or, in a highly exceptional case, applied and was successful.

6.3.7 Action plans

The extent to which action plans were used or agreed with non-JSA customers was mixed. Some carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits did not recall that an action plan was either written or verbally agreed at the end of their Work-focused Interview with a PA. Other non-JSA customers, also from all customer groups, reported that their adviser prepared a summary of the discussions held during WFIs but that these were rarely shared with the individuals concerned. In some instances, carers, lone parents and people with health problems alike were shown a copy of the statements typed up by their PA and so were aware of their general content, but were not given a copy. The main reason for this seemed to be because the statements simply outlined the individual's circumstances and did not provide any specific actions that were new or different to what the customer was doing already. These plans typically referred to a customer's goals or responsibilities and included, for example, to continue caring or to recover from an illness or injury.

'It wasn't specific goals, it was well this is the idea...go into childcare again.'

(Female lone parent, aged 21 yrs)

'She was laughing about it as much as I was really. The only action plan was to get better; to have the operation and return to work when I was well again, that was our action plan.'

(Female waiting for an operation, aged 49 yrs)

'I just agreed to carry on caring and to let them know if my circumstances changed and I felt able to work.'

(Female carer, aged 32 yrs, looking after disabled husband)

More specific action plans were prepared for, and handed out to, some lone parents, people with health problems and, in exceptional cases, carers who discussed work in more depth during the WFI and who agreed more concrete plans with their PA regarding education, training or work. These plans typically outlined the broad steps to be taken by the customer and varied according to the focus of work-related discussions. As a result, action plans for some lone parents and, in exceptional cases, carers highlighted their plans to explore, or start, education or training. In contrast, the plans for some people with health problems or disabilities included details of local organisations for the customer to consider or to contact. Some action plans included details of the type of jobs that lone parents, people with mental health problems, muscle-related problems or complex health issues agreed to look for.

6.3.8 Ending Work-focused Interviews

At the end of the WFI, some non-JSA customers from all groups recalled that they were given the PA's contact details but this was not consistently found. Non-JSA customers were typically told to get in touch with their PA if there was a change in their circumstances and/or they wanted to look for work. In some exceptional cases, PAs suggested that lone parents, carers and people claiming sickness or disability benefits contact them if there were any problems with getting their benefit. Carers and people claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that they were given specific details of any further meetings that they were required to attend. This contrasts with the experience of some lone parents. The experiences of each customer group are now considered in turn.

Carers

At the end of WFIs, some PAs were reported to provide carers with their contact details. PAs typically explained that they were available for advice or information, and told carers to get in touch if their circumstances changed or, in exceptional cases, if they wanted to find work or had problems getting their benefit. Carers were rarely offered further meetings with their PA.

People claiming sickness or disability benefits

In general, PAs left the possibility of further contact open and some gave their contact details to people who were claiming sickness or disability benefits. Customers with health problems or disabilities were typically told that they could get in contact if they have any further queries, or if they wanted to talk about work when their health improved or when the implications of their condition in relation to work were clearer. In an exceptional case, an individual with mental health problems asked if they could see the same adviser but felt that the PA discouraged this and, instead, was signposted to specialist organisations for people with disabilities. This customer stated that they would prefer to build a one-to-one relationship with a single adviser who knew their background.

'She said...when you are fit for work again come back in.'

(Male with acute mental health problems, aged 54 yrs)

'The ball was left in my court. She said if there's anything you need or want help with...then contact me.'

(Female waiting for an operation, aged 35 yrs)

Some people with mental health problems who agreed to look for jobs also agreed to further contact with their PA. These customers were told that their PA would contact them by phone, at varying times, to provide details of any jobs found on their behalf. There was no evidence, however, that these customers subsequently heard from their PA. In exceptional cases, people with health problems were asked to return or contact the public office in three months to provide an update on their health.

People claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that they were informed of further meetings that they were required to attend. In exceptional cases, a customer with an injury was told he was required to return for another interview after twelve weeks and a PA was reported to inform an individual with mental health problems that they would write with the details of a follow-up interview although there was no indication of when this would be given.

Lone parents

At the end of WFIs, some PAs were reported to provide lone parents with their contact details. In general, further contact was left open by PAs, by explaining that they were available for advice or information. Some lone parents were told to get in touch if their circumstances changed, if they found work or education, if they wanted to find work or, in highly exceptional cases, if they had problems getting their benefit. Some customers followed up this offer, usually to find out what was happening with their benefits when there were delays.

Some lone parents agreed to attend follow-up meetings at the Jobcentre Plus public office. In some cases, lone parents were clearly caseloaded onto NDLP (see Section 6.3.5). In more unusual cases, lone parents reported that they were booked a date and time for a follow-up meeting with the same adviser, either because the individual was *'too stressed out'* at the time of the initial WFI or because the customer agreed to look for jobs and return with details so that the PA could conduct another better-off calculation.

Some lone parents were told that they would be called for a review meeting in either 12 weeks or six months, and, in exceptional cases, about a 12-month review. This was not routinely found, however, and some lone parents were unaware of any further meetings that they were required to attend.

6.3.9 Overall perceptions of the interview with a Personal Adviser

In general, carers did not find the WFI with a PA useful or informative. These customers were often unclear as to why they had to attend and did not feel that it was appropriate given their full-time caring responsibilities. As a result, they perceived the meeting to be a waste of time. In an exceptional case, a carer felt that they benefited from advice provided by their PA but did not feel that they were able to do anything with this until there was a change in circumstances.

Lone parents' perceptions of their WFI tended to focus on the PA's style and approach to the meeting, rather than what was discussed, placing particular emphasis on the importance of a personal service that took account of their individual circumstances. Lone parents typically perceived their PA to be understanding and approachable, and felt able to return if they wanted to ask further questions. Some lone parents did not perceive the meeting to be useful, often because they were not interested in work at that time. Others, however, who received support and advice from their PA regarding training, work or benefits felt that it was a

productive interview that raised their awareness about the range of services available through Jobcentre Plus.

'It wasn't useful because I wasn't looking for work.'

(Female lone parent, aged 31 yrs)

'You knew that someone was there at the end of the line that, if you needed to speak to someone about your claim you could actually just ring that person.'

(Female lone parent, aged 34 yrs)

'I thought I might as well use the time I've got to gain some qualifications.'

(Male lone parent, age not known)

People claiming sickness or disability benefits also focused on the way that the PA handled the meeting. When PAs were open and listened to customers, individuals responded positively and felt that the adviser struck the right balance in discussing work. As a result, these customers were willing to return to Jobcentre Plus again to use the PA's services. In some instances, people with health problems or disabilities felt that the adviser did not handle the interview well, either because they felt that the PA did not understand their circumstances or because they felt it was an inappropriate time to discuss work.

'This woman looked really empathetic towards me. She said I know how you feel, I've been there myself. I think it's nice when people personalise interviews.'

(Female diagnosed with severe depression, aged 30 yrs)

'I felt quite comfortable with her. Some of them at the Jobcentre can be a bit scary...but she was really nice and approachable.'

(Female with anxiety and depression, aged 22 yrs)

'He made me feel looked down on, he made me feel like I'm disabled...why did you bother coming to see me, that's the impression I got.'

(Male with physical disabilities, aged 34 yrs)

6.4 The impact of Jobcentre Plus on non-JSA customers

At the end of the Jobcentre Plus process, non-JSA customers typically felt that they understood which benefits they were entitled to and were confident that their claim would proceed. Some of these customers knew what to claim from the outset, usually due to previous experience, and their understanding was confirmed at their meeting with an FA. Others, who were less sure, received support and advice from either a FCO, an FA and/or a PA. Meetings with FAs were also particularly effective in increasing customers' confidence that their claim would proceed smoothly. As a

result, these individuals did not want to ask further queries regarding their eligibility to claim. In contrast, some lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits were not confident that they knew what benefits they were entitled to, particularly the amount they could expect to receive or when it would be available, and wanted further information. Neither the FCO nor the FA addressed these concerns and customers left the Jobcentre Plus public offices not knowing what was going to happen.

Non-JSA customers' understanding and awareness of the services available through Jobcentre Plus was greatly enhanced by meetings at the public offices. In exceptional cases, FCOs directed lone parents to a crisis loan. FAs conducted better off calculations to show customers that they would be financially better off in work and occasionally made enquiries about different benefits on the customers' behalf. In particular, customers became much more aware of the work-related support and services available as a direct result of their participation in a WFI. While the information provided about services was generally insufficient to enable individuals to decide whether they were appropriate for them, non-JSA customers knew that there was a PA available who could offer further guidance and help with finding work.

The extent to which Jobcentre Plus helped non-JSA customers to move towards work was limited, and was often dependent on the relationship that developed between a PA and the customer. Lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits were sensitive to the way in which PAs approached discussions about work, particularly with respect to the individual's personal circumstances, and their general interpersonal and communication skills.

People with health problems or disabilities appeared happy to use the Jobcentre Plus office in their search for work, either now or in the future. This willingness to return was due to a combination of factors, including a positive experience with FAs and PAs, and a raised awareness amongst some about the services and support available through the service. That said, the experience did not appear to change attitudes to work amongst this group. Those who were looking for work at the time of their WFI continued to do so, although some suggested that they would now be more likely to use the Jobcentre Plus job points or advice from their PA as part of their job search strategy. Those who reported being unable to work at that time generally retained that view – in other words, the experience of visiting the Jobcentre Plus office and the work-focused element of the service did not generally appear to change their behaviour, or their perception of the likelihood of them working in the future.

The WFI encouraged some lone parents to think more actively about their options. Some began thinking about, and looking for, learning opportunities to develop skills and/or hobbies while others were prompted to consider, and look for, work. These individuals' confidence was increased by the knowledge that support services were available, but also by the way that their PA treated their case and presented the different options. Some lone parents were also encouraged to consider work based on the results of a better off calculation. These individuals felt that the calculation

was a vital tool to ensure that a job is '*worth giving up time with my children*'. Some lone parents also widened their job search strategy and, in exceptional cases, moved into work as a direct result of the support they received from their PA.

6.5 Conclusions

The Jobcentre Plus contact centres were not always the first point of contact for non-JSA customers. Instead, carers, people with a health problem or a disability, and lone parents alike contacted public offices, ex-BA offices or local welfare agencies to enquire about starting a new claim for benefit before they were directed to the contact centre. Some non-JSA customers from all groups did not speak with an FCO at a contact centre at all, either because they picked up the claim forms and arranged a WFI appointment at a public office or because discussions were handled by other agencies or individuals on the customer's behalf. As a result, these individuals did not personally experience First Contact.

When non-JSA customers did call a contact centre to initiate a claim for benefit, First Contact was generally found to provide an efficient service. Information on the benefits sought by non-JSA customers was collected, claim forms were despatched and Work-focused Interviews were booked to take place within four working days. There were some cases, however, where people with health problems did not feel that the FCO identified the most appropriate benefit for their circumstances. WFI appointments for some lone parents were scheduled to occur five days or more after their initial call to a contact centre. This may be due to the allocation to, and availability of, specialist lone parent advisers in public offices. Some non-JSA customers did not receive their claim forms in the post and so were unable to complete the forms prior to their meeting with an FA.

It appeared that First Contact was not effective in promoting the work-focused services of Jobcentre Plus to non-JSA customers. Some carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits recalled answering questions about work, but these tended to be limited to the context of the individual's claim. Some lone parents and, in an exceptional case, a customer with a health problem received information on the specialist support services available from Jobcentre Plus to help them back into work. Such information was not, however, routinely provided to non-JSA customers. Discussions about customers' current job search activity were only found in exceptional cases, and confined to lone parents. Although some lone parents were told that the FCO could look for jobs for them over the phone, there was no evidence that job searches or submissions were conducted for non-JSA customers.

WFIs were deferred at First Contact for some people claiming sickness or disability benefits and the option of a deferral was offered to other customers with health problems. There were some instances, however, when a deferral or waiver was not made or offered but was appropriate, including customers who were due an operation, signed off work for life, diagnosed with a terminal illness, or who had a

job to return to once they recovered from an illness or injury. These cases were typically picked up by either an FA or a PA in the Jobcentre Plus public offices. Non-JSA customers who were booked to attend a WFI were generally aware that they were required to attend an interview at a public office and that non-attendance would affect their claim for benefit. Carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that the FCO explicitly told them that the interview was a condition of benefit entitlement. Some lone parents and people with health problems recalled that their FCO explained that the interview was concerned with work but other non-JSA customers reported that they were told the interview was regarding their benefit.

FAs were generally reported to deliver an efficient service to non-JSA customers. Carers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits consistently reported that the FA checked their claim forms, verified the information presented, collected evidence to support the claim, and filled in gaps on the forms as and when necessary. FA meetings were not found to be effective for some carers when evidence to support the claim was not collected and so processing was subsequently delayed. There was also less evidence that FAs routinely verified information on the claim forms submitted by carers. Similarly, carers rarely recalled that the FA explained the status of their claim at the end of the interview. Instead, these customers were simply told that their forms would be processed and someone would be in touch with a decision.

In contrast, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits reported that FAs provided some information on the status of their claim, usually in response to customer queries, but the exact details varied within and across these customer groups. Some FAs were reported to be unable to address questions raised by people with health problems concerning their entitlement to benefit or how much money they would receive. These questions were addressed for lone parents, but some recalled that the FA was unable to answer queries about other benefits or the conditions of a particular benefit. As a result, there were examples of unresolved benefit-related queries for customers from all non-JSA customer groups.

At the end of their meeting with an FA, non-JSA customers from all groups were informed that they were required to see another adviser but they rarely recalled that they were told why or that the interview was about work. Similarly, these customers from all non-JSA groups rarely recalled that the FAs explained that the benefit claim was dependent on satisfactory completion of a WFI.

PAs were typically reported to inform non-JSA customers that the purpose of the WFI was to discuss work. Only in exceptional cases was this found not to be the case. However, carers, lone parents, and people claiming sickness or disability benefits rarely recalled that they were told of the requirement to participate in the WFI as a condition of benefit entitlement. PAs usually led discussions with non-JSA customers during the WFI.

The extent to which WFIs involved meaningful and substantive discussions about work for non-JSA customers was mixed. In-depth discussions were held with some customers with health problems, injuries or disabilities. Some of these individuals actively participated in the WFI when discussions were focused on work as an option for the future, when realistic and desirable options were explored with the PA, and when discussions were tailored to the individual's circumstances. Some lone parents also reported full and frank exchanges about work during the WFI with a PA. These customers felt fully involved in the conversation, were given the opportunity to ask questions, and the PA listened, and responded, to their suggestions. As a result, these lone parents trusted their PA, and felt that the nature and focus of the discussions were tailored to their situation and appropriate to their needs. In-depth discussions about work with carers were exceptional.

More limited discussions about work were found across all non-JSA customer groups, although the reasons for this were mixed. Carers were usually engaged in a discussion about work straight after the PA's introduction, and were asked a series of work-related questions. When asked about what work they were interested in, or what they wanted to do in the future, carers typically explained that work was not an option and WFIs ended shortly afterwards. Similarly, some lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits responded to work-related questions posed during the meeting. PAs did not seem, however, to explore the responses or issues raised by these customers but instead were reported to move the discussion on. As a result, these customers did not feel fully involved in the WFI and felt that they would benefit from a more in-depth interview. Some people with disabilities, mental health problems, acute or complex health problems perceived the PA to inappropriately focus on work as an immediate option. While these customers participated in the WFI, they were not fully engaged because they did not believe that it was relevant to their circumstances. Instead, these customers felt the WFI would be more useful at a time when they could think about work more actively.

There were some examples of very short WFIs for carers, lone parents, and people claiming sickness or disability benefits alike, with little discussion about work. In some cases, PAs were reported to approach the subject of work by enquiring about the customer's current circumstances – typically a carer's responsibilities or an individual's health problem – and, later, the implications in relation to work. In these instances, carers, people with disabilities, acute or complex health problems generally made it clear that they were unable to work and PAs tended to draw the meeting to a close shortly afterwards. Similarly, some lone parents also reported that they made it clear to their PA, early on in the WFI, that they were either already in work or were not willing to work at that time given the young age of their child(ren). PAs appeared to follow the customer's lead and drew the meeting to a close. In other cases, people with severe health problems or mental health problems reported that the PA asked them about work, touching upon their last job held, qualifications and current interest in work. These meetings were then brought to a close with little or no exploration of the responses provided by the customer. It is

unclear why such WFIs were so short as the customers involved were often either willing to be engaged in discussions about work or wanted to talk about their work options.

In-work benefits or tax credits were rarely covered in meetings with carers or people claiming sickness or disability benefits, but were found in some WFIs for lone parents. Similarly, there was no evidence that better-off calculations were conducted for carers or people with health problems, injuries or disabilities. In contrast, there was some evidence that better-off calculations were conducted for lone parents. Discussions about current job search activity were held with some lone parents and people with mental health problems but were not found for other non-JSA customers. Similarly, job searches were conducted for some lone parents, people with mental health problems and some people with more complex health issues but were rarely recalled by other non-JSA customers. Information on any vacancies found was routinely provided to customers but applications were only found in exceptional cases.

Lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits who discussed work with a PA were routinely given advice or information on the different services available through Jobcentre Plus. Carers rarely received such information. Some lone parents were provided advice on education or training, or were given information about NDLP. Similarly, people with health problems, injuries or disabilities were informed of the possibility of (re-) training and help available under NDDP, although the latter was rarely explicitly mentioned. The information provided by PAs was generally regarded as insufficient and non-JSA customers wanted further detail on the purpose, content or usefulness of the support to determine whether it was appropriate for them. There was little evidence that non-JSA customers were routinely referred to specialist provision. Instead, only some lone parents who were motivated to find work or learning opportunities were caseloaded or referred by their PA for an appointment with a NDLP adviser.

The extent to which action plans were used or agreed with non-JSA customers was varied. In some cases, non-JSA customers from across all groups did not recall that a plan was prepared or agreed. In others, they reported relatively vague plans that simply stated the individual's current circumstances and did not suggest any specific actions to help prepare the customer for work or outline what Jobcentre Plus would do to help. In contrast, more specific action plans were found for some lone parents, people with health problems and, in exceptional cases, carers who engaged in more detailed discussions about work with their PA in the WFI. At the end of WFIs, non-JSA customers were typically told to contact their PA again if their circumstances changed and/or they wanted to discuss work. Some PAs were reported to offer to further contact with people with mental health problems and joint-related problems by phone, although there was little evidence that this occurred. Non-JSA customers were rarely offered a further meeting with a PA at a set time or date, with the exception of lone parents who were caseloaded onto NDLP.

7 The office environment

This chapter explores customers' views and, where relevant, staff views of the Jobcentre Plus public office environment. Earlier research (Davies et al, 2002) identified a number of issues relating to the public office environment, all of which also emerged in this phase of research. Attitudes towards the general office environment are covered in Section 8.1, and issues relating to privacy are outlined in Section 8.2. The use of floorwalkers is a new element introduced as part of Jobcentre Plus, and views of this are covered in Section 8.3. Respondents' views towards, and experiences of using, the computerised job vacancy system – job points – are described in Section 8.4. The final section (Section 8.5) draws together some overall conclusions.

7.1 The office environment

In general, customers with experience of the service prior to the new Jobcentre Plus regime noted a general improvement in the public office environment, and compared it favourably to the older Jobcentres, as well as to other public offices such as the old Benefits Agency offices and local authority.

'It doesn't look like a jobcentre when you first walk in to it, it looks very different.'

(Male, sick/disabled, aged 58 yrs)

Positive views were expressed amongst all groups of customers about the seating, the spaciousness, the cleanliness and the lighter, brighter décor.

'The old style, that was really dull and gloomy, quite depressing really but then you go in there and it's all bright...'

(Female, sick/disabled, aged 22 yrs)

'It's friendly, its more approachable...it's warmer with the colour schemes and the open plan.'

(Female lone parent, aged 38 yrs)

Although only occasionally mentioned specifically (particularly JSA customers), there was a general impression that the more welcoming environment, in conjunction with generally more helpful staff, resulted in a less stigmatising, intimidating or depressing event leading to a more positive experience. Respondents generally felt that the staff attitude towards customers had changed for the better, which in turn impacted on customers' behaviour.

'Treat people the same as you want them to treat you.'

(Male, sick/disabled, aged 43 yrs)

'I must admit I were pleasantly surprised. Years ago...you were sort of talked down to.'

(Female, sick/disabled, aged 49 yrs)

'I felt more like a person than a number.'

(Female lone parent, aged 25-39 yrs)

Staff also believed that the change in the environment had been generally positively received by customers. Staff noted that there was less confrontation, frustration or 'anger' with customers in the new environment, with customers perhaps feeling that they were being treated with more respect. The more relaxed comfortable and 'bright' offices emphasised the changes in the process itself, and that it was no longer the 'old way of doing things'.

Staff also reported that generally the new offices were nicer environments to work in, and helped them to provide a more professional service to their customers. However, in some areas public offices were reported by both staff and customers alike to be a little cramped, with desks very close to one another. For example, in one office it was commented that there was insufficient seating for waiting customers, another appeared to have insufficient file storage space, and in another it was reported that they had insufficient desks to accommodate all staff.

7.2 Privacy issues

Whilst there were generally favourable comments from all respondents about the overall office environment, issues were often raised relating to a perceived lack of privacy. In particular, there were concerns amongst customers that others could overhear their conversations with staff, which were often about sensitive issues (for example, health problems, financial information or child support issues). These concerns about lack of privacy were far more likely to have been raised by non-JSA customers than by JSA customers.

Amongst sick or disabled customers and those with caring responsibilities, the lack of privacy in the public office was consistently mentioned spontaneously by respondents, amidst concerns about discussing their health problems within earshot of other customers.

'I don't want people listening, it's the risk, especially if it's in your local area where there are people that you might know walking around.'

(Female, sick/disabled, aged 25-39)

There was only one reported example of a sick or disabled respondent being offered the use of a private room. Others sometimes appeared to be unaware that this facility was available.

Some lone parents also reported difficulties in discussing their personal circumstances in an open plan environment. There was some suggestion that they may have felt happier discussing their circumstances in more detail if there had been a little more privacy (only one lone parent in the sample reported having an interview in a private room). However, the issue of privacy appeared to be more salient amongst lone parents than amongst carers or people with health problems.

Despite these concerns amongst some about the lack of privacy, it appeared that only exceptionally were customers offered the use of a private room, and generally respondents were unaware of the facility. For some respondents, it was suggested that this perceived lack of privacy meant that in the future they would prefer to telephone to speak to an adviser if at all possible.

From the staff perspective, privacy was often mentioned as being problematic for customers. In particular, desks were sometimes too close to one another, meaning that conversations could easily be overheard.

Another concern raised, also raised in earlier research, was the use of warm phones. Whilst their usage was not widespread amongst this sample, some customers commented that others who were waiting in the vicinity of the warm phones could overhear their telephone conversations. Nevertheless, other customers welcomed the opportunity to telephone other parts of the service from the Jobcentre Plus office. That said, interviews with staff indicated that some people were reluctant to use the telephone service, preferring to speak to someone face-to-face. This was particularly notable in offices with a high proportion of customers for whom English was not their first language.

7.3 Floorwalker and reception staff

A significant change introduced in the new Jobcentre Plus service is the use of floorwalkers and, in some offices, security officers. Their function includes the greeting of customers, and directing them to the appropriate service or waiting area. Customers may also hand over their completed claim forms to these staff, who will forward them to the appropriate member of staff in advance of the customer's interview.

Generally, respondents were reassured by the presence of such staff, and found it helpful to be directed to the appropriate section.

'...there is somebody there to take you where you need to go.'

(Female lone parent, aged 18-24 yrs)

It was also noted by some customers that this could keep queues to a minimum, and avoided customers *'wandering around aimlessly'*. There were, however, reservations expressed by some customers who were greeted by security staff, for example, feeling *'uneasy'* about handing over claim forms. That said, others commented that the security guards were performing a necessary role and were *'polite'* and *'helpful'*.

Where security officers were in place in public offices they were welcomed by staff, who perceived that they had had a positive influence on customers' behaviour. This could include, for example, calming customers down in moments of stress or anxiety, and by sending a clear message that *'nuisance'* behaviour would not be tolerated.

7.4 Job points

Within the new Jobcentre Plus service, 'job points' replaced the previously used job vacancy display boards. These are banks of touch-screen computers enabling customers to search for and 'self-select' job vacancies of interest, the details of which they can then print out. Amongst all groups of customers, job points were generally favourably received and were viewed as an improvement from the display boards, and perceived as in line with the general modernisation of the service. Earlier research (Davies et al, 2002) reported that some customers found the new job points restricted their ability to browse for jobs, but this was less of an issue for customers in this latest phase of research. Indeed, staff suggested in this phase that customers had now adapted to the new job search system and were generally positive about it. Customers did, however, report occasions when one or more of the job points were not working, which could lead to queues to use other job points.

Jobseekers in this sample generally found the job points to be much better than the old display board system. Reasons for this included the ability to search nationally for jobs, the system being user friendly and the perception that more information about a job was available on the job points than had been on the display boards. There were, however, some criticisms about job points, particularly about the 'systems' being down. This was a particular frustration when a jobseeker had visited the office with the sole purpose of searching for jobs using the job points. Other concerns included having to queue to use job points, the job points being 'restrictive' in the kinds of jobs they showed (compared to the display boards), and difficulties in getting used to the system (associated with not receiving help in how to use the system).

JSA customers were also more likely than other groups to mention the use of the Internet in the public office, a job search service which they found useful (Internet usage was rarely mentioned in earlier phases of the research). However, others preferred to access these services from their home. From the staff perspective, job points were much more frequently used and more reliable than the Internet.

Amongst respondents with health conditions, those who had used job points generally thought them an improvement to the previous vacancy service. However, although some had found them relatively straightforward to use, others had experienced difficulties, for example because of literacy problems or visual impairments. Nevertheless, most customers had been able to obtain assistance from a member of staff (although there were reported incidences of customers being unable to get assistance). Some sick or disabled customers had not used the job points, and occasionally appeared to be unaware of their existence.

Amongst lone parent respondents, those who had used the job point facilities had generally found them accessible and straightforward to use (although generally not had any advice from staff on how to use them). Some lone parents had not used the facility, although generally they were aware of its availability.

Carers appeared the least likely to have used the job points, although not all were aware of their existence. Of those that had used them, there were some issues raised about staff not being 'around' to show them how to use the facility.

From the staff perspective, it was also noted that job points could cause frustration to customers when they were 'down'. However, the general view amongst staff was that the job point service was favourably received and was an improvement on the previous job vacancy display system. Several commented that it made job searching easier for customers, and one member of staff commented that the new system 'empowered' customers to look for a job themselves.

7.5 The impact of the environment on the likelihood of using the service again

In terms of the impact of the environment on customers' likelihood of returning to the service, generally customers reported that they would continue to use the services of Jobcentre Plus. Whilst there were examples of customers who reported that they would now use the service more frequently, there was little widespread evidence to suggest that this was solely attributable to improvements in the environment. However, taken in conjunction with changes to the process as a whole, there is little doubt that the environmental improvements brought about as part of the new Jobcentre Plus have enhanced the overall service available to customers.

7.6 Conclusions

Overall, attitudes towards the Jobcentre Plus environment were positive, from customers and staff alike. What concerns there were primarily related to lack of privacy, and unavailability of job points due to technical difficulties. However, there remained some dissatisfaction. This was primarily associated with aspects of the benefits related service (for example, difficulties with the claiming process), or with the perceived lack of co-ordination between different parts of the organisation rather than the actual physical layout or facilities available at the public office.

8 Conclusions

This chapter concludes the report by bringing together the key findings from the staff and customer research to present an overview of the delivery of the Jobcentre Plus vision at each stage of the process (Section 8.1). Barriers to progress are discussed in Section 8.2 and finally some overall conclusions are presented (Section 8.3).

8.1 Delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision

8.1.1 First Contact

In terms of identifying the appropriate benefit for customers to claim, this part of the First Contact process was largely working well. Where customers knew what benefit they wanted to claim First Contact Officers (FCOs) were able to verify customers' assertions by confirming key eligibility criteria. Some customers were unsure which benefit they should claim and in these cases FCOs asked questions from the VANTIVE script to determine this. Generally, staff felt confident in doing this, although some found benefits other than Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Income Support (IS) to be more difficult to determine. Some newer staff also felt less confident because they did not feel that they had received sufficient benefits training. Some FCOs were able to give customers additional benefit advice, such as eligibility for Housing Benefit (HB) or Council Tax Benefit (CTB).

A key role of the FCO is to promote the work-focused element of Jobcentre Plus, however, the extent to which this was being delivered was generally limited. Although JSA customers were asked about their employment history and what work they were looking for in the future (as covered by the VANTIVE script), it appeared that customers' may have understood these discussions as being concerned with their eligibility for benefit and thus reported having either no or limited discussions about work at the First Contact stage. For some JSA customers, there were also limited explanations as to the purpose of the Work-focused Interview (WFI) and only some customers were aware that they would be attending an interview to discuss work. Only in exceptional cases did JSA customers receive a work focus at First Contact. This occurred where the WFI was explained in more depth and where customers' work experience and aspirations were discussed in more detail.

Non-JSA customers also received a very limited introduction to the work-focused element of Jobcentre Plus. Explanations given as to the purpose of the WFI tended to emphasise the support available through Jobcentre Plus rather than the discussion about work. Some FCOs did not appear to be comfortable in promoting a work focus to non-JSA customers and did not ask the customer further questions about their circumstances and views in relation to work. Non-JSA customers commonly reported having no or limited discussions about work and there was a general lack of awareness that they would be attending a meeting to discuss work.

The extent to which FCOs emphasised the mandatory nature of the WFI varied and was not always mentioned explicitly. In general, JSA and non-JSA customers were aware that they were required to attend an interview at a public office and that non-attendance would affect the progress of their claim. The extent to which FCOs explained to customers what would happen at their appointment, in terms of who they would see and how long meetings would last also appeared to vary. Although FCOs generally reported that they told customers about seeing two Advisers, some customers did not recall being told this. It may be that some customers were told, but did not absorb this information.

Within contact centres there was greater emphasis on undertaking job searches and making job submissions compared to previous phases of research, although it was not something that appeared to happen routinely. Job searches were mostly reported to be conducted with JSA customers who, by virtue of the benefit they were claiming, were assumed by FCOs to be job ready. In the customer research a few examples were found where JSA customers had received a job search and applied for the vacancies found. Lone parents were the non-JSA customer group whom FCOs reported they were more likely to offer job searches to, although generally job searches with non-JSA customers were rare because they were not job ready.

Usually customers attended their appointment within four days, although some had to wait longer.

8.1.2 Meetings with Financial Assessors

Generally customers had their Financial Assessor (FA) meeting first. There were some reports of customers seeing a Personal Adviser (PA) first but this tended to happen either where the customer was late for their appointment, or where offices were running behind schedule. This did not appear to be a concern for customers. Some JSA and non-JSA customers saw only one adviser for a combined FA/PA meeting.

FAs were providing customers with a thorough benefit claim check service, which was something that FAs felt knowledgeable and confident in doing across all customer groups. FAs were also generally gathering all the necessary evidence and verification from JSA customers, lone parents and people claiming sickness or disability benefits. This did not routinely occur for carers.

The main area where progress had been made was in the knowledge and confidence of FAs in giving customers benefit information and advice. FAs were giving some customers wider information and advice about entitlements to benefits and other financial help such as New Tax Credits (NTCs), the Social Fund, HB and CTB. This had not been evident in earlier phases of research. The customer research, however, highlights that this was occurring for only some customers and some customers were disappointed their FA did not provide them with information about further benefits they could claim.

In some Pathfinder offices, FAs were also informing customers of the amount of benefit they could expect to receive, although in other offices FAs were not giving this information, unless perhaps they were specifically asked by a customer. The customer research indicates that, apart from some exceptions, customers were generally not being informed how much benefit they could expect to receive. Similarly, only some customers were told when they could expect to receive their first benefit payment. Thus, informing customers of the status of their claim in terms of the amount of benefit they could expect to receive, and how long it is likely to take, is an area where further progress needs to be made.

A key area where FAs were not giving customers sufficient information was in explaining the reason why customers were seeing a PA. This applied more so to non-JSA customers than to JSA customers. For non-JSA customers there was relatively little or no explanation given. In some cases where explanations were given they focused on benefits rather than work. Similarly, FAs did not always explicitly tell customers that benefit receipt was dependant upon satisfactory participation in a WFI. This was rarely observed, although some customers did report being told this.

Further clarity of information is also required in informing customers about the Jobcentre Plus process. Some customers were not aware that they would be seeing both an FA and a PA and were surprised when they arrived for their appointment. FAs reported this confusion was caused because the letters customers received only mentioned the PA. It was a particular problem for some lone parents who might in addition have to attend a Child Support Agency (CSA) meeting.

8.1.3 Interviews with Personal Advisers

Explanations given by PAs to JSA customers were generally clear in explaining that the purpose of the interview was to discuss work. Some non-JSA customers also received explanations that the interview was to discuss work and the services available under Jobcentre Plus, but this was not the case for all non-JSA customers. Non-JSA customers were rarely told that their participation in the WFI was a condition of benefit receipt. Some JSA customers reported that they were told about the mandatory nature of the WFI, although this was not a common finding from the observational evidence. It may be that JSA customers were receiving this message even though it was not explicitly being spelt out to them in PAs' introductions.

Across all customer groups work was discussed, but the extent to which these discussions were meaningful and substantive varied greatly. Interviews with JSA customers followed a common format as PAs went through the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg). Interviews with non-JSA customers did not have a formal structure, but customers were commonly asked about their employment history, qualifications and future plans in relation to work. Interviews which were more in-depth and in which customers were engaged, occurred where customers felt able to ask questions and where PAs listened and responded to customers' suggestions or concerns. With customers with health problems or disabilities, interviews were also more in-depth when PAs focused on work as a future option.

Among JSA and non-JSA customers, discussions about work were more limited when PAs did not challenge customers' own assessments of their ability to work, did not ask customers to elaborate on their responses, did not follow through on issues raised by the customer, or tried to maintain a narrow agenda. Where customers, both JSA and non-JSA, appeared to be unresponsive or disinterested PAs tended to take the lead from the customer and did not try to encourage them further in discussions. In dealing with non-JSA customers, PAs appeared to be reluctant to pursue discussions about work with customers who were not seemingly interested. This was related to PAs wanting to make customers feel at ease. As a result some JSA and non-JSA customers felt that their WFI had not been sufficiently in-depth or detailed.

Among non-JSA customers discussions were also limited when customers clearly indicated that work was not an option for them, or was not something that they were interested in in the immediate or medium-term. PAs took the customers lead in not continuing with discussions and, in these instances, customers felt that this was appropriate.

There was no apparent progress in the extent to which non-JSA customers had meaningful and substantive discussions about work, even though PAs generally reported feeling confident in engaging in a dialogue with non-JSA customers. The extent of discussion was largely dependant on the apparent interest and motivation of the customer, as well as on the individual capabilities of PAs. Some PAs reported having developed strategies for encouraging discussions with non-JSA customers, but some also reported feeling less confident in discussing work with customers with mental health issues, drug users and customers with more severe physical health problems.

Discussions in WFIs about customers' benefit claims tended to be minimal and tended to occur when customers raised outstanding queries, such as how long it would take for them to receive a benefit payment.

More positively, progress has been made in the knowledge and confidence of PAs in giving customers information and advice on the help and services available. PAs were generally more knowledgeable about the different organisations, training courses and programmes that they could refer JSA and non-JSA customers to. Some

customers were, for example, given information on training opportunities, New Deals, support with CVs and job search, or local organisations. However, the main criticism from customers was that the amount of information PAs gave them was limited in terms of describing its content and how it could benefit them. Consequently customers were unable to determine whether it was something that would be appropriate for them. There were, however, some exceptions where customers received more detailed information.

Some JSA and non-JSA customers (except for carers) received advice on ways to look for work, such as recruitment agencies, and were told about the job points and Internet facilities within the Jobcentre Plus office. There were also examples where customers were given information on financial assistance such as NTCs and the Adviser Discretion Fund, although among non-JSA customers information on NTCs was only offered to lone parents. There were also exceptional cases where lone parents reported receiving better-off calculations.

The findings suggest that PAs had a greater breadth of knowledge, but not necessarily a sufficient depth of knowledge. There also appeared to be a concern among some PAs about giving some customers with health problems too much information for fear of upsetting them or making them feel under pressure and that perhaps PAs were purposefully holding back information until customers' circumstances had settled down or improved. The customer findings, however, suggest that these concerns may be unfounded. Similarly, better-off calculations for lone parents were felt by some PAs to be more appropriate at later meetings when customers were more ready to think about work, or more appropriate for JSA customers once they had received a job offer.

Job searches were generally being conducted as part of the WFI for JSA customers, although there were some instances where job searches were not conducted. By comparison, job searches were not usually carried out for non-JSA customers because they were not in a position to think about looking for work at the time of their WFI. JSAs were completed and signed by JSA customers, although for some customers they were not considered to be meaningful because they did not reflect their job goals and aspirations. With non-JSA customers the completion of Customer Action Plans varied; PAs in some offices completed them with customers whilst others did not. Where they were completed they tended to be a summary of the WFI discussion.

Further contact with the PA was not generally offered to JSA customers, perhaps because JSA customers have to follow a mandatory process of further meetings. Only some JSA customers were told about further mandatory review meetings. With non-JSA customers, PAs invited them to return if they wanted further help, but it was up to the customer to initiate this. However, there was evidence of a more proactive approach among PAs to following non-JSA customers up with a telephone call some time after their WFI to see if their circumstances had changed. There was little evidence that non-JSA customers were told about further mandatory meetings, the exceptions being some lone parents.

Findings indicate that the promotion and encouragement by PAs for non-JSA customers to take up New Deals and other help was limited and tended to be customer led. Outside of referring customers to New Deals and other specialist provision or training, PAs had very little time available to offer a caseloading service to non-JSA customers. As a result, the main focus of caseloading help was in providing a telephone based job search service, which was targeted at those who were most job ready and who needed the least help in moving into work. The exception was an office where PAs had allocated time in their diaries for caseloading and in this office it appeared that PAs were able to offer help to some customers who were less job ready.

8.2 Barriers to further progress

Some common barriers were identified which appeared to hinder the delivery of the Jobcentre Plus vision at various stages of the process.

8.2.1 Preconceptions about non-JSA customers

At the contact centre there was evidence that some FCOs made assumptions about non-JSA customers' job readiness and presumed, in some cases, that they would not be interested in discussing work and did not give the customer the opportunity to indicate how they felt. Where this happened, discussions around work were very limited. This may be related to the recruitment of new staff and to insufficient training. There was some observational evidence of this occurring with PAs in WFIs with carers, where it was assumed by the PA that they would not be interested in discussing work.

8.2.2 Staff confidence in discussing work with non-JSA customers

Among some staff there was a general level of discomfort in discussing work with non-JSA customers. Some FCOs did not feel comfortable in promoting the WFI to non-JSA customers because they did not feel it was appropriate when customers were unlikely to be available for work. Some FCOs had found that some non-JSA customers did not respond positively to the subject of work being raised. Similarly, FCOs sometimes felt that offering job searches to non-JSA customers was inappropriate and did not do so unless asked by the customer. Among some PAs there were certain customers and circumstances where they felt less comfortable in discussing work. This included customers with mental health problems, drug users, carers who had given up work to care and customers with more severe physical health conditions. Where staff did not feel confident or comfortable, discussions around work were not pursued or encouraged.

8.2.3 Lack of relevant benefits expertise

At First Contact, some newer FCOs did not feel they had the necessary knowledge on Jobcentre Plus benefits to confidently identify the correct benefit that customers were eligible to claim. More generally FCOs wanted more detailed information and

training on benefits other than JSA and Income Support (IS). Among FAs, benefit knowledge across all of the Jobcentre Plus benefits had improved since earlier phases of research as a result of 'on the job' learning. However, for some FAs a lack of knowledge (on one of the benefits) prevented them from giving customers more in-depth information and advice, particularly in relation to the amount of benefit they could expect to receive.

8.2.4 Workloads and time constraints

At First Contact, time constraints impacted upon the ability of FCOs to offer customers more detailed benefits advice and to conduct job searches and make job submissions. Constraints on the amount of time that FCOs could spend with each customer were dependant on the number of telephone calls waiting to be answered and the length of time that customers had been waiting, for which FCOs had targets to meet.

In public offices, there were particular circumstances where FAs were unable to complete the benefit claim check within the 20 minute appointment time. Where meetings overran, FAs had to see customers again after the PA meeting. There were also circumstances where FA meetings took longer than the time allocated which meant that PAs were unable to cover everything that they should do with customers. Except for one office, the extent that PAs were able to caseload customers was limited. Caseloading had to be conducted during downtime which also had to be used to complete other tasks. Some public offices were facing particular difficulties due to reductions in staff numbers, combined with staff absences due to long-term sick leave. In these offices, the amount of downtime that FAs and PAs had was reduced further and meetings with customers were rushed.

8.2.5 Insufficient interpreter facilities for non-English speaking customers

At all stages of the Jobcentre Plus process there was evidence that the ability of staff to deliver services to customers for whom English was not their first language was more difficult. Conversations with customers over the telephone or face-to-face meetings were more difficult for staff to conduct and took longer. Difficulties also arose as a result of customers being unable to complete benefit claim forms in advance of the FA meeting. In offices located in areas with a high proportion of non-English speaking customers this was a particular difficulty.

8.3 Overall conclusions

In looking across the different stages of the Jobcentre Plus process, a key emerging issue is the demand from customers to be given more information. The Jobcentre Plus vision itself (as set-out in the 'Must Dos') also requires that staff give customers more information, such as explaining the purpose of the WFI and explaining the mandatory nature of the WFI. Specifically, customers reported wanting more information on:

- The Jobcentre Plus process – the number of meetings they had to attend and how long these meetings would last. This information needs to be provided to customers at the First Contact stage to inform them of what to expect. Informing customers of the purpose of the WFI would also give them the opportunity to consider their future aspirations and work goals prior to attending.
- Information as to why meetings were delayed when customers were having to wait.
- The status of their benefit claim – what benefits they were eligible to claim (an issue at First Contact), how much benefit they could expect to receive and when they could expect to receive it. It was these questions that when not addressed by the FA were sometimes raised by the customer during the WFI.
- More detailed information and advice from PAs on training opportunities and service providers, how to access these and their appropriateness to the individual customer. Customers may be unlikely to return voluntarily to Jobcentre Plus if they do not know what kinds of help and support are available to them.

In relation to the status of the customers' benefit claim and the extent of information and advice given in PA meetings, one of the reasons why this information was not being given was due to insufficient knowledge among staff. The research has highlighted the amount of expertise that staff, particularly FAs and PAs, are required to have in order to carry out their role. Among some FAs, a lack of in-depth benefits knowledge prevented them from being able to calculate the amount of benefit customers could expect to receive. Although PAs had progressed in their breadth of knowledge on support and training available to customers, in order to meet customers' individual needs they are also required to have a depth of detailed knowledge. This raises an issue about balancing the role of a PA between signposting customers to other services and providing a more in-depth advisory and support service.

The research also raises the question of whether Jobcentre Plus customers would be better served by the use of generalist or specialist FAs and PAs (whereby staff had a more in-depth knowledge on a particular customer group). There was no clear evidence from this research as to which worked best. There was also no clear support from staff for one option over the other.

Whether using specialist or generalist staff, the research highlights the need for staff training and an ongoing programme of staff development. This was a particular need in contact centres where progress at First Contact was limited by the expansion of contact centres and the recruitment of new staff and where staff generally felt that the benefits training they had received had been inadequate. At all stages of delivery, staff emphasised the importance of learning on the job through personal experience and through consulting with colleagues. In the public offices progress (where this had been made) appeared largely to have occurred as a result of increased individual staff knowledge and confidence, gained as a result of 'on the job' experience, rather than as a result of any 'top down' initiatives or attendance at

training courses. Whilst this had plugged some training gaps there were still some areas where staff wanted more training. The research also suggests a need among some public office staff for further disability awareness training. The customer research provided examples where individuals' needs were not addressed, such as customers having to go upstairs for appointments and discomfort for some customers who had to sit down for long periods of time.

The delivery of a work focus (or lack of), particularly to non-JSA customers, appears to be an area that has not improved despite the greater experience and feelings of confidence reported among PAs. Further training may address the general discomfort that some PAs feel in discussing work with non-JSA customers as well as specific customer groups, such as customers with mental health problems and drug users, that some PAs feel less confident in approaching about work. There also appears to be an inherent tension between the requirement for PAs to have substantive and meaningful discussions about work and the objective of work being a more long-term goal for non-JSA customers. PAs' own concerns were to make customers feel at ease and not push them into discussions about work if customers were not ready or interested.

Resources in terms of time and staff numbers was an issue which impacted on the delivery of the service at all stages. At First Contact, where time was limited and staff were aware of call answering times, offering customers more detailed benefits advice and making job submissions was sometimes not conducted. In public offices, insufficient staff resources resulted in restricting the extent to which PAs could caseload customers to those who needed least help and limiting the number of customers PAs could caseload. In some offices PA Managers had been unable to release PAs to attend training events because of staffing problems. Limits on staff time were also apparent in the difficulties caused when FA or PA meetings ran over the allotted appointment slot, for example if customers arrived late, or if meetings took longer because customers did not speak English as a first language. Staff appeared to have very little non-appointment time to allow for meetings to overrun or for staff absences. The impact on customers was that they sometimes had to wait to see an Adviser or meetings had to be cut short.

Overall, some progress in delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision had been made at each stage of the process and some examples of good practice were found. However, the extent of this progress has been limited by factors such as insufficient staff knowledge and confidence as well as resource and time constraints. The delivery of a substantive work focus to non-JSA customers who are not in a position to consider work as an option for the immediate future is the main area where Jobcentre Plus has yet to deliver.

Appendix A

Methodology

Phase 3 of the evaluation of Jobcentre Plus was conducted in six clusters, all of which were included in earlier research. In total nine Jobcentre Plus public offices and six contact centres were visited. Six of the nine Jobcentre Plus public offices were Pathfinder offices with three day two offices also included in this latest round. The Pathfinder offices visited in Phase 3 were also covered in the earlier research.

The over arching aims of the Phase 3 research were to:

- assess whether Jobcentre Plus pathfinders and day two offices are delivering to policy intent;
- compare delivery in the day two offices with that of the Pathfinders in May 2002; and
- inform the next stages of the Jobcentre Plus rollout.

A.1 Methodological approach

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured qualitative depth interviews with Jobcentre Plus customers and staff members. In addition, a series of observations in contact centres and Jobcentre Plus public offices were conducted.

A.1.1 Qualitative interviews

As with previous phases of the research, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were chosen as the principal research method, alongside non-participatory observations, to gather information about experiences and views of Jobcentre Plus staff and customers.

The interview topic guides used with JSA and non-JSA customers were designed to obtain comprehensive details of the customer's contact with the Jobcentre Plus office and contact centre. At the same time the topic guides were designed to draw

out customer opinion and perception of their Jobcentre Plus experience whilst also gaining an appreciation of the customer's background circumstances. The interview was structured in a logical order, so that the customer was taken through the process of making the claim step by step.

The interview topic guides for use with members of staff were structured to obtain for example details about training, their role, the JCP vision, and process followed by customers, changes they have encountered (Pathfinder offices).

Managers suggested the names of staff members to be interviewed and participants were made aware of the nature of the research by the researcher and/or the manager. It was made clear to the participants that any information provided would be treated in the strictest of confidence and that no individual could be identified from the findings presented. Interviews were recorded, provided the researcher had obtained permission from the staff member.

A.1.2 Observations

Observations were carried out in order to gain a deeper understanding of the process, issues and to gain further insight into the delivery of the Jobcentre Plus service. Observations of First Contact at the contact centre, the Work-focused Interview (WFI) and the Financial Assessor (FA) meeting were undertaken by the researchers in each area.

Researchers endeavoured to remain unobtrusive when conducting the observations in order to minimise any effect on participant behaviour, during staff contact with the customer. Following the first contact call, WFI or FA meeting, researchers engaged the staff member in a brief discussion about the overall contact with the customer to extract the staff member's perceptions of the meeting/call.

A.2 Fieldwork

Jobcentre Plus office managers and contact centre managers were initially contacted by letter, which was followed up with a telephoned call. They were advised of the research agenda and suitable dates were negotiated with managers. The contact person (usually the office manager) was asked to organise the timetable for the interviews and observations and suggested staff members to participate. The managers were also asked to inform their staff about the purpose of the research.

As in previous phases of the research, a range of staff were interviewed in order to gain different staff viewpoints.

A.2.1 Staff interviews

Staff interviews were conducted face-to-face and on a one-to-one basis. Where possible, arrangements were made with managers for a private room to be made available for the staff interviews. The interviews with staff members covered similar broad themes but were tailored to individual's role and office type. The following table summarises the interviews conducted with staff members by type of staff and by public office area.

Table A.1 Summary of Jobcentre Plus public office staff interviewed by type of staff member and by public office area (A-I) – types of Jobcentre Plus staff interviewed as part of the research

	OM/DM	PA	FA	FW	PAM	FAM
A	1	3	1	1	1	1
B	1	3	2	1	1	-
C	1	3	1	-	1	1
D	1	3	2	1	1	-
E	1	3	2	1	1	-
F	1	3	2	1	1	-
G	1	2	1	1	-	-
H	1	3	2	1	1	1
I	1	3	2	1	1	-
Totals	9	26	15	8	8	3

Table A.2 Summary of contact centre staff interviewed by type of staff and by area (i-vi)

	Office Manager	First Contact Officer
i	1	4
ii	1	3
iii	1	3
iv	1	3
v	1	3
vi	1	3
Total	6	19

The topic guide was broken down into several sections:

- Introduction: explanation of the purpose of the research.
- Background: previous work experience, training received, understanding of role etc.
- Topics relating to the specific role of the participant (i.e. For managers – organisation and management; for FAs – setting up and content of FA meetings).
- Office Environment: changes (Pathfinder offices), impact of environment.
- Closing: lessons learnt, good practice examples.

Observations

Observations were conducted of WFI and FA meetings at the Jobcentre Plus offices and of first contact with customers at contact centres. Every effort was made to ensure that observations of contact with both JSA and non-JSA customers were obtained. The observations conducted of WFI, FA meetings and of First Contact with customers are shown in following tables (A.3 and A.4).

Table A.3 Summary of observations conducted of first contact with customers by customer group and by area (i-vi)

	Customer group			
	JSA	Lone parents	Non-JSA Sick or disabled	Carers
i	4	-	1	1
ii	5	-	2	-
iii	4	1	1	-
iv	4	-	4	-
v	4	-	1	1
vi	4	-	1	1
Totals	25	1	10	3

Table A.4 Summary of observations conducted of WFI and FA meetings by customer group and public office area (A-I)

	Customer group			
	JSA	Lone parents	Non-JSA Sick or disabled	Carers
FA meetings				
A	2	-	-	-
B	3	-	1	-
C	3	-	-	1
D	3	-	-	-
E	1	-	3	1
F	2	2	4	-
G	1	1	1	1
H	1	1	2	-
I	3	-	2	-
Totals	19	4	13	3
WFI meetings				
A	3	2	2	1
B	4	1	2	-
C	2	-	2	-
D	5	-	1	-
E	1	-	3	1
F	2	2	4	-
G	1	2	1	1
H	-	-	3	1
I	6	-	2	-
Totals	24	7	20	4

Researchers recorded the conversation in the form of a ‘transcript’ and completed a schedule of the conversation. Information noted by the observer on the schedule included, for example, issues raised by both the customer and staff, language and terms used, call duration, depth of explanations provided, IT systems used and process followed by staff. Copies of the observation schedules can be found in Appendix I.

After the meeting/call had ended, the researcher took the opportunity to spend a few minutes talking to the staff member to gain their perspective of the interview/conversation. The researcher noted any comments onto the schedule. This was not always possible for example if First Contact Officers (FCOs) went straight into the next first contact call without a break.

A.2.2 Customer research

The customer groups approached in Phase 3 research were as follows:

Table A.5 Customer groups approached in the research by benefit type

Customer group		Benefit type claimed
Jobseekers		Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA)
Non-JSA customers	Lone parents	Usually Income Support (IS)
	Sick or Disabled	Usually Incapacity Benefit (IB) or IS
	Carers	Invalid Care Allowance (ICA)

Customers were drawn from a database supplied by the Department for Work and Pensions. The database provided a sample of customers by benefit claim type who had attended a Work-focused Interview within the last couple of months. Customer groups were identified based on the type of benefit claimed (Table A.2). The sampling list was cleaned to remove any individuals who were identified as being outside of the designated ‘district’ and to remove any duplication in the sampling list.

Targets for each customer group had been determined based on the objectives of the research.

Table A.6 Customer targets per public office area

Customer group	Numbers required/public office area
JSA	3
Lone parents	4
Sick or disabled	4
Carers	2

Where the numbers of customers claiming a benefit type were low, every unit provided was included from the sampling list, where the number of customers claiming benefit was more generous a random sample was obtained. Additional customer numbers were requested if all of the units from the original sampling list had been used. This was only required where customer numbers (units) on the original sampling list were low.

Overall targets for each customer group were achieved in most public office areas.

Table A.7 Summary of interviews conducted with Jobcentre Plus customers, by customer group and public office area (A-I)

	JSA customers	Lone parents customers	Sick or disabled customer	Carers	Total/public office area
A	3	4	4	2	13
B	3	5	4	2	14
C	3	4	4	2	13
D	2	2	6	1	11
E	3	4	4	1	12
F	3	5	4	1	13
G	3	4	3	2	12
H	3	4	4	2	13
I	4	7	1	1	13
Total	27	39	34	14	114

Customer recruitment

There were two main aims when recruiting customers for Phase 3, to ensure that the customer was in receipt of the relevant benefit type and to ensure that the customer had been through the whole Jobcentre Plus process, i.e. had attended a WFI.

An introductory 'opt out' letter was sent out to customers sampled from the database, explaining the purpose of the research and that an interviewer would be in contact some time during the next few weeks to ask whether the customer would like to take part in this study. A copy of this 'opt out' letter can be found in Appendix C. A freephone number was provided on the letter for customers to call if they wanted to opt out or if they required further information. A small number of customers chose to 'opt out' by calling the freephone number and these customers weren't contacted again. A few customers also 'opted in' by phoning the freephone, these customers were called back by a member of the team.

A screening questionnaire was used at the recruitment stage in order to check the type of benefit claimed by the customer and the eligibility of the customer to take part in the research. A copy of the recruitment questionnaire can be found in Appendix G. It is also worth noting at this point that an incentive payment of £15 was offered to customers for participating in the research.

An appointment was made for a researcher to interview the customer, if the customer was eligible and willing to take part in an interview. A convenient date and time was arranged with the customer. Interviews were arranged to take place at the home of the customer. Confirmation letters were sent out to customers at their home address (where possible) confirming the date and time of the interview.

Customer interviews

Interviews with customers were conducted on a one-to-one basis and recorded, provided the permission of the customer was obtained. The customer was informed that the recording was for the convenience of the researcher.

The topic guide covered similar issues with JSA and non-JSA customers. The topic guide also indicated to the researcher the areas of most importance to the research and included prompts for the researcher to enquire about specific issues. This was to ensure a degree of consistency was achieved amongst the interviews conducted. A copy of the interview guides used for JSA and non-JSA customers can be found in Appendix H.

Appendix B

‘Must Dos’ guidance

B.1 Introduction

Jobcentre Plus introduced for the first time (other than on a pilot basis) a *work-focused* service and benefit conditionality for **non-JSA** customers of working age claiming Income Support (IS), Incapacity Benefit (IB), Severe Disability Allowance (SDA), Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) and Bereavement Benefit (BB). The purpose of this work-focused service is to help non-JSA customers return to work as soon as they can.

Conditionality for customers claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) is **not** affected by the introduction of Jobcentre Plus.

We are conscious that this work-focused service and benefit conditionality is new for our non-JSA customers and staff. In order to help you deliver a work-focused service to all customers, we have produced this list of things that Personal Advisers (PAs), Financial Assessors (FAs) and First Contact Officers (FCOs) **must do** in order to help non-JSA customers return to work as soon as they can.

None of this is new: indeed everything here will be covered somewhere in operation guidance and training. What it aims to do though is help us relate what we do each day with each customer to the strategy for delivering a work-focused service.

We have also included a reminder of the main differences from JSA and some key operational requirements. These are mainly about making sure we record accurately and promptly the help we give customers and that our systems work well.

The list can be used as a work aide for staff delivering the service and for their managers to support and develop their staff and to monitor the quality of the service their staff are providing. A self-assessment stencil is attached to help managers monitor delivery of the ‘Must Dos’ in their offices.

Pathfinder Improvement Team

3rd Floor, Steel City House

West Street

Sheffield

S1 2GQ

0114 259 5627

B.2 First Contact

To deliver the work-focused service the First Contact Officer must:

- actively promote the work-focused services of Jobcentre Plus;
- explain that a Work-focused Interview is a **compulsory** condition of benefit entitlement;
- explain the purpose of the Work-focused Interview;
- discuss any current jobsearch activity;
- allocate a Personal Adviser able to deal with a customer's particular needs – eg lone parent or IB customer;
- book a Work-focused Interview to take place within 4 working days of First Contact if not waived or deferred;
- decide if Work-focused Interview should be appropriately waived/deferred;
- do a job search for all customers who are job-ready and undertake a submission if there is a suitable vacancy.

B.2.1 Operational requirement

- Act as a first point of contact.
- Redirect non-Jobcentre Plus customers as appropriate.
- Advise customers of Jobcentre Plus work-focused services and work-focused benefit conditionality.
- Identify the most appropriate benefit(s).
- Identify 16/17 year old customers and take the appropriate action.
- Identify if rapid reclaim is appropriate.
- Gather labour market information to inform the Work-focused Interview and ensure that all IT and clerical customer records are created and updated as appropriate – eg LMS marker set, JES record created and the reason for waiver/deferral is recorded.
- As an output, customers must receive the correct interview notifications and claim forms.

B.2.2 Difference from JSA

JSA customers are subject to stricter conditionality and the Work-focused Interview/ New Jobseeker Interview **cannot** be waived or deferred. First Contact for JSA customers will concentrate on the requirement to look for work as a compulsory condition of entitlement to JSA and referral to suitable vacancies.

B.3 Financial Assessor meeting

To deliver the work-focused service the Financial Assessor must:

- explain that the benefit claim is dependent on satisfactory completion of a Work-focused Interview;
- thoroughly check the benefit claim for content and completeness, raising and resolving queries with customers while the customer is present;
- gather all evidence and verification to reduce opportunities for fraud and error;
- answer customers' queries about benefits so that these will not be carried forward into the Work-focused Interview;
- advise the customer of the status of their claim before they leave the office and tell them of any further evidence needed before the claim can be processed;
- alert PA if it appears that a Work-focused Interview might not be appropriate.

B.3.1 Operational requirement

When appropriate, to undertake a follow up meeting with the customer after the Work-focused Interview if the Personal Adviser has identified the need for additional action before the claim can be processed. For example if the customer refuses to participate in the interview. The output of all Financial Assessor meetings will be for claims to be passed to processing teams for benefit assessment and payment.

B.3.2 Difference from JSA

A Work-focused Interview/New Jobseeker Interview will always be appropriate for JSA customers. The Financial Assessor will explain that JSA customers must be available for and actively seek employment.

B.4 Personal Adviser Meeting

To deliver the work-focused service the Personal Adviser must:

- be trained to deal with customers circumstances (eg IB customer, Lone Parent);
- consider if a waiver/deferral is appropriate and take the necessary action;
- conduct the Work-focused Interview at a more convenient location if the customer cannot get to the office;
- explain the purpose of the Work-focused Interview and the requirement to participate;
- discuss any current jobsearch activity;
- have a **meaningful and substantive** discussion of the customer's work options and work prospects based on an assessment of their skills, experience, qualifications, barriers and caring responsibilities;

- undertake a jobsearch for those ready for work and make a submission if there is a suitable vacancy;
- focus on an IB customer's residual capacity not their incapacity; what they can do, not what they cannot and be prepared to challenge assumptions;
- actively promote in-work benefits and tax credits and other advantages of being in work for the customer and their family;
- carry out an in-work benefit calculation wherever possible, either using known figures or hypothetical examples;
- actively promote and encourage the customer to take-up the New Deals and other help to enable them to prepare for work and refer them to appropriate specialist provision – Progress2Work, debt counselling etc;
- encourage the customer to develop a Customer Action Plan setting out what they will do to prepare themselves for work and what we will do to help them;
- tell the customer about mandatory trigger meetings and set an appropriate workflow or reminder on LMS;
- offer continuing contact with the customer and encourage further meetings before the mandatory repeat Work-focused Interview to discuss their work options;
- advise the Financial Assessor whether the customer has participated in the Work-focused Interview so that benefit processing is not delayed.

B.4.1 Operational requirement

To create or update a record of the customer's qualifications, skills, employment history, job submissions, health problems, disabilities, caring responsibilities and barriers to employment. To facilitate the provision of ongoing help advice and support. To return to work and to monitor and follow-up deferrals, caseload and trigger meetings and set appropriate workflow/reviews for the next time-bound trigger meeting and update LMS and JES record.

B.4.2 Difference from JSA

Only JSA customers are required to be available for and actively seek work. However, it is crucially important that the Personal Adviser focuses on work related issues for both JSA and non-JSA customers alike. In such cases that will mean challenging assumptions ('I'll never work again'/'There are no jobs for people of my age') head on. The aim should be to identify pathways back to work wherever possible.

B.5 Trigger meetings

Trigger meetings are **mandatory**. They are either time-bound eg 6/12 month anniversary for lone parent or triggered by a life event such as receipt of a Personal Capability Assessment (PCA) for an IB customer. They are **not** the same as caseload meetings (see next page).

To deliver an effective trigger meeting the Personal Adviser must:

- ensure the meeting is work-focused and builds on previous Work-focused Interviews and activity;
- review progress, including against the Customer Action Plan if one has been drawn up;
- update work prospects, progress and records from the previous Work-focused Interview;
- update the customer on in-work benefits, tax credits and other support available to help them return to work;
- conduct in-work benefit calculations wherever possible, either using known figures or hypothetical examples;
- undertake job search and referral when the customer is job ready;
- actively encourage customers who previously declined to take up caseloading now.

B.5.1 Operational requirement

To: update assessment, and records of customer's skills, experience, qualifications, barriers etc; discuss customer's work options and help and support available to enhance their skills, experience and overcome their barriers and review and update their Customer Action Plan and any progress they have made against it and set the workflow for the next time-bound trigger meeting.

B.5.2 Difference from JSA

Only JSA customers are required to be available for and actively seek work. However, it is crucially important that the Personal Adviser focuses on work related issues for both JSA and non-JSA customers alike. In such cases that will mean challenging assumptions ('I'll never work again'/'There are no jobs for people of my age') head on. The aim should be to identify pathways back to work wherever possible.

B.6 Caseload Meetings

Caseloading is **voluntary**. It includes preparation for work and Jobsearch help from a Personal Adviser or Disability Employment Adviser (DEA) and participation in a New Deal or other programme.

To deliver effective caseloading the Personal Adviser must:

- actively promote and encourage take-up of help from New Deals, e.g. New Deal for Lone Parent, other programmes, and DEA if customer is disabled and needs specialist services
- understand and actively promote New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) to sick/disabled customers
- provide information/advice about help from other organisations
- monitor and encourage progress against Customer Action Plan
- undertake job search and referral as soon as the customer is job ready
- explain in-work support available where appropriate (in New Deal for Lone Parent and New Deal disabled People only).
- conduct in-work benefit calculations wherever possible, either using known figures or hypothetical examples

B.6.1 Operational requirement

To provide advice/information about available help from other organisations, monitor the customer's progress against their Customer Action Plan and undertake Jobsearch matching and submission as soon as the customer is ready for work and update relevant IT records.

B.6.2 Difference from JSA

Only JSA customers are required to be available for and actively seek work. However, it is crucially important that the Personal Adviser focuses on work related issues for both JSA and non-JSA customers alike. In such cases that will mean challenging assumptions ('I'll never work again'/'There are no jobs for people of my age') head on. The aim should be to identify pathways back to work wherever possible.

Non-JSA customers must dos – self assessment sheet

Process Element*: 1. First Contact 2. Financial Assessor Meeting 3. Work-focused Interview 4. Caseloading 5. Trigger Meeting * Delete as appropriate
Strengths/good practices
Weaknesses/areas for improvement
Planned action/timing

Appendix C

Opt out letter to Jobcentre Plus customers

<Name>
<Address 1>
<Address 2>
<Address 3>
<Address 4>

Dear <Name>

Research on Jobcentre Plus services

I am writing to ask for your help with an important study about people's experiences of Jobcentre Plus services. The Department for Work and Pensions want to improve services provided to people who are claiming benefits and have commissioned an independent research organisation, ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd. to carry out some research with people who have recently made a claim for benefit. Your name has been randomly selected from the Department's records of people who have recently had contact with Jobcentre Plus.

An interviewer from ECOTEC will be contacting you some time during the next few weeks to ask you to take part in this study. If you do take part, we would like to offer you <amount in pounds> as a 'thank-you' gift for your help with this study. This will not affect your entitlement to benefits in any way. Even if you are no longer claiming benefit we would still be interested to hear your views. We would like to emphasise that ECOTEC is completely independent of government departments and political parties. Anything you tell the interviewer will be treated in the strictest of confidence and the results will be presented in such a way that no one will be able to identify you or your family.

I do hope you will be able to help with this important study and that you will enjoy the opportunity of giving your views. We can provide interpreters, sign language experts and other specialist support you might require. This is a voluntary study, however, and you do not have to take part. If you do not wish to take part, please call ECOTEC on **freephone number <number>** remembering to give your name and address. Whatever your decision, we can assure you that it will not affect your benefit entitlement or any dealings you may have with Jobcentre Plus, either now or in the future.

If you would like to know more about the research, please do not hesitate to contact **<name> at ECOTEC on <number>**. Alternatively, you can call me on <number>. We would be pleased to answer any queries you may have. We look forward to meeting with you soon.

Kind regards

Appendix D

Confirmation letter to Jobcentre Plus customers

<Name>
<Address line 1>
<Address line 2>
<Address line 3>
<Address line 4>

<Date>

Dear <Client's name>

Jobcentre Plus research

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. I am writing to confirm that <researcher's name> from ECOTEC Research and Consulting will meet with you on <day, date and time>. The interview will last for about 40 minutes, and when it ends you will receive a 'thank you' gift of <amount in pounds>.

We would like to emphasise that ECOTEC is completely independent of government departments and political parties. Anything you tell the interviewer will be treated in the strictest of confidence and the results will be presented in such a way that no-one will be able to identify you or your family.

Yours sincerely

[Recruiter's signature]

Appendix E

Letter of introduction to Jobcentre Plus Office Managers

Ref.: VM/lw/<area>/w

<Name>
<Address 1>
<Address 2>
<Address 3>
<Address 4>

<Date>

Dear <Name>

Evaluation of Jobcentre Plus – Wave 3

I am writing to let you know that <area> has been selected as one of six case study areas to be included in Wave 3 of the Jobcentre Plus Evaluation, as outlined in <name> letter of the <date>.

The overall aim of this qualitative research is to explore whether contact centres, Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder and phase 2 roll-out public offices are delivering the policy intent. Therefore, we are particularly interested to meet with your staff and yourself to hear your views and experiences of delivering Jobcentre Plus services. All information provided by staff and managers will be treated in confidence and the

research results will be presented in such a way that no-one will be able to identify individual members of staff. In addition, we would like to spend some time in your offices observing how services are delivered so that we fully understand the process and how things work.

A researcher from ECOTEC Research and Consulting will contact you within the next 14 days to provide you with more details about the fieldwork and to discuss local administration and management arrangements, so that we can minimise the disruption to the work of your teams. Meanwhile, if you have any queries regarding our research please do not hesitate to contact me on <number>; <name> (<number>) or <name> (<number>) Jobcentre Plus Evaluation and Strategy Development Team.

We look forward to meeting with you soon.

Kind regards

Appendix F

Topic guides for interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff

F.1 Interview guide for discussions with Financial Assessors (Jobcentre Plus Public Office only)

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and Day two offices are delivering to policy intent. The specific objectives of the staff research are to:

- understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in contact centres and public offices;
- establish how the delivery of services in Pathfinder Offices has changed, if at all, since May 2002 (Phase 2) and the reasons behind these changes;
- explore staff views about Jobcentre Plus and its delivery and (in Pathfinder offices) whether their views have changed since May 2002;
- explore staff views about any changes implemented i.e. have things improved, or got worse; and
- identify good practice and the lessons to be learned for the future roll-out of Jobcentre Plus offices.

Notes:

- The topic guide needs to be tailored for staff working at Pathfinder offices that have been visited in earlier phases and staff working in Day two offices that have not been visited before (Alfreton, Bridgnorth and Nelson).

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction – independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - [AT DAY TWO OFFICES] to explore the bedding in process of Jobcentre Plus.
 - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed since we last visited in May 2002.
- Emphasise that we're not evaluating staff.
- If re-interviewing the same member of staff, say that the interview may repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred.
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews.
- Ask permission to tape the interview.

Part 2: Background

- 2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus? How long have you been in this particular role?
- 2.2 What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.3 What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.4 [Could you recap and briefly say] What are your main roles and responsibilities in relation to Jobcentre Plus?

Collect an overview of the job

Specialist roles or responsibilities

Relationship with other Contact Officers and Personal Advisers

How do they see their role and responsibility in relation to the aims and purpose of

Jobcentre Plus?

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES:

- 2.5 How have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed over the past year?

Why?

Views towards this – positive/negative

ASK AT DAY TWO OFFICES

2.6 What was your previous job?

Previous experience/jobs in relation to benefits service, customer contact

Appeal of the job

ASK ALL

2.7 [DAY TWO OFFICES] What guidance/training/information have you received in relation to Jobcentre Plus and in relation to your work role?

Format – verbal, ICT, paper-based, formal training

Who was responsible for this?

Identify most and least useful aspects of different information sources, and collect evidence of how they helped the assessor to prepare and do their job

IF NOT CONSIDERED USEFUL ASK: *How might it be improved?*

Specialist training to deal with non-JSA customers

2.8 [PATHFINDER OFFICES] What role specific training/information have you received during the last year?

IF YES: How has this helped?

Any ongoing support?

2.9 [ASK ALL] Are there any areas of additional training that you would like to receive?

IF YES: what areas of training and why?

Any particular customer circumstances or client types where more support/ advice/training is needed?

preferred format of training provision

are there any plans in place to provide this?

2.10 How do you handle 'downtime'? How are you advised to utilise this time?

Any problems/solutions?

2.11 To what extent are the work focused 'Must Dos' used to guide practice?

How clear/workable are they in practice

Why they are/why they are not

Are they monitored?

How is awareness raised among staff?

Part 3: The process of setting up meetings with customers

3.1 [Could you recap and briefly explain] What is the current procedure for setting up meetings with customers and who is responsible for this?

Are interviews with an assessor pre-booked?

Are customers simply allocated to an FA on arrival at Jobcentre Plus office?

PATHFINDER OFFICES:

3.2 How has this procedure changed over the past year?

Why?

FAs views towards this – positive/negative

3.3 What are your views of this process?

3.4 What do you feel works particularly well and why?

Contributory factors

Determine the impact on delivery - how do the aspects identified help?

Determine the impact on customers

3.5 What difficulties have you experienced with the process?

Collect concrete evidence by example

What action has been taken to address these?

Has this resolved the problem? If not, what could?

3.6 How much information do you have about the customer before you meet them?

Is this sufficient – why/why not

IF NOT SUFFICIENT: How could this be improved

Part 4: Content of Financial Assessor interviews

4.1 How do you introduce the meeting to the customer? Explain the purpose of the meeting?

Does this vary with client type and/or active/inactive benefits?

4.2 In general, are customers completing benefit claim forms in advance of their meeting with FAs?

- 4.3 How long do meetings with customers tend to last?
Identify factors that influence length of meetings
Who determines the length?
Differences if client has not completed the claim form
- 4.4 What do you discuss with customers during interviews?
What is the main focus of the meeting?
Who defines the agenda?
Benefit claim
Other support needs
Differences if client has not completed the claim form
Do FAs ask any supplementary questions to verify or check the information provided?
- 4.5 How do you determine customers' benefit needs?
Have FAs ever discovered information concealed by the customer during routine checking, and how do they go about verifying this?
- 4.6 What is the procedure for checking customers' benefit claim forms?
What supporting evidence do they supply?
Is it sufficient? If not what happens next and how is this resolved?
- 4.7 What supporting evidence do you ask for to check the customers' identity?
Do they supply sufficient evidence? If not what happens next and how is this resolved?
Have claims triggered a Gateway Intervention where customers have less straightforward circumstances?
What happens if you suspect a claim to be fraudulent? Probe: Has the FA ever had sufficient doubt about a claim that they have referred it to the Counter Fraud Intelligence Service, and if so, what was the result?
- 4.8 Do you think the processes for checking identity and benefit claim forms are working in terms of eliminating benefit errors and fraud?
Is there room for improvement, and if so, what improvements could be made and how?

4.9 What information or advice do you give?

Specialist/General benefit advice. Probe:

- *type of benefit*
- *anticipated amount of benefit*
- *expectation of when will receive benefit*

Signposting to other services

Explanation of the new tax credits

How is it tailored to meet the customers' needs?

4.10 What happens when a customer presents a problem or issue that you're not familiar with?

Information sources accessed, including colleagues

Steps taken to find the information

Gaps in information

What are the responsibilities of the customer when a problem/issue arises?

4.11 Do you meet with customers again after the Work-focused Interview?

IF YES ASK:

- *under what circumstances, collect examples of when this happens*
- *for how long*
- *what is discussed on these occasions*

IF NO ASK:

- *why not, collect examples of when this happens*

4.12 How does the conversation end?

Information given to the customer – including anticipated amount of benefit and when this will be received

Explanation of benefit processing arrangements

Follow-up arrangements

Formal or informal agreements

What information is passed on to the PA?

4.13 How is the customer handed over to the PA?

4.14 What happens next to the benefit claim?

How is the information processed?

How is the information passed onto colleagues in Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders?

4.15 Do you ever see customers who you think should have had their WFI deferred?

IF YES: What do you do in these circumstances?

Is this information passed on to the PA? Do circumstances/office environment allow for this?

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES:

4.16 Has the way you conduct interviews with customers changed over the past year?

Why? How is this better/worse?

Collect concrete evidence by example

ASK ALL:

4.17 What impact do you think your role has on the delivery of benefits to customers?

4.18 What impact do you think your role has in eliminating benefit errors and fraud?

4.19 How confident do you feel about giving benefit information and advice to customers?

Probe: levels of benefit knowledge/expertise across all benefit types, including recipients of bereavement benefits

Probe: differences in dealing with different customer groups

4.20 How successful do you feel the delivery of benefit services to customers under Jobcentre Plus has been so far?

Efficiency of delivering benefits

How have FAs views changed over the past year

4.21 How could the delivery of benefits be improved?

Part 5: Office environment

ASK AT DAY TWO OFFICES ONLY

5.1 What do you think of your office environment?

5.2 And the new facilities?

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES ONLY

5.3 Have any local changes been made to the office environment over the past year?

IF YES: What and why were these changes made?

IF NOT: Is there anything that they would like to change and why?

What is preventing them from making these changes?

ASK ALL:

5.4 What impact do you think the office environment has on your meetings with customers?

- *ability to look for work*
- *attitudes to the service*
- *willingness to return to the service*

5.5 What do you think customers' feelings are about the office environment?

- *have there been any issues raised*
- *are there any issues you find problematic*
- *privacy*
- *accessibility*
- *facilities*

5.6 What impact do you think the office environment has on delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision?

Part 6: Closing

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

- 6.1 To sum up, what would you say have been the main changes over the past year?

What has improved/got worse?

ASK ALL:

- 6.2 To what extent are you able, at this stage, to deliver your part in the Jobcentre Plus vision? To what extent have you moved closer to delivering your part in the vision since October 2001? Why/why not?

- 6.3 What things would you still like to change?

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

- 6.4 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year ?

ASK ALL:

- 6.5 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the rollout of further Jobcentre Plus offices? What else?

- 6.6 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

F.2 Interview guide for discussions with First Contact Officers

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices. The specific objectives of the staff research are to:

- understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in contact centres and public offices;
- establish how the delivery of services has changed, if at all, since May 2002 (Phase 2) and the reasons behind these changes;
- explore staff views about Jobcentre Plus and its delivery and whether their views have changed since May 2002;
- explore staff views about any changes implemented i.e. have things improved, or got worse; and
- identify good practice and the lessons to be learned for the future roll-out of Jobcentre Plus offices.

Notes:

- The topic guide needs to be tailored for staff working at contact centres that have been interviewed in earlier phases and staff that have not been interviewed before.

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction – independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed since we last visited in May 2002
- Emphasise that we're not evaluating staff
- If re-interviewing the same member of staff, say that the interview will repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews
- Ask permission to tape the interview.

Part 2: Background

- 2.1 How long have you been working for the contact centre? How long have you been in this particular role?
- 2.2 What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.3 What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.4 [Could you recap and briefly say] What are your main roles and responsibilities in relation to Jobcentre Plus?

Collect an overview of the job

Specialist roles or responsibilities

Relationships with other Contact Officers, Personal Advisers

How do they see their role and responsibility in relation to the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?

- 2.5 How have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed over the past year since Jobcentre Plus was launched

Why?

Views towards this – positive/negative

ASK ONLY OF NEW INTERVIEWEES

- 2.6 What was your previous job?

Previous experience/jobs in relation to benefits service, call centre work

Appeal of the job

ASK ALL

- 2.7 [NEW INTERVIEWEES] What guidance/training/information have you received in relation to Jobcentre Plus and in relation to your work role?

Format – verbal, ICT, paper-based, formal training

Who was responsible for this?

Identify most and least useful aspects of different information sources, and collect evidence of how they helped the officer to prepare and do their job

IF NOT CONSIDERED USEFUL ASK: *How might it be improved?*

Specific training to deal with non-JSA customers

- 2.8 [RE-INTERVIEWEES] What role specific training/information have you received over the past year?

IF YES: How has this helped?

Any follow-up support?

2.9 [ASK ALL]

Are there any areas of additional training that you would like to receive?

IF YES: what areas of training and why?

Any particular customer circumstances or client types where more support/ advice/training is needed?

preferred format of training provision

are there any plans in place to provide this?

2.10 How do you handle 'downtime'? How are you advised to utilise this time?

Any problems/solutions?

2.11 To what extent are the work-focused 'Must Dos' used to guide practice?

How clear/workable are they in practice

Why they are/why they are not

Are they monitored?

How is awareness raised among staff?

Part 3: Content of First Contact telephone conversations

3.1 How long do telephone conversations with customers tend to last?

Identify factors that influence length of meetings

Who determines the length?

Under what circumstances are call backs offered?

3.2 What do you discuss with customers during telephone contact?

What is the main focus of the discussion?

(E.g. benefit claim, work/jobsearch, Work-focused Interview, capturing customer details)

Who defines the agenda?

3.3 What happens when a customer presents a problem or issue that you're not familiar with?

Information sources accessed, including colleagues

Steps taken to find the information

Gaps in information

Benefit claim:

- 3.4 How do you determine customers' benefit needs?

Do they take the customers' lead

What information do they need to collect from customers

- 3.5 What information or advice do you give to customers about benefits?

Specialist/general benefit advice

- 3.6 How confident do you feel about giving benefit information and advice to customers?

Probe: levels of benefit knowledge/expertise across all benefit types

Probe: differences in dealing with different customer groups, including widows/recipients of bereavement benefits

Work/Job search:

- 3.7 What information or advice do you to give customers about work and job search?

At what point in the conversation is work raised?

Establish whether job search is being conducted by Contact Officers – IF NOT – why not?

Establish whether customers are being submitted to job vacancies – IF NOT – why not?

- 3.8 How do you decide whether or not it is appropriate to conduct a job search/submit customers to vacancies?

What information is collected?

Collect examples of circumstances when job search would be conducted - and reasons why

Establish whether there are particular groups of customers for whom jobsearch would not be conducted – Why?

Do you see job submissions as an important part of your role? Vary with client type?

Work-focused Interview (WFI):

- 3.9 What do you believe the purpose of the FA meeting and the Work-focused Interview to be?

Vary by client type or active/inactive benefits

3.10 What information do you give customers about the Work-focused Interview?

At what point in the conversation is the Work-focused Interview raised?

Vary by client type or active/inactive benefits

3.11 How do you explain the purpose of the interview to customers?

Probe: what words/phrases are used

What is explained as being the primary focus of the interview – benefit claim/work focus

Vary by client type or active/inactive benefits

3.12 **How do you feel about explaining the work-focused element of the Personal Adviser meeting to customers?**

Does this vary for customers who are not job-ready

Are there any differences in explaining to different client types and/or active/inactive benefits

Probe: for confidence levels

3.13 How does the conversation end?

Information given to the customer

3.14 What happens next?

How is the information processed?

How are benefit claim packs dispatched to customers?

How is the information passed onto colleagues in Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders?

3.15 Has the way you conduct first contact telephone conversations with customers changed since Jobcentre Plus was first launched?

Why? How is this better/worse?

Collect concrete evidence by example

3.16 [If VANTIVE not mentioned above] To what extent do you follow the scripts provided on VANTIVE?

Why/why not?

Determine the impact on delivery

Determine the impact on customers

3.17 Has this changed at all over the past year?

IF YES: How/Why might this be?

Contact Officers' views towards this – positive/negative

3.18 How could first contact telephone conversations with customers be improved?

Setting up meetings with customers

3.19 [Could you recap and briefly explain] And what is the current procedure for setting up Work-focused Interviews with advisers and who is responsible for this?

How is this done?

How are PAs allocated to customers – customers booked to any PA or to specialist PAs

Role of staff in Jobcentre Plus public office

What kind of information is passed onto the FA and PA? Do you think this helps them to deal with the customer?

Ask whether the CO ever considers, or allows for, the time for customers to collect the necessary information and evidence in preparation for the FA meeting

How regularly do COs identify the need for a Gateway Intervention?

3.20 Has this procedure changed since Jobcentre Plus was rolled out?

How and why?

COs views towards this – positive/negative

3.21 What are your views about the process?

3.22 What do you feel works particularly well and why?

Contributory factors

Determine the impact on delivery – how do the aspects identified help?

Determine the impact on customers

3.23 What difficulties have you experienced with the process?

Collect concrete evidence by example

What action has been taken to address these?

Has this resolved the problem? If not, what could?

Deferrals and waivers:

3.24 What do you believe the purpose of a deferral to be?

3.25 How do you decide whether or not to defer a customer?

3.26 How do you decide whether or not to waive the WFI?

Part 4: Office environment, resources and facilities

- 4.1 What support do you have from colleagues and line managers?
- 4.2 What do you think of your office environment?
- 4.3 How are your computer/IT facilities currently working?
- 4.4 Has this changed at all over the past year?

IF YES: How/Why?

Contact Officers' views towards this – positive/negative

Part 5: Closing

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

- 5.1 To sum up, what would you say have been the main changes over the past year?

What has improved/got worse?

ASK ALL:

- 5.2 To what extent are you able, at this stage, to deliver your part in the Jobcentre Plus vision? To what extent have you moved closer to delivering your part in the vision since October 2001? Why/why not?
- 5.3 What things would you still like to change?

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

- 5.4 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year ?

ASK ALL:

- 5.5 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the roll-out of further Jobcentre Plus offices? What else?
- 5.6 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

F.3 Interviews with Customer Service Managers/Floor Manager (Jobcentre Plus public offices)

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and Day two offices are delivering to policy intent. The specific objectives of the staff research are to:

- understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in contact centres and public offices;
- establish how the delivery of services in Pathfinder offices has changed, if at all, since May 2002 (Phase 2) and the reasons behind these changes;

- explore staff views about Jobcentre Plus and its delivery and (in Pathfinder offices) whether their views have changed since May 2002;
- explore staff views about any changes implemented i.e. have things improved, or got worse; and
- identify good practice and the lessons to be learned for the future roll-out of Jobcentre Plus offices.

Notes:

- The topic guide needs to be tailored for staff working at Pathfinder offices that have been visited in earlier phases and staff working in Day two offices that have not been visited before (Alfreton, Bridgnorth and Nelson).

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction – independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - [AT DAY TWO OFFICES] to explore the bedding in process of Jobcentre Plus
 - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed since we last visited in May 2002
- Emphasise that we're not evaluating staff
- If re-interviewing the same member of staff, say that the interview may repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews
- Ask permission to tape the interview.

Part 2: Background

- 2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus? How long have you been in this particular role?
- 2.2 What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.3 What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.4 [Could you recap and briefly say] What are your main roles and responsibilities in relation to Jobcentre Plus?

Collect an overview of the job

Specialist roles or responsibilities

Team management – size and scope

How do they see their role and responsibility in relation to the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES:

2.5 How have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed over the past year?

Why?

Views towards this – positive/negative

ASK AT DAY TWO OFFICES

2.6 What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?

Previous experience/jobs

Similarities and differences to current position

Appeal of the job

ASK ALL

2.7 [DAY TWO OFFICES] What guidance/training/information have you received in relation to Jobcentre Plus and in relation to your work role?

Format – verbal, ICT, paper-based, formal training

Who was responsible for this?

Identify most and least useful aspects of different information sources, and collect evidence of how they helped them to prepare and do their job

IF NOT CONSIDERED USEFUL ASK: How might it be improved?

Specific training to deal with non-JSA clients

2.8 [PATHFINDER OFFICES] What role specific training/information have you received over the past year?

IF YES: How has this helped?

Any ongoing support?

2.9 [ASK ALL]

Are there any areas of additional training that you would like to receive?

IF YES: what areas of training and why?

Any particular customer circumstances or client types where more support/ advice/training is needed?

preferred format of training provision

are there any plans in place to provide this?

2.10 To what extent are the work-focused 'Must Dos' used to guide practice?

How clear/workable are they in practice

Why they are/why they are not

Are they monitored?

How is awareness raised among staff?

Part 3: Delivery of services to clients

3.1 [Could you recap and explain...] Could you describe in detail how **you** deliver services to clients in this office?

What are the procedures?

Who is involved?

Liaisons with the contact centre/Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder

3.2 ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES:

How has this procedure changed over the past year?

Why?

Floor walkers' views towards this – positive/negative

3.3 How do you assist other colleagues in the office? What does this involve?

a) Financial Assessors?

b) Personal Advisers?

3.4 How do you feel this works?

3.5 How is your time divided between the different aspects of your role?

Helping customers to use the job-points

Issuing claim forms and leaflets

Tracking appointments

Queue busting

Managing delays

General enquiries – job search, benefits

Assisting FA

Assisting PA

Other

Any issues/problems

How happy are you with these roles

3.6 Are there any of the above tasks which are difficult to deliver? Any customers/client types who are difficult to deal with?

3.7 What do you feel works particularly well, and why?

Contributory factors

Determine the impact on delivery – how do the aspects identified help?

Determine the impact on clients

3.8 What difficulties have you experienced?

Collect concrete evidence by example

What action has been taken to address these?

Has this resolved the problem? If not, what could?

Part 4: Office environment

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

4.1 Have any local changes been made to the office environment over the past year since Jobcentre Plus was launched?

IF YES: What and why were these changes made?

IF NOT: Is there anything that they would like to change and why?

What is preventing them from making these changes?

ASK ALL:

4.2 What impact, if any, do you feel the Jobcentre Plus environment has on customers:

- *behaviour in the office*
- *attitudes to work*
- *willingness to return to the service*
- *ability to look for work*

4.3 What do you think customers' feelings are about the office environment?

- *have there been any issues raised*
- *are there any issues you find problematic*
- *privacy*
- *accessibility*
- *facilities*

Part 5: Closing

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

- 5.1 To sum up, what would you say have been the main changes over the past year?

What has improved/got worse?

ASK ALL:

- 5.2 To what extent are you able, at this stage, to deliver your part in the Jobcentre Plus vision? To what extent have you moved closer to delivering your part in the vision since October 2001? Why/why not?

- 5.3 What things would you still like to change?

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

- 5.4 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year ?

ASK ALL:

- 5.5 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the rollout of further Jobcentre Plus offices? What else?

- 5.6 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

F.4 Interview guide for discussions with Delivery/Office Managers

(Contact centres and Jobcentre Plus public offices)

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and Day two offices are delivering to policy intent. The specific objectives of the staff research are to:

- understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in contact centres and public offices;
- establish how the delivery of services in Pathfinder offices has changed, if at all, since May 2002 (Phase 2) and the reasons behind these changes;
- explore staff views about Jobcentre Plus and its delivery and (in Pathfinder offices) whether their views have changed since May 2002;
- explore staff views about any changes implemented i.e. have things improved, or got worse; and
- identify good practice and the lessons to be learned for the future roll-out of Jobcentre Plus offices.

Notes:

- The topic guide needs to be tailored for staff working at Pathfinder offices that have been visited in earlier phases and staff working in Day two offices that have not been visited before (Alfreton, Bridgnorth and Nelson).

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction – independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - [AT DAY TWO OFFICES] to explore the bedding in process of Jobcentre Plus
 - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed since we last visited in May 2002
- Emphasise that we're not evaluating staff
- If re-interviewing the same member of staff, say that the interview may repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews
- Ask permission to tape the interview.

Part 2: Background

- 2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus? How long have you been in this particular role?
- 2.2 What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.3 What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.4 [Could you recap and briefly say] What are your main roles and responsibilities in relation to Jobcentre Plus?

Collect an overview of the job

Specialist roles or responsibilities

Team management – size and scope

How do they see their role and responsibility in relation to the aims and purpose of

Jobcentre Plus?

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES & CCs;

2.5 How have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed over the past year?

Why?

Managers views towards this – positive/negative

ASK ALL

2.6 [PATHFINDER OFFICES & CCs]What role specific training/information have you received over the past year?

How has this helped?

Any ongoing support?

2.7 [DAY TWO OFFICES] What training/information have you received in preparation for Jobcentre Plus and in relation to your work role?

Format – verbal, ICT, paper-based, formal training

Who was responsible for this?

Identify most and least useful aspects of different information sources

IF NOT CONSIDERED USEFUL ASK: How might it be improved?

Collect evidence of how they helped managers to prepare and do their job

Part 3: Organisation and management

3.1 Can you describe for me how your office is set up and managed?

Is this in response to local or previous office issues e.g. fraud, targets

Staff management – line/team management responsibilities

Team set-up

Staffing arrangements within teams e.g. specialist or generalist PAs

Other areas of responsibility

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES & CCs:

3.2 Has this changed at all over the past year since Jobcentre Plus was introduced?

IF YES: How/Why?

Managers' views towards this – positive/negative

- 3.3 How closely do you work with colleagues in the contact centre/Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and other key contacts?

Areas of close working

Frequency and nature of contact

Existing working relationships or new?

ASK PATHFINDER OFFICES & CCs

- 3.4 Has this changed in the past year?

YES: How/Why?

- 3.5 What autonomy have you in the delivery of Jobcentre Plus in your office?

Determine the level at which decisions are made.

Identify those aspects of delivery that can be tailored/changed by local offices and those that can not?

What local decisions have been made over the past year? and why?

- 3.6 How do you feel this works?

Are the arrangements effective? Why

What factors support or hinder the working arrangements?

How could they be resolved?

- 3.7 How are the different aspects of Jobcentre Plus prioritised?

Benefits and employment

Fraud/error and labour market focus

- 3.8 What are the key messages you try to acquaint staff with?

How is this done?

- 3.9 How do staff handle 'down time'? How are staff advised to utilise this time?

Any problems/solutions?

- 3.10 To what extent are the work-focused 'Must Dos' used to guide practice?

How clear/workable are they in practice

Why they are/why they are not

Are they monitored?

How is awareness raised among staff?

Part 4: Delivery of services to customers

*Interviewer notes: Please remember that this section must cover both the delivery of benefit-related services and Work-focused Interviews (from customers' first contact through to the voluntary caseloading of follow-up interviews). Please note: **Each interview must be tailored to the role and responsibilities of each respondent.***

4.1 Contact centre:

*Can you **briefly** outline how Jobcentre Plus services are currently being delivered at the contact centre?*

What are the procedures?

Who is involved?

Liaison with the contact centre/Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder

4.2 How has this changed/developed over the last year?

Why

Managers views towards this – positive/negative

4.3 Jobcentre Plus public office:

*Can you **briefly** outline how Jobcentre Plus services are currently being delivered at this public office?*

What are the procedures for setting up WFI and FA meetings [Interviewers, please note any reference to the splitting of interviews and explore the circumstances where this happens]

And the procedures for setting up trigger meetings?(Time-bound (lone parents) or life events (Incapacity Benefit)

Who is involved? Role of FSA and PA

Communication links between FAs and PAs

Liaisons with the contact centre/Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES:

4.4 How has this changed/developed over the last year?

Why

Managers views towards this – positive/negative

ASK AT PUBLIC OFFICES ONLY:

4.5 What impact has Jobcentre Plus had on the delivery of pre-existing services e.g New Deals, JSA fortnightly signings, job search and payment of benefits?

What steps are being taken to overcome any problems?

Deferrals and waivers:

4.6 What percentage of cases are currently being deferred?

Has this changed at all over the last year – and why?

Similarly, for customers who are waived

4.7 Do you feel that the 'right' customers are being deferred? why/why not?

Has this changed over the last year – improved/worsened?

Similarly, for customers who are waived

4.8 To what extent are customers who slip through the contact centre stage deferred by PAs at the WFI?

Collect any examples of the type of cases that are deferred

Similarly, for customers who are waived

Financial Assessor Meetings:

4.9 What do you perceive to be an FA's role in their meetings with JSA and non-JSA customers?

4.10 How successful do you feel the FA benefit element of Jobcentre Plus has been so far? for JSA and non-JSA customers?

Identify any difficulties/problems in delivering the benefit element and reasons why

Identify any examples of good practice and reasons why successful

How confident are staff in delivering the benefit element to JSA and non-JSA customers?

4.11 What do you regard as a successful outcome following an FA meeting for JSA and non-JSA customers?

Highlight where responses relate to specific customer groups.

Work-focused Interviews:

4.12 What do you perceive to be a PA's role in their meetings with non-JSA customers?

4.13 How does this differ for JSA customers?

4.14 How successful do you feel the work-focused element of Jobcentre Plus has been so far for JSA and non-JSA customers?

Identify any difficulties/problems in delivering a work focus and reasons why

Identify any examples of good practice and reasons why successful

How confident are staff in delivering a work focus to non-JSA customers?

Is there any flexibility around how the WFI is organised

IF ANY DIFFICULTIES/PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED ASK:

4.15 What could be done to help staff deliver a work focus to JSA and non-JSA customers?

PROMPT: Staff training, Written guidance

What would staff find useful?

4.16 How are New Deal and non-New Deal caseloading being managed by the office?

Identify and problems/difficulties in providing caseloading services

How is this managed at the office level and for each adviser?

What customer groups are being targeted for caseloading services and why?

4.17 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a Work-focused Interview for a non-JSA customer?

Highlight where responses relate to specific customer groups.

Attendance to interviews

Willingness to engage in work-focused discussions with advisers

Changed attitudes about work or the benefit service

Training/referrals to support services

Voluntary caseloading

4.18 What aspects of Jobcentre Plus do you feel work particularly well, and why?

a) for customers?

b) for staff? *Prompt: ensure OM covers FA as well as PA*

Contributory factors – i.e. what has facilitated these aspects to work well

4.19 And what works less well, and why?

a) for customers?

b) for staff?

Contributory factors – i.e. what has facilitated these aspects to work less well

Part 5: Office environment : Jobcentre Plus public offices only

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES ONLY:

- 5.1 Have any local changes been made to the office environment over the past year since Jobcentre Plus was launched?

IF YES: What and why were these changes made?

IF NOT: Is there anything that they would like to change and why?

What is preventing them from making these changes?

ASK ALL:

- 5.2 What impact, if any, do you feel the Jobcentre Plus environment has on customers:

- *attitudes to work*
- *willingness to return to the service*
- *ability to look for work*

- 5.3 What do you think staff feelings are about the office environment?

- *have there been any issues raised*
- *are there any issues you find problematic*
- *privacy*
- *accessibility*
- *facilities*

Part 6: Closing

Interviewer notes: Please ask the following questions to all managers to explore their awareness of progress towards the Jobcentre Plus vision.

- 6.1 Now that Jobcentre Plus has been up and running for over two years, what impact has it had on you and your staff? Has it improved or worsened?

Workload

Ability to manage time

Attitudes to the policy vision

Personal development

- 6.2 What things would you still like to change?

- 6.3 How would you describe the 'Jobcentre Plus vision'?

- 6.4 How close are you to delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision? To what extent have you moved closer over the past year? And what still remains to be done?
- 6.5 What problems do you face?
- 6.6 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year?
- 6.7 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the rollout of further Jobcentre Plus offices? What else?
- 6.8 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

F.5 Interview guide for discussions with Personal Advisers (Jobcentre Plus public offices)

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and Day two offices are delivering to policy intent. The specific objectives of the staff research are to:

- understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in contact centres and public offices;
- establish how the delivery of services in Pathfinder offices has changed, if at all, since May 2002 (Phase 2) and the reasons behind these changes;
- explore staff views about Jobcentre Plus and its delivery and (in Pathfinder offices) whether their views have changed since May 2002;
- explore staff views about any changes implemented i.e. have things improved, or got worse; and
- identify good practice and the lessons to be learned for the future roll-out of Jobcentre Plus offices.

Notes:

- The topic guide needs to be tailored for staff working at Pathfinder offices that have been visited in earlier phases and staff working in Day two offices that have not been visited before (Alfreton, Bridgnorth and Nelson).

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction – independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - [AT DAY TWO OFFICES] to explore the bedding-in process of Jobcentre Plus
 - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed since we last visited in May 2002
- Emphasise that we're not evaluating staff
- If re-interviewing the same member of staff, say that the interview may repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews
- Ask permission to tape the interview.

Part2: Background

- 2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus? How long have you been in this particular role?
- 2.2 What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.3 What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.4 [Could you recap and briefly say] What are your main roles and responsibilities in relation to Jobcentre Plus?

Collect an overview of the job

*Are they a generalist or specialist PA – what types of customer do they see?
Other specialist roles or responsibilities*

Relationship with other advisers

Is the adviser dedicated to Jobcentre Plus or have wider responsibilities?

How do they see their role and responsibility in relation to the aims and purpose of

Jobcentre Plus?

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES

- 2.5 How have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed since Jobcentre Plus was introduced?

Why?

Views towards this – positive/negative

ASK ALL

- 2.6 [DAY TWO OFFICES] What guidance/training/information have you received in relation to Jobcentre Plus and in relation to your work role?

Format – verbal, ICT, paper-based, formal training

Who was responsible for this?

Identify most and least useful aspects of different information sources

IF NOT CONSIDERED USEFUL ASK: How might it be improved?

Collect evidence of how they helped the adviser to prepare and do their job

Specific training to deal with non-JSA customers

- 2.7 [PATHFINDER OFFICES] What role specific guidance/training/information have you received over the past year?

IF YES: How has this helped?

Any ongoing support?

[ASK ALL]

- 2.8 Are there any areas of additional training that you would like to receive?

IF YES: what areas of training and why?

Any particular customer circumstances or client types where more support/ advice/training is needed?

preferred format of training provision

are there any plans in place to provide this?

- 2.9 How do you handle 'downtime'? How are you advised to utilise this time?

Any problems/solutions?

- 2.10 To what extent are the work-focused 'Must Dos' used to guide practice?

How clear/workable are they in practice

Why they are/why they are not

Are they monitored?

How is awareness raised among staff?

Part 3: The process of setting up meetings with customers

[Interviewers, please note any reference to the splitting of interviews and explore the circumstances where this happens]

3.1 What are the current procedures for setting up standard referrals for Work-focused Interviews with advisers? Who is responsible for this?

Who books interviews for individual advisers?

How is this done?

Role of contact centre staff

How does this differ for WFI following deferrals and other mandatory meetings?

3.2 And the procedure for setting up trigger meetings?

Role of FSA and PA

Time-bound (lone parents) or life events (Incapacity Benefit/bereavement benefit)

3.3 [PATHFINDER OFFICES] How have these procedures changed since Jobcentre Plus was rolled-out/over the past year?

Why?

PAs views towards this – positive/negative

3.4 What are your views about the process?

3.5 What do you feel works particularly well and why?

Contributory factors

Determine the impact on delivery – how do the aspects identified help?

Determine the impact on customers

3.6 What difficulties have you experienced with the process?

Collect concrete evidence by example

What action has been taken to address these?

Has this resolved the problem? If not, what could?

ASK ALL:

3.7 How much information do you have about the customer before you meet them?

Is this sufficient – why/why not

How much preparation they able to do

IF NOT SUFFICIENT: How could this be improved

3.8 [Pathfinder offices] Has this changed over the past year/since Jobcentre Plus was rolled-out?

Deferrals and waivers:

3.9 Do you ever see non-JSA customers for a Work-focused Interview who you think should have been deferred?

IF YES: - Who and Why?

- Does the FA notify you of clients who should potentially be deferred?
- What customer group did this person fall into?
- What were the customer's particular circumstances that suggest the Work-focused Interview should have been deferred?
- *To what extent is this a problem – does it happen often or rarely*
- *Similarly, for customers who should have been waived*

3.10 How do you decide whether to continue with the Work-focused Interview or to defer the customer?

Similarly, for customers who are waived

Part 4: Content and delivery of Work-focused Interviews

[Discuss all questions for Part 4 in relation to both JSA and non-JSA customers (including widows/recipients of bereavement benefits)]

4.1 What do you believe to be the purpose of the Work-focused Interview?

- a) Does this vary by client types,
- b) Or, active/inactive benefits

4.2 How long do meetings with customers tend to last?

Does length of meeting vary by client type

Identify factors that influence length of meetings – prompt for any time constraints re: back-to-back interviews/balance of time between FA and PA input – is there any flexibility?

Who determines the length? Adviser or client...How?

4.3 How do you begin the interview?

4.4 How do you explain the purpose of the interview to customers?

Probe: what words/phrases are used

4.5 What do you discuss with customers during interviews?

What is the main focus of the meeting?

How are interviews structured

Who defines the agenda?

Work/job goals in short, medium or long-term

Barriers to work

Childcare

Training needs

Other support needs

4.6 Are there any customers who are particularly difficult to deal with/deliver the work focus to?

Individual clients or client types

What happens in these cases – Probe: examples

4.7 How do you encourage less 'job ready' customers to talk about work?

Probe: what words/phrases/techniques are used

Probe for differences between:

lone parents

carers

widows/recipients of bereavement benefits and

those claiming sickness or disability benefits

What do they do if a customer is not very responsive or interested in talking about work?

- Why?

What do they think is the role of a Personal Adviser in encouraging less job-ready customers – to motivate/encourage, or to only give information/explore options?

4.8 How do you assess/determine customers' needs in relation to work?

4.9 What information or advice do you give?

Childcare

Support services?

Signposting to external services

Specialist services

Information/referrals to New Deal services

Information/referrals to other caseloading services including those provided by the PA

Explanation of the new working tax credits

In-work benefit calculations – how/when are these used?

Job search, job submissions and placements

Format of information and advice

Is advice given reactively or proactively?

How is it tailored to meet the customers' needs?

4.10 What happens when a customer presents a problem or issue that you're not familiar with?

Information sources accessed, including colleagues

Steps taken to find the information

Gaps in information

JSA versus non-JSA

4.11 What do you believe the different New Deals offer to the customer?

What is the purpose of the New Deals

How is New Deal introduced – by different client type

4.12 How do you close meetings with customers?

Establish what information is given, actions undertaken, and agreements made

E.g. - Action planning, including agreed job search activity

- Referrals to New Deal Services and caseloading*
- Referrals to other organisations/service providers*
- Explanation of New Tax Credits*
- Explanation of follow-up arrangements for customer to return to PA at any time*
- Formal or informal agreements – (Probe for differences between JSA and non-JSA customers: JSA – Jobseeker’s Agreement; and Non-JSA – Customer Action Plan)*
- What purpose do action plans serve?*
- Explanation of further mandatory reviews over time*

4.13 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a Work-focused Interview for non-JSA customers?

Highlight where responses relate to specific customer groups.

Attendance to interviews

Willingness to engage in work-focused discussions with advisers

Changed attitudes about work or the benefit service

Training/referrals to support services

Voluntary caseloading

4.14 What impact do you think the meetings have on customers?

4.15 How do you feel Work-focused Interviews with non-JSA customers compare to those with JSA customers?

Probe: harder/easier to conduct, more/less successful – why?

4.16 How do you feel about discussing work issues with non-JSA customers?

Probe: levels of confidence

Probe for any differences in discussing work with different non-JSA customer groups

ASK IF ANY DIFFICULTIES MENTIONED AT 4.11 or 4.12

4.17 What could be done to help make work-focused discussions with non-JSA customers easier?

PROMPT: Staff training, Written guidance – what kinds of training/guidance?

Better local knowledge of what is available for customers?

What would you find useful?

4.18 [PATHFINDER OFFICES] Has the way you conduct Work-focused Interviews changed since Jobcentre Plus was first launched/over the past year?

Why? How is this better/worse?

Collect concrete evidence by example

4.19 How successful do you feel the work-focused element of Jobcentre Plus has been so far for non-JSA customers?

Effectiveness in re-focusing customers on work

How have PA's views changed since the service was launched

4.20 How could they be improved?

Part 5: Caseloading

5.1 What do you understand to be the purpose of caseloading for non-JSA customers?

Are there any other forms follow-up contact instigated by PA or client?

What forms does this take? How often does this occur? Does it eventually lead to caseloading?

5.2 How does caseloading differ from other forms of follow-up contact?

How does New Deal compare to other forms of caseloading?

Intensity of support

Format of contact/support – telephone or face-to-face contact

Services offered – how this compares to what is offered in WFI

5.3 How do you decide whether or not to caseload a non-JSA customer?

What criteria are taken into account

Determine under what circumstances PA would caseload a customer – and why?

How are customers encouraged to join a caseload? What works and with whom?

- 5.4 What types of customer are caseloaded?
Do they concentrate on the more job-ready, or the less job-ready – and why?
What types of customer are not caseloaded?
Who would benefit most, and least from caseloading?
- 5.5 What targets do you have for caseloading customers?
How do these targets influence decisions about which customers to caseload?
- 5.6 To what extent have non-JSA customers who were not caseloaded or job ready at the time of the interview, voluntarily contacted you or returned to see you at a later date?
Probe: - which non-JSA customer groups
- collect examples of when this has happened and reasons why the customer re-contacted the PA (what had changed?)
- how long after their original Work-focused Interview was this
- 5.7 How effective is caseloading?
involving non-JSA clients
- achieving outcomes

Part 6: Office environment

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

- 6.1 Have any local changes been made to the office environment over the past year since Jobcentre Plus was launched?
IF YES: What and why were these changes made?
IF NOT: Is there anything that they would like to change and why?
What is preventing them from making these changes?
- 6.2 ASK ALL: What impact, if any, do you feel the Jobcentre Plus environment has on customers:
- attitudes to work
- willingness to return to the service
- ability to look for work

6.3 What do you think customers' feelings are about the office environment?

- *have there been any issues raised*
- *are there any issues you find problematic*
- *privacy*
- *accessibility*
- *facilities*

Part 7: Closing

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

7.1 To sum up, what would you say have been the main changes over the past year?

What has improved/got worse?

7.2 ASK ALL: To what extent are you able, at this stage, to deliver your part in the Jobcentre Plus vision? To what extent have you moved closer to delivering your part in the vision over the past year? Why/why not?

7.3 What things would you still like to change?

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

7.4 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year ?

7.5 ASK ALL: What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the roll-out of further Jobcentre Plus offices? What else?

7.6 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

F.6 Interview guide for discussions with PA Managers/ Adviser Managers (Jobcentre Plus public offices)

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and Day two offices are delivering to policy intent. The specific objectives of the staff research are to:

- understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in public offices;
- establish how the delivery of services in Pathfinder offices has changed, if at all, since May 2002 (Phase 2) and the reasons behind these changes;
- explore staff views about Jobcentre Plus and its delivery and (in Pathfinder offices) whether their views have changed since May 2002;

- explore staff views about any changes implemented i.e. have things improved, or got worse; and
- identify good practice and the lessons to be learned for the future roll-out of Jobcentre Plus offices.

Notes:

- The topic guide needs to be tailored for staff working at Pathfinder offices that have been visited in earlier phases and staff working in Day two offices that have not been visited before (Alfreton, Bridgnorth and Nelson).

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction – independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - [AT DAY TWO OFFICES] to explore the bedding-in process of Jobcentre Plus
 - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed since we last visited in May 2002
- Emphasise that we're not evaluating staff
- If re-interviewing the same member of staff, say that the interview may repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews
- Ask permission to tape the interview.

Part 2: Background

- 2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus? How long have you been in this particular role?
- 2.2 What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.3 What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?
- 2.4 [Could you recap and briefly say] What are your main roles and responsibilities in relation to Jobcentre Plus?

Collect an overview of the job

Specialist roles or responsibilities

Team management – size and scope

How do they see their role and responsibility in relation to the aims and purpose

Of Jobcentre Plus?

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES ;

2.5 How have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed over the past year?

Why?

Managers views towards this – positive/negative

ASK ALL

2.6 [PATHFINDER OFFICES]What role specific training/information have you received over the past year?

How has this helped?

Any ongoing support?

2.7 [DAY TWO OFFICES] What training/information have you received in preparation for Jobcentre Plus and in relation to your work role?

Format – verbal, ICT, paper-based, formal training

Who was responsible for this?

Identify most and least useful aspects of different information sources

IF NOT CONSIDERED USEFUL ASK: How might it be improved?

Collect evidence of how they helped managers to prepare and do their job

[ASK ALL]

2.8 Are there any areas of additional training that you would like to receive?

IF YES: what areas of training and why?

preferred format of training provision

are there any plans in place to provide this?

Part 3: PA training needs

ASK ALL

3.1 How do PAMs identify and seek to resolve PAs' learning and development needs?

Is there a formal or informal process/procedure?

Is this a reactive or proactive process?

- 3.2 [DAY TWO OFFICES] What guidance/training/information have PAs received in relation to Jobcentre Plus?

Format – verbal, ICT, paper-based, formal training

Who was responsible for this?

Identify most and least useful aspects of different information sources

IF NOT CONSIDERED USEFUL ASK: How might it be improved?

Collect evidence of how they considered training to have helped PAs to prepare and do their job

Any specific training to deal with non-JSA customers

[ASK ALL]

- 3.3 Are there any areas of additional training where PAs have needs?

IF YES: what areas of training and why?

Any particular customer circumstances or client types where more support/ advice/training is needed?

preferred format of training provision

are there any plans in place to provide this?

Part 4: Organisation and management

- 4.1 Can you describe for me how your office is set up and managed?

Is this in response to local or previous office issues e.g. fraud, targets

Staff management – line/team management responsibilities

Team set-up

Staffing arrangements within teams e.g. specialist or generalist PAs

Other areas of responsibility

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES:

- 4.2 Has this changed at all over the past year since Jobcentre Plus was introduced?

IF YES: How/Why?

Managers views towards this – positive/negative

- 4.3 How is the Adviser Manager's team structured?

Does the team contain specialist or generalist PAs;

How does the AM set the targets and business objectives for the team

- 4.4 How closely do PAs work with colleagues in the contact centre/Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices, other key contacts and their Office Manager?

Areas of close working

Frequency and nature of contact

Existing working relationships or new?

ASK PATHFINDER OFFICES:

- 4.5 Has this changed in the past year?

YES: How/Why?

- 4.6 How are the different aspects of Jobcentre Plus prioritised?

Benefits and employment

Fraud/error and labour market focus

- 4.7 What are the key messages you try to acquaint staff with?

How is this done?

- 4.8 How do staff handle 'down time'? How are staff advised to utilise this time?

Any problems, if so, how are these resolved?

- 4.8 What links do PA have with service providers?

Type of provider and extent of contact

Part 5: Delivery of services to customers

- 5.1 WFIs and Trigger meetings

What is the extent to which AM monitor how WFIs and trigger meetings are set up

Is there any flexibility around how the WFI is organised [Interviewers, please note any reference to the splitting of interviews and explore the circumstances where this happens]

Prompt for comments about communication links between FAs and Pas, and liaisons with the contact centre/Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder

- 5.2 [PATHFINDER OFFICES] How have these procedures changed since Jobcentre Plus was rolled-out/over the past year?

Why?

Adviser Managers views about any changes – positive/negative

5.3 What difficulties have been experienced with the process?

Collect concrete evidence by example

What action has been taken by AM to address these?

Has this resolved the problem? If not, what could?

Part 6: Content and delivery of Work-focused Interviews

Work-focused Interviews:

6.1 What do you perceive to be a PA's role in their meetings with non-JSA customers?

6.2 How does this differ for JSA customers?

6.3 How successful do you feel the work-focused element of Jobcentre Plus has been so far for non-JSA customers?

Identify any difficulties/problems in delivering a work-focus and reasons why

Identify any examples of good practice and reasons why successful

How confident are staff in delivering a work-focus to non-JSA customers?

6.4 To what extent are WFIs monitored and quality assured?

How AMs monitor the quality of interviews being delivered by PAs

How the AM satisfies themselves that the 'Must Dos' are being delivered

How they identify areas of weakness in the services being delivered and seek to overcome them/how they improve quality of services being delivered

How AMs use the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) in monitoring the quality of interviews

How often do AMs sit in on WFIs and how do they go about feeding back on the PA's performance

Whether they ever sit in on – or conduct – interviews with difficult clients whether they think that there could be any improvements in any of the above.

6.5 What could be done to help Advisers to deliver a work focus to non-JSA customers?

PROMPT: Staff training, Written guidance

How do AMs identify and seek to resolve PAs' learning and development needs

Any other kind of support that they give to PAs;

- 6.6 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a Work-focused Interview for a non-JSA customer?

Highlight where responses relate to specific customer groups.

Attendance to interviews

Willingness to engage in work-focused discussions with advisers

Changed attitudes about work or the benefit service

Training/referrals to support services

Voluntary caseloading

- 6.7 What aspects of Jobcentre Plus do you feel work particularly well, and why?

c) for customers?

d) for staff?

Contributory factors – i.e. what has facilitated these aspects to work well

- 6.8 And what works less well, and why?

c) for customers?

d) for staff?

Contributory factors - i.e. what has facilitated these aspects to work less well

Part 7: Caseloading

- 7.1 What do you understand to be the purpose of caseloading for non-JSA customers?

Are there any other forms follow-up contact instigated by PA or client? What forms does this take? How often does this occur? Does it eventually lead to caseloading? Are there any barriers to caseloading, if so, ask for examples

- 7.2 How does caseloading differ from other forms of follow-up contact?

How does New Deal compare to other forms of caseloading?

Intensity of support

Format of contact/support – telephone or face-to-face contact

Services offered – how this compares to what is offered in WFI

- 7.3 Where customers are not eligible for New Deal, are advisers able to provide caseloading services?

Identify and problems/difficulties in providing caseloading services

How is this managed at the office level and for each adviser?

What customer groups are being targeted for caseloading services and why?

- 7.4 How do advisers decide whether or not to caseload a non-JSA customer?

What criteria are taken into account

Determine under what circumstances PA would caseload a customer – and why?

How are customers encouraged to join a caseload? What works and with whom?

- 7.5 What types of customer are caseloaded?

Do they concentrate on the more job-ready, or the less job-ready – and why?

What types of customer are not caseloaded?

Who would benefit most, and least from caseloading?

- 7.6 How do AM provide support to PAs in caseloading customers?

- 7.7 What targets are there for caseloading customers?

How do these targets influence decisions about which customers to caseload?

Part 8: Office environment

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

- 8.1 Have any local changes been made to the office environment over the past year since Jobcentre Plus was launched?

IF YES: What and why were these changes made?

IF NOT: Is there anything that they would like to change and why?

What is preventing them from making these changes?

ASK ALL:

- 8.2 What impact, if any, do you feel the Jobcentre Plus environment has on customers:

- *attitudes to work*
- *willingness to return to the service*
- *ability to look for work*

8.3 What do you think customers feelings are about the office environment?

- *have there been any issues raised*
- *are there any issues you find problematic*
- *privacy*
- *accessibility*
- *facilities*

Part 9: Closing

Interviewer notes: Please ask the following questions to all managers to explore their awareness of progress towards the Jobcentre Plus vision.

9.1 Now that Jobcentre Plus has been up and running for over two years, what impact has it had on you and your staff? Has it improved or worsened?

Workload

Ability to manage time

Attitudes to the policy vision

Personal development

9.2 What things would you still like to change?

9.3 How would you describe the 'Jobcentre Plus vision'?

9.4 How close are you to delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision? To what extent have you moved closer over the past year? And what still remains to be done?

9.5 What problems do you/PAs face?

9.6 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year?

9.7 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the roll-out of further Jobcentre Plus offices? What else?

9.8 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix G

Recruitment questionnaire for customer depth interviews

Introduction

- Introduce self and research organisation.
- Explain that the Department for Work and Pensions recently sent them a letter asking if they would be interested in taking part in some research which looks at the new services provided at their local Jobcentre Plus office, and that ECOTEC/CRSP are carrying out the research interviews for DWP – check whether they recall receiving the letter.
- The research is being conducted among people who have recently made a new claim for benefit and who have attended (or are due to attend) a meeting at their local Jobcentre Plus office with a Personal Adviser.
- The aim of the research is to find out what people think about the new services being provided.
- May I ask you a few questions to check if you would be eligible to take part?

Reassure if necessary:

- It will only take a couple of minutes to answer
- All answers are completely confidential, are for [Research Organisation's] use only and will not be passed onto any third party

1. **Have you had an interview within the last XXX months, or are you waiting to have an interview at your local Jobcentre Plus office with a Personal Adviser** *TICK ONE BOX ONLY*

Yes Go to 2
 No CLOSE

2. **And at which Jobcentre Plus office did you attend/are you due to attend?** *ENSURE THAT THE JOBCENTRE THEY WENT TO/ARE DUE TO GO TO IS THE CORRECT JOBCENTRE PLUS SITE FOR YOUR AREA.*

Yes, is the correct site Go to 3
 No, is not the correct site CLOSE

3. **Who else lives with you in your household?** *TICK ALL BOXES THAT APPLY*

Nobody else

Cohabitant/Partner/Spouse
 Son(s)/daughter(s) aged under 16
 Son(s)/daughter(s) aged 16+
 Parent/Parent-in-law
 Brother/Sister/Brother-in law/Sister-in-law
 Grandchild
 Other related (WRITE IN)
 Boarder/lodger
 Friend/House mate
 Other unrelated (WRITE IN) _____

4. **Do you have an illness, health problem or disability that affects your ability to take-up paid employment?** *TICK ONE BOX ONLY*

No
 Yes

IF MENTIONED, WRITE IN TYPE OF ILLNESS/DISABILITY _____

- 5a. **Do you care for someone either in your family, or household, or for a friend who is sick or disabled?** *TICK ONE BOX ONLY*

No
 Yes

IF MENTIONED, WRITE IN WHO THEY CARE FOR _____

5b. IF YES AT 5a ASK Do you care for this person for 35 hours or more per week, which effects your ability to take up paid employment? TICK ONE BOX ONLY

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Can you tell me which of the following benefits did you make a claim for when you visited the Jobcentre Plus office? REASSURE IF NECESSARY Don't worry if you are not sure. READ OUT. TICK ONE BOX ONLY

Jobseekers' Allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Income Support	<input type="checkbox"/>
Incapacity Benefit	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carer's Allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (WRITE IN)	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. And what benefits are you now receiving? REASSURE IF NECESSARY Don't worry if you are not sure. READ OUT. TICK ONE BOX ONLY

Jobseeker's Allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Income Support	<input type="checkbox"/>
Incapacity Benefit	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carer's Allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (WRITE IN)	<input type="checkbox"/>

8. And finally, which of the following age groups do you fall into? READ OUT. TICK ONE BOX ONLY (or write in age if given)

18-24	<input type="checkbox"/>	<u>(Write in age if given)</u>
25-39	<input type="checkbox"/>	
40-49	<input type="checkbox"/>	
50-60/65	<input type="checkbox"/>	

CHECK CUSTOMER TYPE AND QUOTA:

	Benefit claimed (from sample list)	People in household	Other	No. Interviewees Required (per Public Office)
Jobseeker	JSA	-	-	3
Lone parent	Income Support	Child/children aged under 16, and no partner/ spouse	-	4
Sick or disabled	Incapacity Benefit or Income Support	-	Has an illness, health problem or disability	4
Carer	Carer's Allowance	-	Is responsible for caring for a sick or disabled person for 35+ hours/week	2
				Total = 13

IF NOT NEEDED, THANK THEM FOR THEIR TIME AND CLOSE.

IF ELIGIBLE, WILLING TO TAKE PART AND NEEDED – RECRUIT:

- *Provide an outline of the study:* the Department for Work and Pensions want to improve the services provided to people claiming benefit. They are funding [Research Organisation] to talk to people like yourself to find out more about your experience of the new services provided by Jobcentre Plus.

We are particularly interested to find out whether you found the service useful, whether it was tailored to your needs and whether the service made you think differently about being on benefit and looking for work (either now or in the future).

Arranging an interview appointment:

- Check fieldwork schedule and let them know when we will be in the area.
- Agree a date and time for the interview to take place and give the name of the researcher that will be visiting.
- Ensure that appointment date is **after** their Work-focused Interview.
- When recruiting emphasise the <amount in pounds> cash gift for the customer's time, but that this will not affect their entitlement to benefits.
- Inform that will confirm details in writing.

APPOINTMENT DATE & TIME: June/July 2003, at am/pm

NAME: Mr/Mrs/Ms

ADDRESS:

.....

TEL. NUMBER:

CUSTOMER TYPE: Jobseeker Sick/disabled

Lone parent Carer

**Thank respondent, leave contact name and tel. number and send
confirmatory letter**

Appendix H

Topic guides for interviews with Jobcentre Plus customers

H.1 Topic guide for Jobseeker's Allowance customers

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and Day two offices are delivering to policy intent.

The specific objectives of the customer research are:

- to establish in a chronological sequence of 'what happened next', the exact nature of the actual service which customers received, at all stages of the process;
- explore customers' views of the service they received; and to
- explore the impact of the Jobcentre Plus service on the customers' attitude to work and benefits

Note:

- Where question areas are relevant to exploring the views of, or differences between **new** and **repeat** Jobseeker's Allowance customers
- Spend more time on the high priority areas and less time on the medium-priority but ensure as far as possible that everything is covered.

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction: independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions
- Purpose of the research: to improve the services provided to people claiming benefit; to find out more about customers' experience of the Jobcentre Plus service and whether the service received was appropriate to their needs
- Stress confidentiality of the interview
- Ask permission to record the interview
- Check customer group
- Verify contact made with Jobcentre Plus, and WFI interview undertaken

Part 2: Background (high priority – up to 10 minutes)

[Note: ensure that the customer is referring to their most recent claim]

- 2.1 Background circumstances leading up to recent claim for benefit
e.g. reason why job ended
- 2.2 Immediate plans at the time of making claim in relation to work
e.g. - jobsearch strategies
 - *action taken prior to meeting with personal adviser*
 - *type of work sought*
 - *any barriers to finding appropriate work*
- 2.3 Establish whether the recent claim was the first time that the customer had made a claim through the Jobcentre Plus process.

Have they ever claimed benefit before?

Tell the customer that the interview will go through each stage of the process, in detail, in order to establish exactly what services they received.

Part 3: Initial contact/route to the contact centre (medium priority)

Objective: to establish the route customers took to get to the contact centre

- 3.1 Who did they contact initially about their recent benefit claim?
e.g. - telephoned the contact centre
 - *visited or telephoned a Jobcentre Plus public office*
 - *visited or telephoned an ex-BA office*
 - *contacted others e.g. social workers, charity, medical professional*

3.2 ASK IF TELEPHONED THE CONTACT CENTRE DIRECTLY:

How did they know to telephone the contact centre/the telephone number?

3.3 ASK IF DID NOT TELEPHONE THE CONTACT CENTRE DIRECTLY:

Explore fully what information were they given and what happened next

e.g. - given the contact centre telephone number to call

- were directed to a 'warm phone'

Part 4: First Contact – the contact centre (high priority)

Objective: to establish the exact content of the telephone conversation; customer's understanding of the process; and their views of using a telephone service.

4.1 Recollection of questions asked/information given during the conversation

Probe fully

e.g. - personal details (name, NI number etc.)

- type of benefit wanting to claim

- current circumstances/reason for benefit claim

4.2 Benefit information

What information/advice was given about benefits they could apply for?

4.3 Information about searching for/applying for jobs?

Probe fully

e.g. - extent to which customer's employment history and interest in returning to work was discussed

- were any jobs suggested that customer could apply for

- was a job search conducted

- was customer submitted to any suitable vacancies

- was any action other action suggested that customer should take

Arranging an appointment:

4.4 What information was given about attending an interview appointment at the Jobcentre Plus office?

Probe fully

e.g. - the reason for attending an interview

- how long the appointment would be for

- who they would be seeing (a Financial Assessor and a Personal Adviser)

- that it was compulsory to attend

4.6 IF NOT ALREADY MENTIONED:

What was the customer told about the work-focused element of the Personal Adviser meeting?

Probe fully

e.g. - the purpose of the meeting

- that it was compulsory

If customer has limited understanding of what a WFI is, please explain that a WFI is an interview with a PA at a Jobcentre Plus office to discuss your personal circumstances and any support that you might need in moving back into work.

4.7 How many days later was the appointment scheduled for?

4.8 What were they told about what to take to the interview and where to go?

e.g. proof of identify, sick notes, completed claim forms

4.9 Did you understand what would happen if you did not attend the meeting at the Jobcentre Plus office? *Probe: what did they think would happen? Why did they think this?*

Next stage:

4.10 What written information did they receive in advance of their appointment date? (either in the post, or in person - if First Contact was made from a Jobcentre Plus office)

Probe:

e.g. - relevant claim forms if not already completed

- letter confirming appointment details

- any problems e.g. didn't receive claim forms, had to re-arrange appointment date

Overall views and understanding of the process:

4.11 What was the customer's overall understanding of what would happen next

Probe:

e.g. - regarding their benefit claim

- regarding what would happen at their appointment:

- understanding of FA meeting

- understanding of Personal Adviser meeting

4.12 Opportunity to ask questions

Did they clarify/ask questions about the information they were given?

If not: why not? e.g. weren't given the opportunity, didn't feel able to

4.13 Overall views of telephone procedure

Probe:

e.g.- telephone as opposed to face to face

- more/less convenient – why/why not
- length of telephone conversation
- problems encountered
- whether had to pay for telephone call and reactions to this

4.14 How useful did you find the service that you received at the contact centre?

Probe: content of conversation; views on service provided by staff

e.g. helpful, efficient, knowledgeable etc

Part 5: The Financial Assessor Meeting (high priority)

Objective: to explore exactly what happened during the FA meeting; customers views of the service; and how customers were moved through the Jobcentre Plus process i.e. reception to FA to PA.

Arrival at the Jobcentre Plus office:

5.1 What happened on arrival?

e.g.- *Contact with Floorwalkers, reception staff and help receive*

- were they kept waiting for their appointment, or was it on time

Financial Assessor Meeting:

5.2 Establish whether customer saw somebody who checked through their claim form

Probe:

- *At what point did this happen? e.g. on arrival, before/after Personal Adviser meeting*
- *Was it a different person to who they saw for the WFI?*
- *Did they ask for proof of your identity?*

- 5.3 Recollection of questions asked/information given during the Financial Assessor meeting

Probe fully

e.g. - checking of supporting evidence (sick note, proof of I.D.)

- discussion about benefit entitlement

- 5.4 Had they brought all the necessary forms and supporting evidence with them?

If not: why not? e.g. forgot, had not been told to

- 5.5 Additional Benefit Information

What information/advice was given about any other benefits they could apply for?

- 5.6 Was the Financial Assessor familiar with their case/details? *Probe: did the Financial Assessor appear to be confident in dealing with your benefit claim?*

- 5.7 What did the Financial Assessor tell you about the meeting with the Personal Adviser, if anything? *Prompt: what did they say the purpose of the meeting was?*

Overall views:

- 5.8 Views on service provided by Financial Assessor

e.g. - perceived benefits of the service, negative aspects of the service – why?

Second/final contact with Financial Assessor:

- 5.9 Did customer return to see the FA after the Personal Adviser meeting?

Probe: what happened/what were they told?

e.g. - how much benefit they would receive and when to expect it

- what would happen next to their benefit claim

Part 6: The Work-focused Interview/Personal Adviser meeting (very high priority)

Objective: to establish, in detail, the content of the Personal Adviser meeting; the extent to which the Personal Adviser meeting was work-focused; and customers' views of the meeting.

- 6.1 Establish whether customer saw somebody who talked about their current circumstances in relation to work and future employment options

Probe fully:

e.g. - at what point did this happen? e.g. before/after Financial Assessor meeting

- *was it separate to the Financial Assessor interview*
- *did they have to move to another desk*
- *did they have to wait*

- 6.2 Was the Personal Adviser familiar with your circumstances? *Probe: did they seem like they were prepared for the interview?*

- 6.3 How did the Personal Adviser explain the purpose of the interview?

- *Explore customers' understanding of purpose of the interview*
- *Collect words/phrases used*

- 6.4 Recollection of questions asked/information given during the Personal Adviser meeting

Probe fully – what else?

Discussions about work:

- 6.5 How was the issue of work raised by the Personal Adviser?

Probe: what words/phrases were used?

- 6.6 What (else) did they discuss with the Personal Adviser in relation to work?

Probe fully:

e.g. - their employment history

- *their skills and experience*
- *their plans for starting/returning to work*
- *their barriers to work*

- 6.7 How did the customer feel about talking about work - why?

e.g. explore attitudes to their work options

Information/advice given:

6.8 What information/advice were they given about services available through Jobcentre Plus?

Probe: - for any service mentioned what were they told, how useful was it

e.g. - New Deal services (NDLP, NDDP)

- training courses*
- Disability Employment Advisers*
- other one-to-one based services*
- contact details of other organisations who could help*

6.9 What financial information/advice were they given about in-work benefits?

Probe: - for any advice mentioned what were they told, how useful was it

e.g. - help with child care

- tax credits*
- 'better-off calculation' made*

Jobsearch/job submissions:

6.10 What information/advice was given about applying for jobs?

6.11 Were any job searches conducted?

Probe: appropriateness of this, usefulness of job search

6.12 Did customer apply for any jobs - *if yes, what jobs?*

6.13 How useful did you find any help you received in searching for a job? *Probe: why was this?*

Agreed action/follow-up meetings:

6.14 What action was suggested or agreed?

Probe: - for any agreed action explore appropriateness/usefulness of it

e.g. - written or verbal action plan agreed especially the Jobseeker's Agreement

- referred to a New Deal programme*
- referred to training programme/course*
- referred to other services/providers*
- agreed job search strategy*

6.15 Were further meetings offered or agreed with their Personal Adviser?

Are they aware that they could visit their Personal Adviser at any time for further help whilst on benefits?

6.16 Were you told that you were likely to have another meeting at some point in the future? *Prompt: signing on meetings, review meetings (13 weeks and six months), were they told that the meetings were compulsory?*

Overall views/understanding:

6.17 Views on length of interview with Personal Adviser

Probe:

e.g.- too long, too short – why/why not

6.18 Overall views of the meeting with the Personal Adviser

Probe:

e.g.- appropriateness/usefulness of the meeting- why/why not

- Personal Adviser familiarity with their case/details

- Personal Adviser understanding and responsiveness to customer's personal circumstances, views and future plans

- Personal Adviser knowledge of services/help available

- any problems encountered

6.19 Were there opportunities to clarify/ask questions about the information and advice given - why/why not?

6.20 Explore awareness of obligation to attend the meeting with the Adviser and what would have happened had they not attended

6.21 Explore awareness of attending further mandatory Personal Adviser interviews in the future whilst on benefits

6.22 Were you interested in taking up any of the services available through Jobcentre Plus? *Probe: which ones and why? Under what circumstances would they take them up?*

Part 7: The Office Environment (low priority)

Objective: to explore customers' reactions to the Day two office environment and facilities, and its impact in terms of aiding movement into work.

7.1 Explore overall views of the office environment and facilities

Probe – disabled access/facilities (if relevant)

7.2 Explore views on and use of the facilities

Probe:

e.g. - warm phones

- job points*
- Internet access*
- environment for financial assessor and personal adviser meetings*
- resource area - news papers, books*
- child play facilities (if took children with them to appointment)*

7.3 Explore impact of the office environment and facilities on their experience of the service

- will it assist them in their search for/move in to work*
- will it encourage them to return to the service*

Part 8: Impact (medium/high priority)

Objective: to establish the impact of Jobcentre Plus on customers' attitudes and behaviour; and to close the interview.

8.1 Have your circumstances changed since the time of making your claim? How?

Probe: caring responsibilities; health; relationship with work

8.2 What contact has customer since had with Jobcentre Plus?

ASK IF HAS HAD CONTACT:

- What has this been about e.g. benefit claim, job search, training course*
- Who initiated it - customer or Jobcentre Plus staff*
- How usefull/appropriate has it been*

ASK IF HAS NOT: Has any follow-up contact been planned/agreed?

8.3 Was customer given sufficient information about who to contact?

e.g. Personal Adviser's contact details re job search, or contact details re chasing up benefit claim etc.

8.4 How has the Personal Adviser meeting influenced their attitudes towards work?

Probe: - have their attitudes or their future work aspirations changed

- if customer has previous experience of BAIES contact, how did this experience compare - better/worse

IF THERE HAS BEEN LITTLE IMPACT: why no impact? *Identify any on-going barriers to work.*

8.5 Has customer made any decisions as a result of their Personal Adviser meeting, or followed up any of the advice or actions suggested by the Personal Adviser – why/why not?

8.6 *Would customer return to see their Personal Adviser if needed help or advice?*
Probe - under what circumstances

THANK INTERVIEWEE AND GIVE INCENTIVE

H.2 Topic guide for non-Jobseeker's Allowance customers

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and Day two offices are delivering to policy intent.

The specific objectives of the customer research are:

- to establish in a chronological sequence of 'what happened next', the exact nature of the actual service which customers received, at all stages of the process;
- explore customers' views of the service they received; and to
- explore the impact of the Jobcentre Plus service on the customers' attitude to work and benefits.

Note:

- Where question areas are relevant to exploring the views of, or differences between customer groups, this is highlighted.
- Spend more time on the high priority areas and less time on the medium priority but ensure as far as possible that everything is covered.

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction: independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions
- Purpose of the research: to improve the services provided to people claiming benefit; to find out more about customers' experience of the Jobcentre Plus service and whether the service received was appropriate to their needs
- Stress confidentiality of the interview
- Ask permission to record the interview
- Check customer group
- Verify contact made with Jobcentre Plus, and WFI interview undertaken

Part 2: Background (high priority – up to 10 minutes)

[Note: ensure that the customer is referring to their most recent claim]

- 2.1 Background circumstances leading up to recent claim for benefit
e.g. nature of health problem, caring responsibilities, reason why job ended
- 2.2 Immediate plans at the time of making claim
e.g. - to stay at home
- to look for work (paid or voluntary)
- to start some training or education
Probe for details e.g. reasons for staying at home, type of work or training wanted
- 2.3 ASK IF WORK WAS NOT AN IMMEDIATE PLAN:
Was work an option at the time of making claim for benefit?
Probe - why/why not
- 2.4 ASK IF WORK WAS AN OPTION:
Explore type of work interested in and job-search activities undertaken
- 2.5 ASK IF WORK WAS NOT AN OPTION:
Is work an option in the longer term?
Probe – why/why not, when might work become an option
- 2.6 Establish whether the recent claim was the first time that the customer had made a claim through the Jobcentre Plus process? Have they ever claimed benefit before?

Tell the customer that the interview will go through each stage of the process, in detail, in order to establish exactly what services they received.

Part 3: Initial contact/route to the contact centre (medium priority)

Objective: to establish the route customers took to get to the contact centre

3.1 Who did they contact initially about their recent benefit claim?

e.g.- telephoned the contact centre

- visited or telephoned a Jobcentre Plus public office
- visited or telephoned an ex-BA office
- contacted others e.g. social workers, charity, medical professional

3.2 ASK IF TELEPHONED THE CONTACT CENTRE DIRECTLY:

How did they know to telephone the contact centre/the telephone number?

3.3 ASK IF DID NOT TELEPHONE THE CONTACT CENTRE DIRECTLY:

Explore fully what information were they given and what happened next

e.g.- *given the contact centre telephone number to call*

- *were directed to a 'warm phone'*

Part 4: First Contact – the contact centre (high priority)

Objective: to establish the exact content of the telephone conversation; customer's understanding of the process; and their views of using a telephone service.

4.1 Recollection of questions asked/information given during the conversation

Probe fully

e.g.- *personal details (name, NI number etc.)*

- *type of benefit wanting to claim*
- *current circumstances/reason for benefit claim*

4.2 Benefit information

What information/advice was given about benefits they could apply for?

4.3 Information about searching for/applying for jobs?

Probe fully

e.g. - extent to which customer's employment history and interest in returning to work was discussed

- *were any jobs suggested that customer could apply for*
- *was a job search conducted*
- *was customer submitted to any suitable vacancies*
- *was any action other action suggested that customer should take*

Arranging an appointment:

4.4 What information was given about attending an interview appointment at the Jobcentre Plus office?

*** Probe fully***

e.g. - the reason for attending an interview

- *how long the appointment would be for*
- *who they would be seeing (a Financial Assessor and a Personal Adviser)*
- *that it was compulsory to attend*

4.5 IF NOT ALREADY MENTIONED:

What was the customer told about work at the Personal Adviser meeting?

Probe fully

e.g. - the purpose of the meeting

- *that it was compulsory*

If customer has limited understanding of what a WFI is, please explain that a WFI is an interview with a Personal Adviser at a Jobcentre Plus office to discuss your personal circumstances and any support that you might need in moving back into work.

4.6 Were they asked whether or not they would be able to attend and take part in interview in the next few days?

Probe:

e.g. - what were they asked

- *did they feel they were listened to (why do they say this?)*
- *did they feel under any pressure to attend*

4.7 Was an appointment made, or was it deferred?

explore views of different **non-JSA customer groups**

Probe:

e.g. - how long was it deferred for?

- did they feel this was appropriate – why/why not

- were home visits offered – collect views on appropriateness of this

4.8 IF AN APPOINTMENT WAS MADE:

How many days later was the appointment scheduled for?

4.9 What were they told about what to take to the interview and where to go?

e.g. proof of identify, sick notes, completed claim forms. Probe: was the customer clear about what they had to bring?

4.10 Did you understand what would happen if you did not attend the meeting at the Jobcentre Plus office? *Probe: what did they think would happen? Why did they think this?*

Next stage:

4.11 What written information did they receive in advance of their appointment date? (either in the post, or in person - if First Contact was made from a Jobcentre Plus office)

Probe:

e.g. - relevant claim forms if not already completed letter confirming appointment details

any problems e.g. didn't receive claim forms, had to re-arrange appointment date

Overall views and understanding of the process:

4.12 What was the customer's overall understanding of what would happen next

Probe:

e.g. - regarding their benefit claim

- regarding what would happen at their appointment:

- understanding of FA meeting

- understanding of meeting with a personal adviser

4.13 Opportunity to ask questions

Did they clarify/ask questions about the information they were given?

If not: why not? e.g. weren't given the opportunity, didn't feel able to

4.14 Overall views of telephone procedure

Probe:

e.g. - telephone as opposed to face-to-face

- length of telephone conversation*
- more/less convenient – why/why not*
- problems encountered*
- whether had to pay for telephone call and reactions to this*

4.15 How useful did you find the service that you received at the contact centre?

Probe: content of conversation; views on service provided by staff

e.g. helpful, efficient, knowledgeable etc

Part 5: The Financial Assessor Meeting (high priority)

Objective: to explore exactly what happened during the FA meeting; customers views of the service; and how customers were moved through the Jobcentre Plus process i.e. reception to FA to PA.

Arrival at the Jobcentre Plus office:

5.1 What happened on arrival?

e.g. - Contact with Floorwalkers, reception staff and help receive were they kept waiting for their appointment, or was it on time

Financial Assessor Meeting:

5.2 Establish whether customer saw somebody who checked through their claim form?

Probe:

At what point did this happen? e.g. on arrival, before/after Personal Adviser meeting

Was it a different person to who they saw for the other meeting (i.e. the WFI)?

Did they ask for proof of your identity?

5.3 Recollection of questions asked/information given during the Financial Assessor meeting

Probe fully

e.g. - checking of supporting evidence (sick note, proof of I.D.)

- discussion about benefit entitlement*

5.4 Had they brought all the necessary forms and supporting evidence with them?

If not: why not? e.g. forgot, had not been told to

5.5 Additional benefit information

What information/advice was given about any other benefits they could apply for?

5.6 Was the Financial Assessor familiar with their case/details? *Probe: did the Financial Assessor appear to be confident in dealing with your benefit claim?*

5.7 What did the Financial Assessor tell you about the meeting with the Personal Adviser, if anything? *Prompt: what did they say the purpose of the meeting was?*

Overall views:

5.8 Views on service provided by Financial Assessor

e.g. - perceived benefits of the service, negative aspects of the service – why?

Second/final contact with Financial Assessor:

5.9 Did customer return to see the Financial Assessor after the Personal Adviser interview?

Probe: what happened/what were they told?

e.g. - how much benefit they would receive and when to expect it

- what would happen next to their benefit claim

Part 6: The Work-focused Interview/PA meeting (very high priority)

Objective: to establish, in detail, the content of the Personal Adviser meeting; the extent to which the Personal Adviser meeting was work-focused; and customers' views of the meeting.

6.0 Establish whether customer saw somebody who talked about their current circumstances in relation to work and future employment options

Probe fully:

e.g. - at what point did this happen? e.g. before/after FA meeting

- was it separate to the FA interview

- did they have to move to another desk

- did they have to wait

6.1 How did the Personal Adviser explain the purpose of the interview?

- Explore customers' understanding of purpose of the interview

- Collect words/phrases used

6.2 Was the Personal Adviser familiar with your circumstances? *Probe: did they seem like they were prepared for the interview?*

6.3 Recollection of questions asked/information given during the Personal Adviser meeting

Ask customer to describe what was discussed in the meeting with the Personal Adviser.

Probe fully – what else?

Discussions about work:

6.4 How was the issue of work raised by the Personal Adviser?

Probe fully: what words/phrases were used?

6.5 What (else) did they discuss with the Personal Adviser in relation to work?

Probe fully:

e.g. - their employment history

- their skills and experience

- their plans for starting/returning to work

- their barriers to work

6.6 How did the customer feel about talking about work - why?

explore views of different customer groups

e.g. whether able or not to consider work at this point in time

Information/advice given:

6.7 What information/advice were they given about services available through Jobcentre Plus?

Probe: - for any service mentioned what were they told, how useful was it

e.g. - New Deal services (NDLP, NDDP)

- training courses

- Disability Employment Advisers

- other one-to-one based services

- contact details of other organisations who could help

6.8 What financial information/advice were they given about in-work benefits?

Probe: - for any advice mentioned what were they told, how useful was it

e.g. - help with child care

- tax credits

- 'better-off calculation' made

Job search/job submissions:

6.9 What information/advice was given about applying for jobs?

6.10 Were any job searches conducted?

Probe: appropriateness of this, usefulness of job search

6.11 Did customer apply for any jobs - *if yes, what jobs?*

6.12 How useful did you find any help you received in searching for a job? *Probe: why was this?*

Agreed action/follow-up meetings:

6.13 What action was suggested or agreed?

Probe: - for any agreed action explore appropriateness/usefulness of it

e.g.- written or verbal action plan agreed

- referred to a New Deal programme*
- referred to training programme/course*
- referred to other services/providers*
- agreed job search strategy*

6.14 Were further meetings offered or agreed with their Personal Adviser?

Are they aware that they could visit their Personal Adviser at any time for further help whilst on benefits? Prompt: lone parents- six monthly review meetings; trigger meetings. Sick or disabled clients- three year review.

Overall views/understanding:

6.16 Overall views of the meeting with the PA

Probe:

e.g.- appropriateness/usefulness of the meeting- why/why not

- Personal Adviser familiarity with their case/details*
- Personal Adviser understanding and responsiveness to customer's personal circumstances, views and future plans*
- Personal Adviser knowledge of services/help available*
- any problems encountered*

6.17 Were there opportunities to clarify/ask questions about the information and advice given - why/why not?

6.18 Explore awareness of obligation to attend the meeting and what would have happened had they not attended

6.19 Explore awareness of attending further mandatory Personal Adviser interviews in the future whilst on benefits

6.20 Were you interested in taking up any of the services available through Jobcentre Plus? *Probe: which ones and why? Under what circumstances would they take them up?*

Part 7: The office environment (low priority)

Objective: to explore customers' reactions to the Day two office environment and facilities, and its impact in terms of aiding movement into work.

7.1 Explore overall views of the office environment and facilities

Probe - disabled access/facilities (if relevant)

7.2 Explore views on and use of the facilities

Probe:

e.g. - warm phones

- job points

- environment for financial assessor/personal adviser meetings

- internet access

- resource area - news papers, books

- child play facilities (if took children with them to appointment)

7.3 Explore impact of the office environment and facilities on their experience of the service

- will it assist them in their search for/move in to work

- will it encourage them to return to the service

Part 8: Impact (high priority)

Objective: to establish the impact of Jobcentre Plus on customers' attitudes and behaviour; and to close the interview.

8.1 Have your circumstances changed since the time of making your claim? How?
Probe: caring responsibilities; health; relationship with work

8.2 What contact has customer since had with Jobcentre Plus?

ASK IF HAS HAD CONTACT:

- What has this been about e.g. benefit claim, job search, training course

- Who initiated it - customer or Jobcentre Plus staff

- How usefull/appropriate has it been

ASK IF HAS NOT: Has any follow-up contact been planned/agreed?

- 8.3 Was customer given sufficient information about who to contact?
e.g. Personal Adviser's contact details re job search, or contact details re chasing up benefit claim etc.
- 8.4 How has the Personal Adviser meeting influenced their attitudes towards work?
Probe: - have their attitudes or their future work aspirations changed
- *if customer has previous experience of BA/ES contact, how did this experience compare - better/worse*
- IF THERE HAS BEEN LITTLE IMPACT: why no impact? *Identify any on-going barriers to work.*
- 7.4 Has customer made any decisions as a result of their Personal Adviser meeting, or followed up any of the advice or actions suggested by the Personal Adviser – why/why not?
- 7.5 Would customer return to see their Personal Adviser if needed help or advice?
Probe - under what circumstances

THANK INTERVIEWEE AND GIVE INCENTIVE

Appendix I

Observation guides

I.1 A guide for observations in contact centres of First Contact with both JSA and non-JSA customers

Notes for observers

The aim of these direct observations is to provide the research with a concrete basis for understanding how telephone contact is conducted (with both JSA and non-JSA customers). More specifically the objectives are to determine:

- *How FCOs identify the appropriate type of benefit to be claimed*
- *The extent to which work is discussed and job searches conducted*
- *How FCOs explain to customers about attending a WFI and how they arrange appointments with customers*
- *Indications of who defines the agenda*
- *Ease of use and familiarity with IT systems and scripts used by contact centre staff*
- *Other critical 'incidents' during the contact*

These observations will have been agreed with the relevant managers but we recommend that you explain to staff:

- *that we are conducting an evaluation of Jobcentre Plus on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions;*
- *the purpose of the research is to understand how the initial process of contacting customers works and what it entails;*
- *assure the member of staff that we are in no way assessing or evaluating them or their work*

IF POSSIBLE, at the end of the telephone conversation spend a few minutes with the First Contact Officer to ask them for information about what the customer said that you were unable to hear and to get their views on how they thought the conversation went.

There are two elements to recording your observations:

1. Record the content of the first contact telephone conversation in full, as it happened. The aim is to provide a 'transcript' of the conversation, with lots of direct quotes, plus commentary on any non-verbal actions the First Contact Officer made. It is recommended that you write your notes as you go along onto a notepad and then transfer these notes onto the observation schedule.
2. Complete the grid which breaks down the content of first contact discussion into its different components. As well as asking for details on the content of the discussion – include as many quotes and phrases as possible – you are also asked to provide some reflection and additional observations as to how the telephone contact went, including what happened after the telephone conversation to process the customer's details and benefit claim.

Please tick box according to customer group.

Lone Parent Carer Sick/disabled JSA

1. 'Transcript' of the First Contact conversation

Please record the conversation, word for word, as it occurred, noting any non-verbal actions or expressions made by the First Contact Officer. Use additional pages if required.

Recording order and coverage of contact**2. Thematic grid for first contact discussions with customers**

Please complete the grid below in as much details as possible, including quotes and phrases used by the First Contact Officer and the customer.

<p>Initial information gathered by FCO <i>E.g</i> <i>Personal details Employment history Customer's current circumstances</i></p>	
<p>Benefits <i>How did FCO identify the correct benefit?</i> <i>What questions were asked?</i> <i>Was the FCO able to answer any questions asked?</i> <i>What other benefit advice was given?</i> <i>Did the FCO seek advice from a colleague?</i></p>	
<p>Discussions about work <i>What did the FCO ask, or what information did the customer volunteer about work e.g. previous work experience, reason for leaving previous employment, immediate or future work plans?</i></p>	
<p>Barriers to work <i>Were any discussed? e.g. health, childcare, caring responsibilities?</i> <i>Did FCO seem confident/ comfortable with discussing these?</i></p>	

<p>Job search and job submissions <i>What information was given about searching for/applying for jobs?</i> <i>Was a job search conducted?</i> Was customer submitted to any job vacancies? <i>What was the customer's response?</i></p>	
<p>The FA Meeting & Work-focused Interview How did FCO 'sell' the appointment to customers? <i>How did FCO explain the purpose of the meeting - what words or phrases were used?</i> To what extent was the work-focus emphasised/explained? To what extent was the mandatory nature of the WFI explained? <i>Did FCO seem comfortable/confident with this?</i> <i>What was the customer's response – willing, keen, or reluctant to attend?</i></p>	
<p>Explanation of next steps <i>Did FCO explain what documents were required/what would happen next? Note words and phrases used.</i></p>	

<p>Deferrals <i>Did FCO offer a deferral or waiver – If so how was this explained to the customer – what words/phrases were used?</i> <i>How was the deferral/waiver decided? e.g. key factors why the customer could not attend, advice sought from a team leader</i> <i>How was the deferral timescale decided? Did FCO seem confident/comfortable about this?</i> <i>How did the FCO explain that the customer would be required to attend a meeting in the future?</i></p>	
<p>Disabled Access <i>Was this raised as an issue – by whom?</i> <i>Was provision for sick/disabled customers mentioned by FCO? e.g. home visits, wheelchair access, hearing loops etc.</i></p>	
<p>Issuing of forms <i>How was this done – by whom?</i> Use of VANTIVE scripts <i>Was the VANTIVE script used/ adapted? If so how?</i> <i>Did FCO appear familiar with script?</i></p>	
<p>I.T. Procedures What information was recorded onto VANTIVE/LMS? <i>How is information is passed on to the public offices e.g. use of LMS ‘conversations’?</i> <i>What information is passed on to the public office, and in what level of detail?</i> Did FCO appear familiar with the I.T. systems/did they require any assistance? Is LMS used while the customer is on the line?</p>	

Approximately how many minutes did the First Contact telephone call last? <i>Was a call-back offered, asked for or accepted?</i>	Write in number of minutes: _____
Other Please note down anything else	

IF POSSIBLE, AT THE END OF THE TELEPHONE CONVERSATION SPEND A FEW MINUTES WITH THE CONTACT OFFICER TO GET THEIR VIEWS OF HOW THEY THOUGHT THE CONVERSATION WENT [RECORD ANY NOTES

1.2 A guide for observations of Work-focused Interviews with both JSA and non-JSA customers

Notes for researchers

The aim of these direct observations is to provide the research with a concrete basis for understanding how face-to-face Work-focused Interviews are conducted (with both JSA and non-JSA customers). This will enable the evaluation to independently assess the general assertions made by customers and advisers about the conduct and content of the meetings, and identify areas of confusion or misunderstanding. More specifically the objectives are to determine:

- *How the PA starts the meeting*
- *How work is introduced and the extent to which the meeting is work-focused*
- *The level and type of information and advice given to customers*
- *Whether job searches and job submissions are made*
- *What action and follow-up contact is agreed*
- *'Downtime' spent by advisers when customers do not keep their appointments*
- *Indications of who defines the agenda/issues/problems*
- *Indications of whether the customer 'buys into' advice/suggestions of what to do*
- *Other critical 'incidents' during the interview*

Additional elements to note in the observations include:

- *Body language (moves towards or away, 'closed' postures etc) and eye contact*
- *Behavioural 'events' (to be questioned in follow-up interviews)*
- *Length of meeting*

Introduction to observation

Permission to observe the meeting should have been secured with the Personal Adviser and their Line Manager beforehand. It is also imperative that we to seek the permission of customers to sit in and observe their meeting with an adviser.

- Explain that you work for [*Insert relevant research organisation*], an independent research organisation with no links to the benefits service, other government departments or political parties.
- Explain that you would like to sit in on the meeting to find out how they work and what is discussed.
- Assure the customer that anything discussed during the meeting will be treated as confidential and will not be shared with anyone else.

May we sit in and listen?

- *Check that it is OK for you to sit in on the meeting and make notes – again, reassure the individual that your notes will only record broadly what is discussed, not personal details, and will not be passed onto the benefits service or any other government department.*

IF POSSIBLE, at the end of the interview ask to speak to the customer for a few minutes – somewhere in private – to explore their perspective of how the WFI (and the FA interview if this was also observed) went. Also try to spend a few minutes talking to the PA to gain their perspective of the WFI.

There are two elements to recording your observations:

1. Record the content of the WFI conversation in full, as it happened. The aim is to provide a 'transcript' of the conversation, with lots of direct quotes, plus commentary on any non-verbal actions the PA or customer made. It is recommended that you write your notes as you go along onto a notepad and then transfer these notes onto the observation schedule.
2. Complete the grid which breaks down the content of the WFI into its different components. As well as asking for details on the content of the interview – include as many quotes and phrases as possible – you are also asked to provide some reflection and additional observations, such as indications of who defines the agenda, customers overall engagement with the PA, body language etc.

Please tick box according to customer group.

Lone parent Carer Sick/disabled JSA

1. *'Transcript' of the Work-focused Interview*

Please record the conversation word for work as it occurred, noting any non-verbal actions or expressions made by the PA or the customer. Use additional pages if required.

2. Thematic grid for Work-focused Interview

Please complete the grid below in as much details as possible, including quotes and phrases used by the Personal Adviser and the customer.

<p>How is the meeting started? <i>How does the PA introduce him/her self?</i> <i>How does the PA explain purpose of the meeting – what words or phrases are used?</i> <i>Note body language of customer/PA</i></p>	
<p>Benefits <i>Is there any further discussion about benefits – If so who instigates this?</i> <i>Note phrases/words used</i> <i>Was the customer's claim form looked at again during the WFI?</i></p>	
<p>Work <i>How is the topic of work introduced – by whom? – e.g. previous work experience, attitudes to work</i> <i>Note phrases/words used</i> <i>Who leads the discussion?</i> <i>Customer reactions? e.g. interested/disinterested?</i> <i>Note body language and overall 'engagement' with PA</i> <i>How does the PA try to engage customers who are not interested in a discussion about work?</i> <i>To what extent does the customer talk about their work goals?</i> <i>How does PA respond to this?</i></p>	

<p>Barriers to employment <i>What is the issue e.g. health, childcare, caring responsibilities</i> <i>For each barrier mentioned who raised it and how was it discussed?</i> <i>How did the PA respond/ address the customer's barriers to work?</i> <i>Note words phrases used</i></p>	
<p>Training <i>Was any training suggested/ mentioned?</i> <i>If so who instigated this?</i> <i>What type of training?</i> <i>On what basis did PA suggest a particular course</i> <i>How did PA/customer react? e.g. interested/disinterested?</i> <i>How does the PA try to engage customers who are not interested in training?</i></p>	
<p>Advice/information on services available <i>What advice/information was given?</i> <i>e.g. job brokers, DEAs, /New Deals, other organisations etc.</i> <i>Who instigated it?</i> <i>What form was the information e.g. leaflets, contact details, verbal PA/customer reaction/ interest</i></p>	
<p>Advice/information on financial benefits <i>e.g. tax credits</i> <i>Was an in-work benefit calculation conducted?</i> <i>Customer reaction/interest</i></p>	

<p>Job search/Job submissions <i>What information/advice was given?</i> <i>Was a job search conducted?</i> <i>Who instigated this?</i> <i>How was this done?</i> <i>What type of jobs?</i> <i>On what basis did PA suggest a particular vacancy/job</i> <i>Customer reaction/interest/disinterest</i> <i>How does the PA respond to customers who are not interested?</i></p>	
<p>Explanation of next steps <i>What was explained would happen next?</i> <i>Note words phrases used</i></p>	
<p>Caseloading <i>What information is provided about caseloading?</i> <i>How is it presented?</i> <i>[NB: Is it mentioned at all to non-JSA customers, or is it only mentioned in relation to the New Deals]</i> <i>Techniques used to encourage the customer to sign up to a caseload?</i> <i>What options are given?</i> <i>Are any agreements made for the PA to follow up/re-contact the customer?</i></p>	
<p>Agreed action <i>What action was agreed?</i> <i>Was an action plan or written agreement completed?</i> <i>(customer action plan for non-JSA and Jobseekers Agreement for JSA)</i> <i>Level of customer engagement/involvement with agreeing the action?</i> <i>Did the customer receive a copy of any agreement/action plan?</i></p>	

<p>Close of meeting <i>How did the PA and customer finish the meeting?</i> <i>What if any follow-up arrangements/meetings were made?</i> <i>Note words/phrases used</i></p>	
<p>Interview setting <i>Note levels of privacy, levels of distraction/noise</i> <i>Access for sick/disabled e.g. sight/hearing impaired, wheelchairs</i> <i>Were there any interruptions by staff, phone calls, etc?</i></p>	
<p>PA prompts/tools <i>Did the PA use any prompts to help them structure the WFI?</i> <i>e.g. tick list of key questions, LMS action plan/agreement</i></p>	
<p>Overall impressions <i>To what extent did the customer seem interested and actively engaged in the discussion?</i> <i>To what extent did the PA seem interested and responsive to the customer's needs, views and future plans?</i></p> <p>Approximately how long did the WFI last?</p> <p>Other Note anything else</p>	<p>Write in number of minutes: _____</p>

IF POSSIBLE, AT THE END OF THE INTERVIEW ASK TO SPEAK TO THE CUSTOMER. THESE INFORMAL CHATS SHOULD BE HELD IN PRIVATE, AWAY FROM THE ADVISER, AND SHOULD ONLY LAST ABOUT 5 MINUTES.

ALSO, IF POSSIBLE, SPEND A FEW MINUTES WITH THE PA TO GET THEIR VIEWS OF HOW THEY THOUGHT THE INTERVIEW WENT.

[RECORD ANY NOTES UNDER 'OTHER'].

I.3 A guide for observations of Financial Assessor Interviews

Notes for researchers

The aim of these direct observations is to provide the research with a concrete basis for understanding how face-to-face financial assessor interviews are conducted (with both JSA and non-JSA customers). This will enable the evaluation to independently assess the general assertions made by customers and assessors about the conduct and content of the meetings, and identify areas of confusion or misunderstanding. More specifically the objectives are to determine:

- *How the FA starts the meeting*
- *How the FA determines customers' benefit needs*
- *The level and type of information and advice given to customers*
- *How the FA checks customers' evidence of identity*
- *The procedure in place for checking customers' benefit claim forms*
- *What action and follow-up contact is agreed*
- *'Downtime' spent by FAs when customers do not keep their appointments*
- *Indications of who defines the agenda/issues/problems*
- *Indications of whether the customer 'buys into' advice/suggestions of what to do*
- *Other critical 'incidents' during the interview*

Additional elements to note in the observations include:

- *Body language (moves towards or away, 'closed' postures etc) and eye contact*
- *Behavioural 'events' (to be questioned in follow up interviews)*
- *Length of meeting*

Introduction to observation

Permission to observe the meeting should have been secured with the Financial Adviser and their Line Manager beforehand. It is also imperative that we seek the permission of customers to sit in and observe their meeting with an adviser.

- Explain that you work for [*Insert relevant research organisation*], an independent research organisation with no links to the benefits service, other government departments or political parties.
- Explain that you would like to sit in on the meeting to find out how they work and what is discussed.

- Assure the customer that anything discussed during the meeting will be treated as confidential and will not be shared with anyone else.

May we sit in and listen?

- *Check that it is OK for you to sit in on the meeting and make notes – again, reassure the individual that your notes will only record broadly what is discussed, not personal details, and will not be passed onto the benefits service or any other government department.*

IF POSSIBLE, at the end of the Work-focused Interview try to spend a few minutes talking to the FA to gain their perspective of the interview.

There are two elements to recording your observations:

1. Record the content of the FA interview conversation in full, as it happened. The aim is to provide a 'transcript' of the conversation, with lots of direct quotes, plus commentary on any non-verbal actions the FA or customer made. It is recommended that you write your notes as you go along onto a notepad and then transfer these notes onto the observation schedule.
2. Complete the grid which breaks down the content of the FA interview into its different components. As well as asking for details on the content of the interview – include as many quotes and phrases as possible - you are also asked to provide some reflection and additional observations, such as indications of who defines the agenda, customers overall engagement with the FA, body language etc.

Please tick box according to customer group.

Lone parent **Carer** **Sick/disabled** **JSA**

1. 'Transcript' of the FA interview

Please record the conversation word for word as it occurred, noting any non-verbal actions or expressions made by the FA or the customer. Use additional pages if required.

2. Thematic grid for Financial Assessor interview

Please complete the grid below in as much details as possible, including quotes and phrases used by the Financial Assessor and the customer.

<p>How is the meeting started? <i>How does the FA introduce him/her self?</i> <i>How does the FA explain purpose of the meeting – what words or phrases are used?</i> <i>Note body language of customer/FA</i></p>	
<p>Benefit needs <i>How do FAs determine customers' benefit needs?</i> <i>Note phrases/words used</i></p>	
<p>Identity and benefit checks <i>Has the customer completed the claim forms prior to the meeting?</i> <i>What supporting evidence do FAs ask for regarding customers identity and benefit claim forms?</i> <i>Were there any problems with the ID provided by the customer, and if so what were they, and how, if at all, were these resolved?</i> <i>Note phrases/words used</i> <i>Customer reactions?</i> <i>e.g. comfortable/uncomfortable with the process?</i> <i>Note body language</i></p>	

<p>Advice/information on other financial benefits <i>What information or advice was given</i> <i>e.g. Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit</i> <i>Who raised the subject – FA or customer?</i> <i>Did the FA need to seek out additional information?(from colleague, IT or literature)</i> <i>Customer reaction/interest</i></p> <p>Issues and problems <i>What is the issue e.g. benefit entitlement, National Insurance contributions</i> <i>For each issue mentioned who raised it and how was it discussed?</i> <i>Was FA able to address the issue?</i> <i>Did the FA need to obtain additional information?</i> <i>Note words phrases used</i></p>	
<p>Explanation of next steps <i>What was explained would happen next?</i> <i>Note words phrases used</i> <i>Did the FA explain the work focused nature of the WFI or that the benefit claim would be dependent on it?</i> <i>Customer understanding of next steps</i></p>	
<p>Close of meeting <i>How did the FA and customer finish the meeting?</i> <i>What if any follow-up arrangements/action was agreed ?</i> <i>Note words/phrases used</i></p>	

<p>Interview setting <i>Note levels of privacy, levels of distraction/noise</i> <i>Access for sick/disabled e.g. sight/hearing impaired, wheelchairs</i> <i>Were there any interruptions by staff, phone calls, etc?</i></p>	
<p>FA prompts/tools <i>Did the FA use any prompts to help them structure the interview?</i> <i>e.g. tick list of key questions, the claim form</i></p> <p>Overall Impressions <i>To what extent did the customer seem interested and actively engaged in the discussion?</i> <i>To what extent did the FA seem interested and responsive to the customer’s needs, views and future plans?</i></p> <p>Approximately how long did the interview last?</p> <p>How did the change over to the PA WFI work? <i>Did the customer have to wait to see the PA?</i> <i>Where was the PA WFI held – at the same desk or at another desk?</i></p>	<p>Write in number of minutes: _____</p>
<p>Other Note anything else</p>	

IF POSSIBLE, AFTER THE WORK FOCUSED INTERVIEW ASK TO SPEAK TO THE CUSTOMER. THESE INFORMAL CHATS SHOULD BE HELD IN PRIVATE, AWAY FROM THE FINANCIAL ASSESSOR AND PERSONAL ADVISER, AND SHOULD ONLY LAST ABOUT 5 MINUTES. ALSO, IF POSSIBLE, SPEND A FEW MINUTES WITH THE FA TO GET THEIR VIEWS OF HOW THEY THOUGHT THE INTERVIEW WENT.

[RECORD ANY NOTES UNDER OTHER]

