

**Department for Work and Pensions**

**Research Report No 236**

# **Staff safety in Jobcentre Plus offices**

**Pat Irving and Ashfa Slater**

A report of research carried out by ECOTEC Research and Consulting Limited on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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# Summary

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned this study to examine how the introduction of new processes and changes to the office environment under Jobcentre Plus may have impacted on the safety of staff in integrated offices – particularly their exposure to risk of verbal abuse and attempted or actual physical assault. DWP commissioned ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd to examine how changes to the benefit claims process and the office environment have affected known triggers for customer/staff incidents, and to explore the operation of procedures to prevent and deal with such incidents. Fieldwork took place in January and February 2004, and any initiatives implemented since this period are beyond the scope of this research.

As part of the qualitative research, ECOTEC explored the following issues with a wide-ranging sample of staff in eight case study areas:

- the operation of processes designed to prevent and deal with incidents against staff;
- staff's understanding of these processes;
- triggers that cause incidents;
- staff's perceptions of safety in Jobcentre Plus offices;
- processes around reporting incidents;
- office procedures for dealing with Potentially Violent (PV) customers; and
- the impact of the introduction of Jobcentre Plus (including measures designed to improve staff safety).

## Incidents and unacceptable behaviour

There were some key differences between staff's perceptions of incidents and the guidance's definition of serious incidents. When staff described incidents, the language and terminology they used generally matched that presented in the guidance on unacceptable customer behaviour rather than the definition provided

for serious incidents, which other than reference to assaults/attempted assaults, concerns the consequences of incidents rather than the event(s) itself. When staff talked about incidents they differentiated between physical and verbal incidents. The former were more serious but less frequent than the latter.

The research found no real distinction between experience or periodicity of incidents that could be attributed to integrated or legacy areas. There did not appear to be any consistent pattern as to when incidents might happen. Rather, incidents were more dependent on other factors including geographical location, the size of office, and the nature of the customer group. A small group of customers accounted for the majority of incidents.

The types of events that staff identified as incidents were verbal abuse, physical abuse (threatened, attempted or actual harm) and damage to property. Staff had quite different views about what types of events constituted an incident and these differences of opinion had a bearing on whether they reported such events. Typically, staff had experienced verbal incidents. Their definitions were generally governed by their tolerance concerning unacceptable customer behaviour, particularly in relation to verbal abuse. That said, any attempted and/or actual assaults were considered serious incidents.

## Triggers

Triggers could be related to people issues (both customer and staff) and process issues, and often interact. The most common customer triggers related to the fact that customers could be:

- influenced by external factors, eg substance abuse, mental health problems;
- disempowered and therefore anxious and distressed about their situation before they see a member of staff;
- anxious about money and have to wait for/or receive an unfavourable decision or be refused a Crisis Loan for example.

Customer issues specifically linked to how they interacted with the benefits process under the new Jobcentre Plus system. This was evident in customers' lack of understanding of the new processes and the consequences of customers being told that they were no longer eligible for different types of benefits.

Incident triggers associated with staff in both integrated and legacy areas were:

- the effect that staffing levels could have on waiting times, queues and congestion in the office;
- staff with poor customer-handling and communication skills;
- staff having to communicate unfavourable decisions and say 'no' to customers;
- managers who would override staff's decisions; and
- administrative errors.

The main staff-related trigger pertinent to integrated areas was staff conveying the wrong customer service messages to customers, in particular reception staff and floorwalkers with poor customer service skills.

There were various process issues that were common to both integrated and legacy areas, as follows:

- money, payment and payment handling, eg refusal for Crisis Loans, non-payment of benefits, or late benefit payments;
- administration and 'the system', eg customers having to call the Contact Centre and fraud investigations;
- waiting to be seen and waiting for money;
- changes to the fortnightly review process; and
- increased focus on sanctions.

The process triggers particular to integrated areas were related in general to the introduction of Contact Centres, the mandatory nature of the initial interview (particularly for non Jobseekers Allowance customers), customers who did not fully understand why the changes have been introduced and older people who were less comfortable with using the telephone procedures.

Active risk management minimises the likelihood of incidents. Staff frequently emphasised the importance of good customer handling skills, treating customers well and delivering a good service. Offices have adopted different approaches to minimise process triggers which concentrate in the main on good communication with customers and the need to thoroughly explain the new Jobcentre Plus process that customers would go through. Staff also recognised the real potential of floorwalkers in diffusing potential situations by being proactive in identifying customers who need signposting or assistance.

Staff often developed their own risk management approaches which did not rely on training or guidance. Staff placed strong emphasis on listening to customers, demonstrating empathy and understanding, showing a willingness to help without promising too much, finding appropriate ways to say no and demonstrating respect whilst being firm and understanding.

## Incident handling

There are two DWP guidance documents relating to incidents: *Jobcentre Plus framework for the management and reporting of serious incidents* and *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*. These documents both focus on the steps to be taken after an incident has occurred. Interviews with staff showed that they found the guidance unwieldy and unclear – partly because it made no distinction between verbal/physical incidents (making it difficult to know when to report), they lacked the time needed to read it and it did not provide advice

on how to respond to incidents. This lack of staff awareness of the guidance means that standard procedures are not always followed after an incident has occurred.

In relation to training on incident handling, staff had generally participated in training that incorporated customer care, handling difficult customers and handling difficult situations. For some staff this training had taken place some time ago. Staff had rarely heard of/attended incident handling/reporting training. Those staff that had were generally integrated Jobcentre Plus staff and new recruits. Overall, staff believed that training comprised only a small fraction of an adviser's ability to calm a difficult situation. They regarded experience as providing all additional expertise necessary to prepare for dealing with the variety of situations and customers they might encounter.

In integrated areas there was no clear evidence of existing staff doing any extra training when they rolled out to Jobcentre Plus. This included Contact Centre staff who had transferred from a processing role to front-line role. All new Contact Centre staff had received customer-handling training upon starting as a First Contact Officer. This training received mixed feedback, whilst some were positive about it others felt it was not tailored to the Contact Centre environment and lacked relevance to the demands of the role.

Security staff had received varying amounts of training from their employers in terms of incident handling. Those doing a Customer Care Officer role had received additional on-the-job training from colleagues.

There was little evidence of managers encouraging staff to handle incidents in a particular way. The only obvious advice was for staff to remove themselves from a potentially dangerous situation and to telephone the police without hesitation.

Staff relied on peer support rather than managerial support when handling incidents. Firstly, they would try to calm the situation themselves, and if unable to do so, they assumed that colleagues, managers or security would come and support them. Staff were generally aware of what was happening around, eg raised voices. The support that peers offered varied. Informally they would provide a physical presence in the vicinity. More formally they would get involved in the discussion (more senior colleagues/managers) and/or re-affirm the message being given to the customer.

There were mixed findings from Social Security office staff. The emphasis was on getting the customer out of the office before they triggered any further incidents. Whilst some staff would help colleagues, others found it too difficult to move between booths and felt that it could be disruptive for their own customer and lead to further incidents. In one high incident office, staff were discouraged to assist because of legal ramifications if the situation was mishandled.

Staff had mixed opinions on management interventions. Some staff felt a personal responsibility to resolve incidents and they regarded manager involvement as personal failure. Other staff welcomed manager intervention but found that

managers did not always back staff up by reinforcing the message being delivered; others wanted and expected manager intervention.

General opinion was that security staff were a good deterrent for difficult customers and that if a safety incident occurred, security staff would respond quickly to help to resolve situations or protect staff. There were cases where managers and staff were concerned that security staff were not sufficiently proactive or assertive enough to intervene in a potential incident. The following issues were also identified concerning the roles and responsibilities of security staff:

- staff had some concerns over security guards' additional responsibilities which they felt could impact on their ability to respond to a safety incident;
- security staff themselves were concerned that they had insufficient powers to deal with incidents; and
- managers were concerned over security guards' inability to use physical force, which leads to a reliance on the police.

## Incident reporting

There was no real distinction between the staff in integrated or legacy areas on the following:

- their understanding of procedures for reporting incidents;
- the levels of reported incidents; and
- managerial emphasis placed on the importance to report incidents.

Staff in both integrated and legacy areas had mixed views on whether incident reporting was a voluntary or compulsory process. They based their decision to report an incident on how the incident had affected them, whether the incident was related to process/system failures, any personal/office history of incidents, and the likelihood of further incidents occurring.

Barriers to reporting across integrated and legacy areas were:

- a lack of management support (eg managers tolerating bad behaviour, lack of report outcome information);
- practical issues (eg time constraints);
- limited understanding of/or confidence in the reporting process;
- lack of confidence in completing reports; and
- impact of reporting.

## Support following incidents

Emotional or pastoral support following incidents was generally from peers or managers. The provision of management support varied and depended on the perceived gravity of the incident and the reaction of the staff member involved. Managerial support ranged from talking the incident through with the staff member/witnesses involved to managers referring staff to counselling. Support that was provided tended to be short-term, was rarely ongoing and rarely took into account delayed reactions to incidents. There tended to be tension between:

- the practical responses required following a staff safety incident and management's role in providing pastoral support; and
- staff safety and Jobcentre Plus' customer service ethos.

Staff were more positive about support they received from their immediate line managers rather than managers 'higher up'. Line managers were regarded as more supportive as they had a better understanding of the challenges front-line staff faced. Senior managers were sometimes perceived as more interested in reporting incidents (ie getting the paperwork done) than the impact of an incident on staff. Staff also found that managers were not always sufficiently firm with difficult customers and that they indeed rewarded bad behaviour by speeding up the processing of their claim/payments etc. This then led to ongoing problems for front-line staff. Linked to this, staff also felt that managers did not always back them up and undermined decisions that they had made with customers.

Support from Trade Union representatives was often linked to an encouragement to complete incident reports.

Staff were generally aware of Care First as a support service. They usually only accessed it if they had experienced what they termed as a 'serious' incident. Some staff questioned Care First's independence from Jobcentre Plus and DWP, whilst others were confident in its confidential service.

Support for Jobcentre Plus staff from security guards in integrated areas varied. They provided first aid, emotional support and encouraged staff to complete incident reports. Some felt that the onus was on them to do this as managers did not always check that staff were alright. There was no support for security guards themselves if they experienced incidents. Security guards stated that as they are employed externally they did not have the same support provision available to them. There was limited awareness of Care First amongst security staff and there was no counselling or paid time off available in event of an incident.

## Potentially violent customers

Front-line staff generally had the least understanding of the process used to identify customers as PV. Staff were generally aware that customers would be classified as PV if they were aggressive, threatening or violent. There was less understanding of PV classification for customers who made staff feel uncomfortable or intimidated. Staff also cited external factors that could lead to a PV classification, eg information from a customer's doctor, local newspaper reports, whether a customer was an ex-offender, or a customer's self-declaration of potential violence.

Various staff were responsible for/or involved in making PV decisions, including:

- Office Managers;
- Nominated Safety Managers;
- Trade Union Health and Safety Representatives (TU H&S Representatives); and
- Customer Services team (in consultation with the Office Manager).

Other external bodies were also cited as being responsible for PV decisions including District/Regional office and an office in Glasgow.

Information on PV customers was disseminated to staff through various formats including:

- written methods (PV customer lists circulated as hard copy or via e-mail);
- computerised methods (other than e-mail, eg PV markers on customer records);
- oral methods (office meetings); and
- informal methods (word of mouth communication and use of the 'conversations box' in the Labour Market System).

Some staff found the information they received was insufficient and questioned its accuracy and effectiveness. Staff were uncertain about the practicalities of using circulated lists of PV customers and there was little consistency in the information on such lists in each office. With regards to PV markers, offices used different approaches. There were also staff who were unable to use this information anyway because of the nature of their job, eg floorwalkers and receptionists.

There was limited dissemination of PV information between Jobcentre Plus and other external agencies dealing with customers.

Managers in integrated areas informed customers of their PV marking, while those in legacy areas were more likely not to. Staff had not experienced any consequences of informing customers of their PV status.

Staff had some concerns about possible PV customers not being classified because of under-reporting. This was attributed to:

- staff tolerating incidents because they were quite resilient and would chose to deal with it themselves rather than report it;
- staff who would deal with customers who were *'mouthy and aggressive'* but had not caused a particular incident; and
- perceptions that the reporting system was too time-consuming and involved too much paperwork.

Many staff did not believe that knowing a customer's PV status had any effect on how they dealt with them. Other staff did not have ready access to the information, eg receptionists and floorwalkers because they dealt with all visitors to the office as they walked through the doors. Other staff felt quite vulnerable and adopted a more cautious manner with PV customers in order to avoid any possible incident. There were exceptional cases of staff who even went so far as to generally assume that any interaction with a PV customer would be negative. Some staff were consistently more lenient with PV customers as they wanted to deal with them quickly so that they would leave the office – all of these staff recognised that treating customers in this manner was a form of prejudice.

Some staff did not prepare any differently for interviews with PV customers whilst others either adopted office procedures or individual approaches. Office procedures included: always seeing PV customers in a screened room, ensuring that staff interviewing PV customers were familiar with their case files and Visiting Officers who always undertook accompanied visits to PV customers' homes. Individual approaches centred on ensuring that someone else, either security guards or colleagues/line managers, was aware of the customer's visit. Most staff were able to defer interviews with PV customers to more senior colleagues; other staff chose not to defer as they considered it to be their responsibility to deal with all customers.

Staff were generally dismissive of the usefulness of PV markers and the PV system because of the way the system works. They did not see the relevance of it for all staff and because of the level of administrative work it created. Staff in Social Security offices held the strongest views on the current PV system and all were negative about it. They believed that if a customer had been violent once they could do it again, and that the current review system had been introduced to assist the policy decision to roll out the Jobcentre Plus vision of service delivery and specifically the delivery of services in an open-plan environment without screens.

Generally staff were aware that there was a review system and that their managers regularly reviewed customers' PV markers. They were also aware that they were required to report on every dealing they had with PV customers. Staff did not complete these forms consistently and in some offices they never completed the forms as they regarded it as a time consuming process and an additional administrative burden.

## Safety management

The main safety documentation that each office should have were a Local Incident Management Plan (LIMP) and a Risk Assessment (RA).

Commonly a LIMP of some sort existed in each office, whilst it tended to be only the managers, Nominated Safety Officers and TU H&S Representatives that were aware of it. These staff generally lacked confidence in the LIMP as an effective safety management tool as they regarded it as bureaucratic and lacking in local relevance. Managers in offices without a LIMP had no plans to develop one. There was little evidence of staff consultation on the LIMP and where this had occurred, staff had little recall of it.

Reviews and revisions to the LIMP rarely occurred. For managers in integrated offices this was due to the development of their LIMP within the last two years; for staff in other offices this was linked to the general opinion that LIMPs had little impact on daily practice. Similarly the dissemination of LIMPs to staff also depended on whether managers felt it related to daily practice. Some office managers reported active dissemination via e-mail, intranet, aide-memoir, circulated folder or presentation. Staff recall of this was poor and management were aware of this. Also, offices rarely tested awareness and understanding of the LIMP or formally embedded it into office practices and procedures.

All offices visited had some sort of RA for the building. Again, only managers, Nominated Safety Officers and TU H&S Representatives were aware of the RA process. If Trillium conducted the RA and the TU H&S Representative was based outside the office, they were unlikely to be involved in its development and tended to dismiss it and regard it as unrepresentative of local issues, lacking in relevance and it often did not include all areas of the office. In integrated areas, those involved in the development of the RA were generally aware that it should be reviewed on a six-monthly basis and following an incident. This was not the case in legacy areas. In both types of area, there were only rare examples of reviews taking place.

Other than those involved in development of the RA, staff were typically unclear about the RA process as a whole as there was no dissemination of it and no consultation or feedback on its progress against recommendations.

If Trillium led the RA process this affected consultation, confidence, ownership and dissemination, especially as it was unlikely that they would have visited the office sites, consulted staff or invited staff to take part in the process. In these instances managers also distanced themselves from the process which led to lack of ownership in the office, and TU H&S Representatives also lacked confidence in the local relevance of the document.

Integrated Jobcentre Plus offices either had a screened area on site or used one located at their local Contact Centre. On-site screened areas tended to be used to deliver Social Fund claims and were not used by other staff, either by choice or because of the need to book in advance. Contact Centres with screened areas were used to deliver Social Fund claims and for customers with a potentially violent marker.

Staff generally had poor awareness of both their own and other staff members' roles and responsibilities for safety as set out in the guidance document: *DWP Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting, part two – roles and responsibilities*. Similarly staff were unaware of the detail of their office's LIMP. Their perceptions of their responsibilities were based on common sense and experience, rather than the content of the guidance.

Individuals in integrated offices were aware that they were in part responsible for their own safety. Staff placed considerable trust in their colleagues and also had a sense of responsibility for the people working around them. In integrated offices there was a greater understanding of mutual responsibility, especially peer responsibilities.

Overall, legacy staff awareness, practice concerning safety roles and responsibilities and ownership of safety responsibilities were poor. This ranged from lack of clarity about what was expected, to dependency on screens and holding managers solely responsible for staff safety.

The relevance of staff's understanding of their safety responsibilities and the similarity and differences between legacy and integrated office staff is important as it highlights the impact that has been made by the roll out to Jobcentre Plus, including the greater focus on customer service and the increase in ownership of Jobcentre Plus staff of their personal safety and the safety of their colleagues.

Integrated office managers saw their roles to be of monitoring and enforcement, disseminating and day-to-day activities. Legacy managers were reassured that Trillium had taken on the responsibility of the RA and they regarded their role as disseminating and raising staff awareness. Overall, staff were uncertain about managers' health and safety roles and responsibilities, but generally knew that managers were responsible for the building, staff and customers. Staff did not mention managers' role in terms of the LIMP and RA, focusing instead on practical activity within the office. Staff's views on management roles and responsibilities were very much determined by their perception of, and confidence in, how proactive managers were in resolving safety issues.

TU H&S Representatives customarily viewed their safety role as being the interface between management and staff. Representatives saw themselves as having joint responsibility alongside management for the safety of all staff. They also promoted good practice among staff; were accessible and approachable should staff have concerns regarding safety; were a liaison point for clarifying guidance and reporting

systems; ensured that action was taken following an incident; and represented staff's concerns.

In integrated offices, there was a greater perception of TU H&S Representatives working alongside staff and management to resolve issues. Typically, staff in integrated offices placed substantial trust in the trade union to represent their needs and ensure safety in the working environment. In legacy offices, the perception of the TU H&S Representative's role was far more combative than in integrated offices. The perception was much more of TU H&S Representatives challenging management to achieve staff safety.

Security staff described their role as being responsible for the safety of the building, staff and customers. Security staff were only aware of management's strategic responsibilities regarding safety. They had no understanding of other staff's role concerning safety. Jobcentre Plus staff felt reassured to some extent by the presence of security staff and vulnerable where there was no security presence. In the case of legacy Jobcentres, staff saw the potential introduction of security staff as the major benefit of roll-out to Jobcentre Plus.

Only management, TU H&S Representatives and Nominated Safety Managers had any insight into the services provided by Trillium. At senior management level, there was still some confusion about Trillium's exact role. The main issue was one of communication between Trillium and Jobcentre Plus management. Where Trillium was responsible for developing the RA, dissemination was poor. In the case of rural offices, Trillium had not necessarily visited offices and the level of communication with management was particularly low.

Consistently across integrated and legacy offices there was mixed awareness of the identity of the Nominated Safety Manager and their roles and responsibilities.

Staff in both integrated and legacy areas identified parts of their offices that they perceived to be vulnerable. A number of issues in integrated Jobcentre Plus offices related to the volume of customers and general lack of privacy and seating in the open plan environment. Customers lacked privacy when using facilities, eg warmphones which was unpleasant if they received unexpected news, or during interviews with staff in interview areas that were located next to customer waiting areas where their conversations could be overheard. Other areas of particular concern to staff were the giro payment/finance area (particularly in integrated Jobcentre Plus offices), doors to staff areas, stairwells and the building entrance/exit and surrounding area.

## Conclusions

- Staff working in integrated areas are more immediately aware of and responsible for safety issues than their counterparts in legacy areas. However, they remain unconcerned with the content of office-specific safety management documentation such as the LIMP, RA and the PV guidance in particular. These documents are not necessarily seen, read, understood or indeed followed.
- Front-line staff could be quite sceptical about managers' commitment to staff safety and questioned whether managers wanted to address issues that they faced with some of their problem customers.
- The new claims process is causing problems for customers with a signing history who have not used Contact Centres before, and elderly people, who might be anxious about using the telephone. The findings on incident triggers suggest that the initial contact through the Contact Centre and the increased work focus are the two particular aspects of the process that are causing concerns.
- Staff generally feel safe working in the integrated Jobcentre Plus office environment and value the welcoming, professional image of the new offices and the various safety measures put in place. The new Jobcentre Plus office environment has impacted positively on staff's ownership of their safety roles and responsibilities – for themselves and their colleagues.
- While RAs and LIMPs are in place, knowledge and understanding of these documents, what they mean for staff and ownership of them, is limited among staff at all levels. Particular concerns are that these documents lack local relevance and that managers and health and safety representatives lack confidence in LIMPs as an effective safety management tool.
- On the whole staff are unaware of the content of the operational guidance on unacceptable customer behaviour and managing and reporting serious incidents, despite managers' attempts to disseminate the documentation. Therefore, staff dealing with customers are putting themselves – and possibly their colleagues – at risk by not being aware of the mechanisms in place to manage risk or minimise risk for the future. This lack of knowledge of the guidance detail is a particular concern in relation to handling and reporting customers who are potentially violent, many of whom are currently not reported.
- In practice the safety management process is generally followed retrospectively, with guidance consulted after an incident has occurred. However, the guidance itself starts from the point where an incident occurs, rather than being embedded in customer service processes and procedures. A further consequence of this retrospective approach is that staff find reasons not to report incidents – lack of time, inability to locate the forms, lack of computer skills.
- Staff are very aware of common incident triggers which are broadly described as people (staff and customers), process and environmental issues. Generally it is the interface between two or more of these triggers, one of which is normally the customer, that can cause incidents. Money without doubt is the key process trigger.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations outline issues which would benefit from attention by central bodies, ie DWP and Jobcentre Plus policy/decision makers and/or by local level Jobcentre Plus office managers.

Recommendations for DWP and Jobcentre Plus policy/decision makers fall under three headings and include:

- Safety/risk management:
  - Re-examine safety management documents to establish whether further work is needed in order for staff to find them pertinent to them and their job, accessible and user friendly.
  - Customer service training, as customer service is a key emphasis of the Jobcentre Plus vision and due to the link between good customer handling skills and minimising risk.
  - Revisit methods used to cascade information to front-line staff.
  - Manage information flow to legacy areas which might contribute to a better understanding of working in an integrated Jobcentre Plus environment.
- Back office functions – these issues relate particularly to the effect of system and/or administrative errors on front-line staff in all types of public facing roles:
  - Awareness raising for back office staff.
  - Monitoring the relationship between administrative and payment errors and incidents.
- Strategic and operational roles and responsibilities:
  - Improve the understanding of staff at all levels about the respective roles and responsibilities of Jobcentre Plus, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union and Trillium.
  - Internal Public Relations (PR) (for all parties) – staff in the field need to know that risk is taken seriously.
  - Demonstrate that lessons are learned and acted on.

Local managers need to fulfil their strategic and operational roles and responsibilities, ie:

- Improve understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.
- Internal PR (for all parties) – staff in the field need to know that risk is taken seriously.
- Demonstrate that lessons are learned and acted on.

Therefore, managers also need a certain level of training and/or awareness raising concerning their responsibilities. This should highlight how their behaviour can affect attitudes to safety in their offices, including:

- customer service versus care of staff;
- their relationship and confidence with Trillium and PCS;
- balance between pastoral support and report completion following incidents;
- level of importance placed on procedures, eg supporting evidence for PV review.

Actions for local managers to take forward at office level:

- Safety/risk management:
  - Re-examine safety management documents and ensure they are pertinent at a local level.
  - Monitoring levels of customer service.
  - Managers in local offices should also revisit methods used to cascade information to front-line staff.
- Back office functions:
  - Ensure back office staff's awareness is raised as to their part in ensuring a safe 'front of house' working environment.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research rationale

Jobcentre Plus was formed in April 2001 as a single organisation responsible for delivering a new, integrated welfare benefits and employment service to people of working age. Since October 2001, there has been gradual closure of separate Jobcentres and Social Security offices, which have been replaced by Jobcentre Plus offices. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) estimates that by the end of the 2003-4 financial year, the new integrated Jobcentre Plus offices were serving more than 35 per cent of customers.

The DWP commissioned this study to examine how the introduction of new processes and changes to the office environment under Jobcentre Plus may have impacted on the safety of staff in these integrated offices – particularly their exposure to risk of verbal abuse and attempted or actual physical assault. ECOTEC was commissioned to examine how changes to the benefit claims process and the office environment have affected known triggers for customer/staff incidents, and to explore the operation of procedures to prevent and deal with such incidents.

The research took place in January and February 2004, and any initiatives implemented since this period are beyond the scope of this research. It is worth noting that since fieldwork, Jobcentre Plus have issued new Keeping Safe Training for all customer-facing staff; a new *Essential Health & Safety Guide* for managers and for individuals; new Travelling and Working Off-Site Guidance; and have issued reminders to staff on incident management procedures via Newsletters and Technical Bulletins. In addition, Health & Safety briefing sessions have been delivered to Jobcentre Plus regional management for cascading to individual districts and regions by the business, and Jobcentre Plus are currently working on a new Managing Health & Safety in Jobcentre Plus Operations framework, new assurance mechanisms for health and safety, and collection and collation of contextualised incident data to the field. Recommendations from an independent review of CCTV and panic alarms systems were published in May 2004.

## 1.2 Research aims and objectives

The research aims were to examine:

- the safety of staff in Jobcentre Plus integrated offices and telephone Contact Centres;
- how the new claims process and office environment introduced under Jobcentre Plus have impacted on staff safety;
- how measures designed to ensure the safety of staff were being implemented in Jobcentre Plus offices;
- the triggers behind assaults and abuse conducted by customers against staff; and
- staff's attitudes towards safety.

Specifically, the research looked at:

- the operation of processes designed to prevent and deal with incidents against staff;
- staff's understanding of these processes;
- triggers that cause incidents;
- staff's perceptions of safety in Jobcentre Plus offices;
- processes around reporting incidents;
- office procedures for dealing with Potentially Violent (PV) customers; and
- the impact of the introduction of Jobcentre Plus (including measures designed to improve staff safety).

## 1.3 Research approach

Fieldwork comprising face-to-face interviews with staff, along with observations of the office environment and staff/customer interactions, was conducted in eight areas:

- four integrated areas, looking at one Jobcentre Plus office and one telephone Contact Centre in each; and
- four non-integrated areas, looking at one Jobcentre and one Social Security office in each.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In a small number of areas, researchers visited additional offices to meet the profile of staff required by the study.

Fieldwork areas were selected with the following criteria in mind:

- geographical spread;
- level of incidents (high or medium/low);<sup>2</sup>
- type of area (urban/rural); and
- customer throughput.

### 1.3.1 Interviews

Face-to-face interviews were held with a wide-ranging sample of staff, as outlined in Table 1.1. The sample was designed to enable staff with the following responsibilities to take part in the study:

- delivery of front-line benefits and employment services to Jobcentre Plus customers;
- managing the flows of customers and signposting customers around offices;
- matters relating to staff and customer safety in Jobcentre Plus offices; and
- dealing with incidents when they arise.

**Table 1.1 Sample profile**

<b>Integrated offices</b>	<b>Non-integrated offices</b>
<b>Contact Centres</b>	<b>Non-integrated Jobcentres</b>
Office Manager	Business Manager/Adviser Manager
First Contact Officers	Senior Adviser
Nominated Safety Manager	Front-line Personal Advisers
	New Deal Advisers
<b>Jobcentre Plus public offices</b>	Visits team
Business Manager/Adviser Manager	Reception staff
Senior Adviser	Security guards
Front-line Advisers	Nominated Safety Manager
New Deal Personal Advisers	Trade Union Health and Safety representative
Visits team	
Financial Assessor Manager	<b>Social Security offices</b>
Financial Assessor	Receptionist
Floor managers/reception staff	Benefits Adviser
Security guards	Visits team
Nominated Safety Manager	Manager
Social Fund Officer	Security guards
Trade Union Health and Safety representative	Nominated Safety Manager
	Social Fund Officer

<sup>2</sup> These were determined using regional-level management information and consultations with district level safety representatives and PCS Union.

While the study aimed as far as possible to recruit staff to this profile, some offices did not have all the staff types listed in Table 1.1. In total, the study included 75 participants from integrated areas and 67 participants from non-integrated areas.

### **1.3.2 Recruitment of interviewees**

All staff in the eight case study areas who met the sample profile outlined in Table 1 were offered the opportunity to participate in the study. The following steps were taken to ensure inclusivity for all staff:

- 1** Office managers sent a list of contact details for their staff (except benefit-processing staff with no front-line role) to the research team.
- 2** For each of the two offices in the fieldwork areas, the research team wrote to each member of staff (except benefit processing staff) to invite them to participate in the study.
- 3** A recruiter contacted all individuals who opted in to the study to arrange a suitable interview appointment.
- 4** A recruiter contacted all staff who met the profile and had not opted out to offer them the opportunity to participate in the study. If they opted in, a suitable interview appointment was arranged.

### **1.3.3 Observations**

The research included the following observations:

- General office observations, carried out in each of the Jobcentre Plus offices and Jobcentres visited. These focused on the following:
  - customer flows around the office, the build up of any 'pressure points' and how these were managed;
  - how customers interacted with the office environment and their use of mediated and unmediated services and facilities;
  - the role of staff in signposting and managing customers in the office, particularly in the reception area;
  - the role of office managers in dealing with customers (whether and when they intervened);
  - the role of security staff in dealing with 'difficult' customers;
  - how customers interacted with each other;
  - how staff interacted with customers displaying signs of aggravation/frustration; and
  - how staff dealt with any conflict.

- Six staff/customer interactions in the various different fieldwork areas, comprising the following:
  - *integrated areas* – Financial Assessor and Work Focused Interview meetings for two customers, two Social Fund meetings, and two Contact Centre calls using dual handsets;
  - *non-integrated areas* – in Jobcentres, two meetings for different customers; in Social Security offices, two benefits meetings and two Social Fund meetings.

## 1.4 Report structure

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 sets out the context for the research;
- Chapter 3 examines staff's definitions and experience of incidents, and unacceptable customer behaviour;
- Chapter 4 explores incident triggers and how risk is managed;
- Chapter 5 shows how incidents are handled;
- Chapter 6 indicates how staff safety incidents are reported;
- Chapter 7 outlines the support available to staff following incidents;
- Chapter 8 explores various aspects of the procedures for dealing with potentially violent customers;
- Chapter 9 examines safety management systems, including documentation and staff roles and responsibilities;
- Chapter 10 looks at the training and guidance available to staff;
- Chapter 11 examines the impact of the introduction of Jobcentre Plus;
- Chapter 12 presents conclusions and recommendations emerging from the research.



## 2 Jobcentre Plus operational context

This chapter of the report outlines the operational context for Jobcentre Plus. It covers the delivery of welfare and employment services via Jobcentre Plus, communications processes for Jobcentre Plus staff, safety management processes and the use of external security agencies. For ease of reference, guidance related to safety management is outlined in this chapter and at the beginning of subsequent chapters.

### 2.1 Delivery of welfare and employment services

Prior to the formation of Jobcentre Plus in April 2001, the welfare and benefits system was administered through different delivery organisations. Jobcentres dealt solely with jobseekers, and the Social Security office (also known as the Benefits Agency) dealt with all other benefit claimants. As noted in Chapter 1, there has been a gradual closure of Jobcentres and Social Security offices, although at present a number are still delivering welfare and benefit services. In order to distinguish these offices from the 'integrated' Jobcentre Plus service deliverers, they are termed 'legacy' offices.

Jobcentres were open plan in design, and were the first point of call for jobseekers wishing to make a new claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). Social Security offices were very different in design; staff delivered services from behind a screen to all other benefit claimants. The receptionist at each Jobcentre or Social Security office would deal with customers' queries, hand out the relevant forms and make new claim appointments where necessary.

Only customers claiming JSA were:

- expected to participate in any type of work focused interview (WFI); and
- subject to mandatory review meetings and participation in mandatory programmes.

## 2.2 Delivery of Jobcentre Plus services

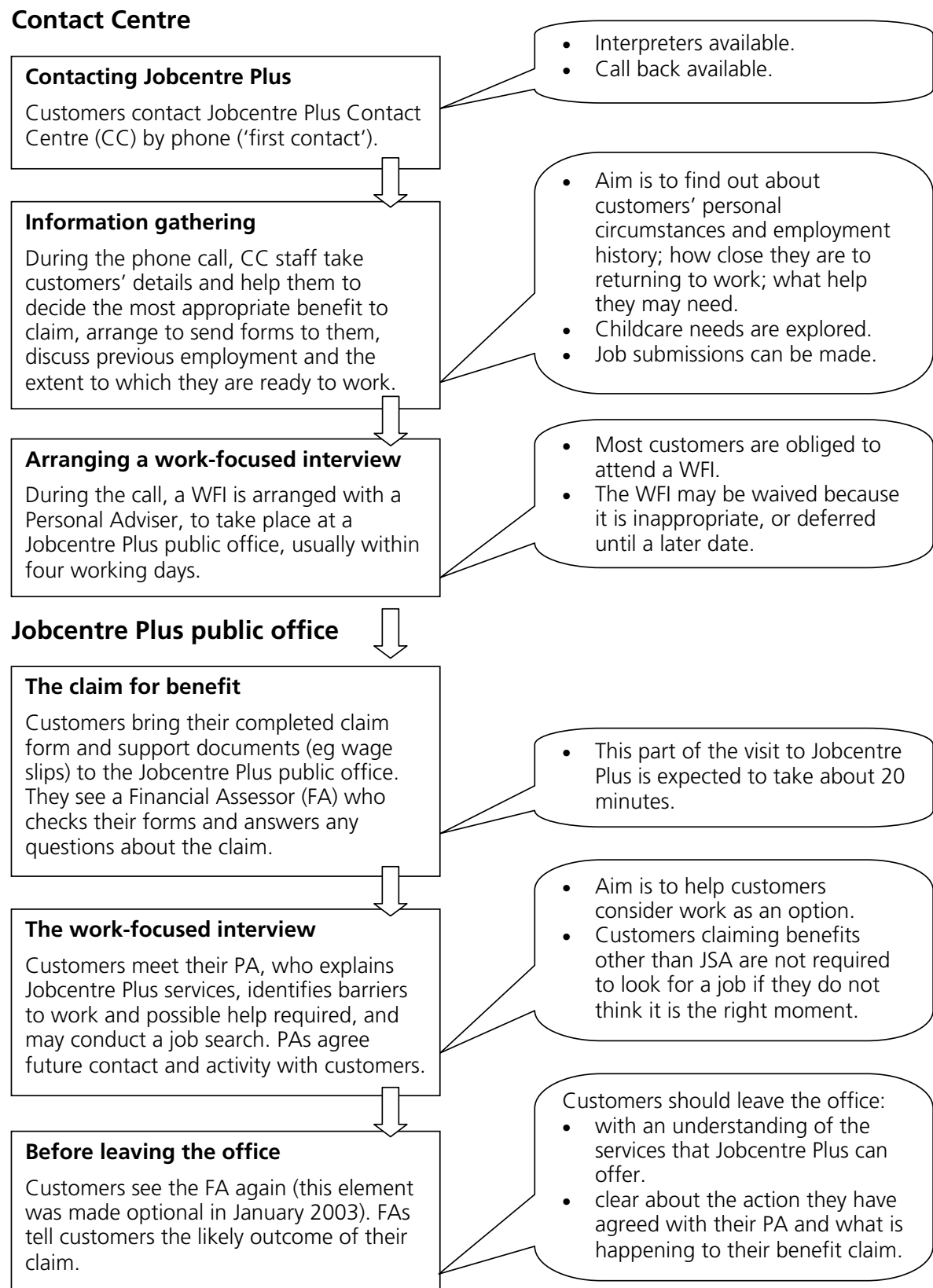
The overall aim of Jobcentre Plus<sup>3</sup> is to deliver '*an integrated and efficient labour market and benefit service to people of working age*'. The Jobcentre Plus vision is that the service should provide:

- 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 Personal Advisers (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.

Figure 2.1 shows the Jobcentre Plus operational processes for new and repeat claimants of working-age benefits.

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<sup>3</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2001) *Opportunity for all – making progress*, Third Annual Report, London: DWP.

Figure 2.1 The Jobcentre Plus process<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Jobcentre Plus brochure, *The work you want, the help you need*.

Jobcentre Plus also provides other facilities and services, including jobpoints, warmphones and Crisis Loans:

- **Jobpoints** are banks of touch-screen computers which have replaced the old-style vacancy boards. They enable customers to search for and select job vacancies by geography and sector, and have printing facilities so that customers can take away a copy of the details. Floorwalkers and Customer Care Officers have the role of facilitating customers in using the Jobpoints, if necessary.
- **Warmphones** are usually situated in open booths. They provide customers with a free telephone service. Warmphones include direct lines to the Contact Centre and other benefits organisations. Customers can also use the phones to contact employers or training organisations.
- **Crisis Loans** are repayable loans available through the Social Fund. They provide help to people who need to meet the expenses of an emergency or disaster. Crisis Loans are paid on a discretionary basis and not all claims are successful, which means that they can be a potential source of tension between customers and staff. Jobcentre Plus aims to improve the system for claiming and providing decisions on:
  - Social Fund claims in a screened environment; and
  - telephone claims for Crisis Loans.

### 2.3 Communication processes for Jobcentre Plus staff

Jobcentre Plus uses the following communication methods to disseminate information from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to delivery organisations, and within individual delivery organisations:

- Intranet – the intranet communication system has superseded the former ESCOM system. The intranet includes all documentation relevant to the delivery organisations on the ground (eg guidance and internal communication bulletins). The intranet system is designed to be quicker to use, easier to navigate and allows local information to be added. An addition to the system is the inclusion of self-teach training materials.
- Communications meetings – these meetings are held once a week in each office, and all staff (other than security guards) are required to attend. They are the main form of communication between management and front-line staff. These meetings delay office opening by an hour one day per week.
- E-mail communication – the use of electronic communication methods to disseminate information within offices is increasing and is gradually replacing the traditional methods of circulating paper copies of information.
- Paper circulation – this has been the traditional method used to circulate information bulletins to all members of staff on a regular basis. In the case of policy documents, staff are often required to sign an accompanying cover sheet to confirm that they have read the documentation.

## 2.4 Safety management processes

### 2.4.1 Risk assessments

Health and safety legislation<sup>5</sup> states that Jobcentre Plus, as an employer, has a legal requirement to ensure, as far as is practical, the health, safety and welfare of its employees. It also states that all employers must carry out risk assessments to identify areas of their business which may expose their employees to risk, and determine the control measures necessary to minimise this risk.

Guidance from the DWP on risk assessment focuses on the areas that should be covered by the risk assessment document.<sup>6</sup> These include:

- identified risks;
- scale of risks;
- control measures in place;
- any practical measures which will improve/remove the situation; and
- any remaining risk and recommended action.

The guidance also indicates who should be involved in the development and regular review of the risk assessment – namely office managers, Trade Union Health and Safety (TU H&S) Representatives, Nominated Safety Managers and in some cases Trillium (see Section 2.5). It is also managers' responsibility to ensure that recommendations are followed up and acted upon.<sup>7</sup>

The introduction of Jobcentre Plus brought about considerable change to the operational processes and working practices that had been in existence. It was therefore necessary to review any impact these changes might have on the risk to Jobcentre Plus staff and members of the public. Operational staff and health and safety officials, in consultation with the trade unions representing Jobcentre Plus staff, undertook a general risk assessment of all offices. This indicated key areas of risk and the control measures that should be put in place to minimise them. The recommendations included the need for:

- a Local Incident Management Plan (LIMP) in all offices, to be reviewed regularly and always following a serious incident. Staff should be aware of this plan and understand it;
- all staff to undertake training in handling customers before commencing their duties, with a regular review of their customer-handling skills.

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<sup>5</sup> Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999).

<sup>6</sup> DWP (1999) *Risk assessments and hazards in the workplace*, chapter 9.

<sup>7</sup> DWP (2003) *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting, part 2 – roles and responsibilities*.

## 2.4.2 Local Incident Management Plans

As noted above, the need for a LIMP was highlighted in the general risk assessment undertaken with the introduction of Jobcentre Plus. The LIMP provides protocols for management, staff and safety officers. The LIMP outlines guidance particular to an individual office on:

- how to avoid incidents;
- what should happen in the event of an incident; and
- what should happen as a result of an incident.

The LIMP also often includes instructions in the event of a fire, bomb or terrorist attack.

If a serious incident occurs, the LIMP should be revised no more than ten working days after the event.

## 2.4.3 Unacceptable customer behaviour

The DWP has produced a set of procedures and guidance entitled *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, which was issued on 1 April 2003. This is designed to reduce the level of risk experienced by staff when dealing with customers whose behaviour is unacceptable. The procedures around unacceptable customer behaviour cover:

- reporting incidents against staff by customers;
- identifying and dealing with Potentially Violent (PV) people;
- the roles and responsibilities of staff and managers; and
- control measures to minimise the risk to staff.

The Department defines unacceptable customer behaviour as:

- *'any act of verbal abuse, including those of a discriminatory nature;*
- *threatening behaviour;*
- *intimidation;*
- *serious or persistent harassment;*
- *an actual or attempted physical assault;*
- *that causes staff to feel upset, threatened, frightened or physically at risk and is directed at them because of their work for the Department.'*

It also applies to incidents that take place outside the workplace, including in non-working hours, if they can be directly connected to staff's work for the DWP.

#### 2.4.4 Definition of a serious incident

The DWP guidance *Jobcentre Plus framework for the management and reporting of serious incidents* (issued 1 April 2003) outlines the following definition of a serious incident:

- 'an actual assault occurs causing injuries that require medical treatment and/or time off work;
- an attempted serious assault involving firearms, knives, petrol, acid etc;
- media attention is attracted;
- potentially serious (ie widespread) industrial relations implications are identified/suspected;
- there is participation by known activist groups;
- there are obvious lessons to be learned from an incident which would apply to other sites across Jobcentre Plus;
- there is serious damage to property.'

#### 2.4.5 Framework for the management and reporting of serious incidents

The DWP guidance on serious incidents also contains specific information to ensure that any serious incidents are properly managed, lessons can be learned, and preventative measures put in place for the future. The guidance includes:<sup>8</sup>

- the roles of local management, the Risk Assessor and local TU H&S Representatives;
- the information flows that should be employed to ensure that all involved in managing the incident are clear about who is responsible for informing the relevant divisions (ie senior Jobcentre Plus management and Occupational Health and Safety Division) and agencies (ie regional press office, employee relations and national trade union);
- check lists for Site Managers and Occupational Health and Safety Division; and
- a full process flowchart.

The DWP intends managers to use this guidance in conjunction with *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, and to ensure that staff are encouraged and given time to complete an IF1 incident form.

#### 2.4.6 Incident reporting procedures

The DWP document *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting* outlines the necessary process for reporting safety incidents.

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<sup>8</sup> DWP (2003) *Jobcentre plus Framework for the managing and reporting of serious incidents*.

Following an incident, managers should encourage the staff involved to report it as soon as possible after the event. Line managers should allow staff time away from their duties to do so.

The following forms are used to report incidents:

- IF1 is used to report all incidents that involve either a customer, other member(s) of the customer's household or an unknown assailant(s).
- IF1 (verbal) is an abridged version of the IF1, which is used to report verbal threats or abuse to staff over the telephone.
- IF2, parts 1-5 are completed by the line manager on receipt of either a completed IF1 or a third-party referral (for example, the police).
- IF3 is completed by any person who witnesses an incident.

The manager's responsibilities also include:

- taking appropriate action against the customer and recording what this was (including an immediate decision about classifying the customer as PV – see Section 2.4.7);
- notifying any other DWP businesses likely to have face-to-face contact with the customer, immediately following the incident;
- sending a copy of the completed incident report forms to the Occupational Health and Safety Division and the local TU H&S Representative and competent Risk Assessor where appropriate;
- undertaking an immediate review of any risk assessment in consultation with the local TU H&S Representative; and
- initiating any local action needed as a result of the review of the risk assessment.

Staff can also expect the following support from management in the event of an incident. Managers should:

- be sensitive to the staff member's feelings;
- discuss with the staff member how they might prevent a recurrence or help staff to deal with a similar situation better next time;
- identify whether those most affected by the incident would benefit from support or counselling;<sup>9</sup> and
- advise the staff member that the trade union representative could also provide help and support.

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<sup>9</sup> Provided by Care First, which is a confidential and specialised support service. Care First can provide support on either an individual or group basis for anyone in Jobcentre Plus who experiences emotional or physical stress as a result of dealing with aggression at work.

### 2.4.7 Potentially violent customers

The DWP regards the classification of a customer as PV to be an important control measure. It is designed to ensure that staff are aware of the risks involved in dealing with the customer, and are thus able to take necessary precautions. The manager nominated to deal with PV customers is accountable for the decision to classify an individual as PV, and must take into consideration any extenuating circumstances that might explain the customer's behaviour.

The DWP's *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting* includes guidelines on behaviour that would result in a person being classified as PV. The circumstances include if customers:

- *'commit an actual physical assault on a member of staff, regardless of whether the member of staff is injured;*
- *commit an actual physical assault on a member of staff's family, if it can be demonstrated that the assault was directly connected to the member of staff's work in the Department;*
- *attempt to commit a physical assault;*
- *stalk a particular member of staff (which is defined as 'the wilful, malicious and repeated following and harassing of another person');*
- *suffer from a severe mental illness and they, or a qualified medical practitioner or social worker, inform the Department that they are likely to pose a danger to staff;*
- *make a threat of violence either face to face, over the telephone or in writing; or*
- *display threatening or aggressive behaviour.'*

The DWP is legally required to inform customers of their PV status, unless there is a situation where managers decide that revealing the PV decision to the customer might put staff at risk of further violent incidents.

Office Managers are responsible for determining (in consultation with staff) a safe system for dealing with PV customers. They should consider options such as: use of third parties (eg social workers, probation officers); accompanied visits/interviews; managers undertaking interviews or accompanying staff in interviews; and use of a screened area. A report of the customer's behaviour will be made on each occasion they have dealings with DWP staff.

The guidance states that all PV markings must be reviewed on an annual basis. In doing so, the nominated manager must take into account the nature of the incident which led to the original PV decision, the number and type of contacts since the original incident, and the customer's behaviour since the original incident. If the PV classification is removed, nominated managers should notify both the customer and those organisations originally notified of the PV classification as soon as possible.

### 2.4.8 Training and guidance

At the time of fieldwork, the foundation training course undertaken by *all* Jobcentre Plus staff working with the general public was called 'Preventing and calming difficult situations' (PCDS). It was designed as a one-day course that all staff must attend prior to contact with customers. The programme included background to assaults; prevention, diffusion and calming; keeping safe; and responses to incidents. Since then a new training package has been introduced called 'Keeping Safe'. However this is not covered by this research.

The follow-up to PCDS is 'Preventing and calming difficult interviews' (PCDI), which requires some face-to-face experience prior to the training. PCDI is designed as a two-day course to equip staff with the skills to '*anticipate, prevent or calm difficult or heated interviews*'<sup>10</sup> and use office systems to support the adviser. The course covers:

- definitions and detection;
- triggers and reasons/purpose of aggression;
- potential reactions (how to use and/or overcome these);
- prevention methods;
- calming techniques;
- physical protection reactions;
- post-incident responses and actions; and
- how to apply the training to job roles and different situations.

### 2.4.9 Trade unions

The manager should inform the TU H&S Representative immediately after a serious incident has occurred and, where possible, they should investigate the incident jointly. TU H&S Representatives should be consulted and, wherever possible, participate in site-specific risk assessments. Further essential aspects of their role are to provide support for individuals who have experienced an incident, and to represent staff with concerns about safety.

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<sup>10</sup> DWP (2003) *Preventing and Calming Difficult Interviews Facilitator's Pack*.

## 2.5 External security agencies

### 2.5.1 Land Securities Trillium

In 1998, the DWP signed an agreement, transferring ownership and management of almost all of its estate to Land Securities Trillium (commonly referred to as 'Trillium'). Trillium's responsibilities include:

- building management and maintenance;
- furniture and equipment maintenance;
- utilities management;
- security; and
- catering.

Trillium have also been responsible for developing and reviewing the locality specific risk assessments for some DWP offices.

### 2.5.2 Securitas

Whilst Trillium have ultimate responsibility for ensuring the safety of DWP buildings, staff and customers they sub-contract this element of their work in Jobcentre Plus offices to an organisation called Securitas. Security guards have a range of duties relating to security of the building, staff and customers, customer service, and action to take in the event of an incident taking place.

*'General duties:*

- *On their arrival, welcome and respond to clients/visitors to the office.*
- *Facilitate flow of clients through reception into the waiting areas.*
- *Assist clients with Jobpoints and leaflets if requested by floor managers.*
- *Use knowledge to identify possible 'hot spots' and inform floor managers. Always look to minimise tensions.*
- *Assist those with disabilities, elderly or infirm people, or those in any difficulty.*
- *Support and assist Jobcentre Plus staff to deliver their service to those who use their office.*
- *Be proactive, find solutions, minimise any cause of tension within the office environment.*

*Specific duties:*

- **CCTV** – On a regular basis checks the monitors and pay particular attention to high-risk areas. These should be identified within each office and are likely to include toilet areas, staircases, and pay areas. If problems occur, inform the floor managers; do not wait to see how they develop.
- **Public toilets** – Regular patrols and inspections to be carried out. Particular attention should be paid to standards of cleanliness and hygiene. Problems should be reported and action taken immediately. This may mean calling out specialist contractors to remove items such as hypodermic needles or body fluids.
- **Alarm systems** (including panic alarms) – Learn how the system works, and ensure that alarms are set correctly every day.
- **Fire/bomb emergencies** – Ensure familiarity with the office plans and the role of the guard in the event of an emergency. The prime role will always be the safe evacuation of all within the office.

*In the event of an incident the guidance states that security guards are expected to:*

- Tackle minor incidents before they escalate out of control.
- Be firm, fair and polite when dealing with potentially difficult situations. If you treat people as you would expect to be treated many situations can be more easily managed.
- Be aware of the guidance, agreed with the floor managers, on who can or cannot be admitted to the office. If you have been requested to restrict access to individuals who are in breach of policy (such as smoking or drinking alcohol) and for some reason you are unable to do so, inform the floor manager.
- If an incident occurs – As the trained security guard you will use your training and experience to work in conjunction with the DWP staff member controlling the incident.
- In any incident you must act to minimise the risk to yourself, DWP staff and customers. Use your training and experience to anticipate and defuse potentially aggressive situations. Where a situation is escalating, make every effort to ensure DWP staff and customers are moved away to a place of safety before an incident occurs.
- Physical intervention or arrest should be used only as a last resort where you judge that there is a real and immediate threat to the safety of a member of staff or a customer. However, provided you act within the law both your company and Jobcentre Plus will support you.
- Ensure all incidents are recorded in the assignment logbook.
- Work to maintain a safe and secure environment for everyone<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> DWP Intranet Guidance for Security Guards in Jobcentre Plus offices..

# 3 Incidents and unacceptable behaviour – definitions and experiences

This chapter examines staff's definitions of incidents and unacceptable customer behaviour and their experiences of incidents – directly or as a witness.

## 3.1 Definitions in the guidance

Definitions of serious incidents and unacceptable customer behaviour are outlined in *Jobcentre Plus framework for the management of serious incidents* and *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting* respectively.<sup>12</sup> These definitions and staff's own definitions are discussed below.

The Jobcentre Plus guidance on incident management defines a serious incident as follows:

'A serious incident is when:

- *an actual assault occurs causing injuries that require medical attention and/or time off work;*
- *an attempted serious assault occurs involving firearms, knives, an axe, petrol, acid etc;*
- *media attention is attracted;*
- *potentially serious (ie widespread) industrial relations are identified/suspected;*

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<sup>12</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2003) *Jobcentre Plus Framework for the management of serious incidents* and *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*.

- *there is participation by known activist groups;*
- *there are obvious lessons to be learned from an incident which would apply to other sites across Jobcentre Plus;*
- *there is serious damage to property.'*  
(para 2.3, p4).

The guidance on unacceptable customer behaviour defines unacceptable behaviour as:

- *'any act of written or verbal abuse, including those of a discriminatory nature;*
- *threatening behaviour;*
- *intimidation;*
- *serious or persistent harassment;*
- *an actual or attempted physical assault;*
- *that causes staff to feel upset, threatened, frightened or physically at risk and is directed at them because of their work in the Department.'*  
(para 14).

### 3.2 Staff's definitions of incidents

There were some key differences between staff's perceptions of incidents and the guidance's definition of serious incidents. When staff described incidents the language and terminology they used generally matched that presented in the guidance on unacceptable customer behaviour rather than the definition provided for serious incidents, which other than reference to assaults/attempted assaults, concerns the consequences of incidents rather than the event(s) itself.

Staff described incidents as:

- events – something that has happened or might happen;
- people's actions and behaviour, including threats and intimidation; and
- how an event or action might make them feel – upset, unsafe or threatened, for example.

When staff talked about incidents they differentiated between physical and verbal incidents. The former were more serious but less frequent than the latter. Two key issues emerged in terms of how staff defined and interpreted incidents:

- **Managing and containing problem situations** – where a problem situation had been managed or contained, staff questioned whether this was an incident, since such situations did not normally get reported.

- **Personalisation of incident definitions** – while staff's definitions covered some or all of the elements identified above (events, actions, feelings), these were interpreted in an individual manner and were illustrated by examples of incidents that they had experienced or comments on the frequency of different types of events. For example:
  - A manager in a Contact Centre said:

*'For me it's any occasion where it makes the member of staff feel seriously uncomfortable. None of us likes being addressed in a raised voice, and none of us like people using inappropriate language'.*
  - A security guard (from a legacy case study area) defined major incidents as assaults, damage to property and cases where members of the public break through into the staff areas but added that such events *'don't happen too often'*.
  - A Jobcentre Plus manager defined an incident as a situation where a member of staff feels unsafe and went on to make the following comment on the nature of incidents and their frequency:

*'I think verbal is more [frequent] than physical. As far as I'm aware we've only, and don't forget this is as far as I'm aware, only had one person actually physically assaulted. And the security guards have come close to being assaulted, but the staff I think there's only been one or two threats, one actual assault ... So the actual number of physical assaults I think is low, it tends to be more verbal'.*

In practice, staff viewed incidents as a relative rather than an absolute concept, acknowledging that colleagues' views of incidents and unacceptable customer behaviour might differ from their own. Staff generally referred to incidents in the third person, or as a theoretical or hypothetical situation. Only one interviewee specifically defined an incident as something that happened to them, saying:

*'Where I felt threatened, whether it be physically, verbally or banging by the clients'.*

There were cases where managers were concerned that there was some difference between their interpretation of an incident and staffs' views. Where this happened these managers provided general or broad definitions of incidents, for example where a customer made a member of staff feel uncomfortable.

### 3.2.1 Events

The types of events that staff identified as incidents were verbal abuse, physical abuse (threatened, attempted or actual harm) and damage to property. Included in verbal abuse were cases of racial abuse; which were reported in both integrated and legacy areas. Staff had quite different views about what types of events constituted an incident and indeed these differences of opinion had a bearing on whether such events were reported (this latter issue is covered in Chapter 6). Their definitions were generally governed by their tolerance concerning unacceptable customer behaviour, particularly in relation to verbal abuse. That said, any attempted and/or actual assaults were considered serious incidents.

As identified above and as is covered in further detail in Section 3.4, staff's definitions of events were illustrated by examples of incidents they had experienced, either directly themselves or as witnesses.

### 3.2.2 Actions and behaviour

In terms of people's actions and behaviour, staff felt that attempted assault or the threat of assault were serious incidents. A security guard in a legacy Social Security office, for example, felt that physical threat was the main type of staff safety incident. Threatening and intimidating behaviour also featured in definitions of incidents. Such behaviour manifested itself as follows:

- through aggression, which was evident in aggressive language, behaviour and actions; and
- in quiet or '*silent*' behaviour that created an uncomfortable atmosphere as a result of an implicit rather than an explicit threat.

Looking specifically at aggression, a small group of staff rationalised customers' language and behaviour, saying that it was directed at the '*system*'. They felt that aggression occurred when customers were frustrated by Jobcentre Plus procedures, a lack of communication between staff and customers, and/or delays in payment. However, staff were concerned when aggression was targeted at them as individuals. This was particularly important for the small numbers of interviewees from minority ethnic groups who reported racial abuse.

A Fortnightly Job Review Team Leader in an integrated office associated aggression with what could be interpreted as a 'weapon' by saying '*something used*'. However, this interviewee did not use any of the terminology in the definition of serious incidents in the Jobcentre Plus incident management guidance (*'an attempted serious assault...involving firearms, knives, an axe, petrol, acid etc'*).

Staff found mild or silent behaviour disturbing because it did not draw the attention of colleagues in the same way as customers '*letting off steam*' by shouting and swearing. For example, one interviewee said:

*'The most threatening behaviour can be the quietest – where it's done very menacingly and they will be very quiet about it, but they will start moving closer to you at the interview and it's when I start feeling uncomfortable.'*

(Adviser, Jobcentre Plus)

### 3.2.3 Feelings towards incidents

How members of staff felt about events or customer behaviour featured strongly in their definitions of incidents. Staff talked about feeling:

- threatened or intimidated;
- uncomfortable;

- worried or disturbed;
- frightened; or
- unsafe in terms of their safety being compromised.

In some cases, definitions covered how events or behaviour affected other customers too, who like members of staff can be intimidated or even involved when incidents occur.

### 3.3 Unacceptable customer behaviour

Staff tended to associate unacceptable customer behaviour more with verbal than with physical abuse, while the guidance definition covers both types of incidents. Interviewees recognised that different members of staff had quite different views on what was and was not acceptable customer behaviour. In some cases, staff reported that swearing was part of customers' day-to-day language: one interviewee said it was *'more or less part of the job'* (Restart Adviser, integrated office) while another said:

*'If someone shouts at me or uses foul language, in some ways you do get used to that and it's just a brush off, whereas others might find that quite a problem.'*

(Legacy Adviser)

For a small number of interviewees, the frequency of verbal abuse was such that they questioned whether it should indeed be defined as an incident.

Staff who had worked in Jobcentres and Social Security offices for some time (ten years and more, for example) generally stated that they had developed tolerance to customer behaviour. In some cases they were blasé, particularly in relation to swearing and other verbal abuse.

*'Swearing is like water off a duck's back, you should be listening to the words in between.'*

(Legacy Team Leader)

*'Jobcentres and Social Security offices tolerate levels of abuse and poor behaviour that are not necessarily accepted in other organisations.'*

(Legacy Manager)

Similarly, a New Deal Adviser in an integrated office raised the issue of 'institutional tolerance', suggesting that the *'ES side have always tolerated more shouting and swearing'*.

Where staff were tolerant to verbal or physical abuse, this was associated with the delivery of bad news. A Social Fund Officer in a legacy Social Security office, for example, explained that customers might let off steam after they received an unfavourable decision. However, staff who were offended by bad language would ask customers to moderate their language. One interviewee added that if a customer did not comply with such a request, then they would terminate the interview.

As with staff's definitions of incidents, their definitions of unacceptable customer behaviour took into account individuals' tolerance to such behaviour and different views of what was and was not acceptable.

### 3.4 Experience of incidents and unacceptable customer behaviour

Many of the staff interviewed in both legacy and integrated offices had experienced incidents – either by being personally involved or having witnessed them – or were aware of incidents involving colleagues. Whilst incidents in Contact Centres were reported as being relatively rare, it was unusual for staff to have had no experience of incidents, although these individuals were not necessarily associated with 'low-incident areas'. One, for example, was a Visiting Officer with eight years' experience, attached to a high-incident Jobcentre Plus office.

Both the levels and patterns of incidents varied across and within offices, with some staff reporting limited exposure to incidents whereas others experienced incidents on a more frequent basis. When asked about the frequency of incidents, the responses varied from an average of one a week to six a year. Looking at incident patterns, the research identified that:

- there were no consistent patterns as to when incidents might happen (this refers to both time and triggers). Incident triggers are covered in detail in Chapter 4;
- a small group of customers accounted for the majority of incidents; and
- the majority of incidents were verbal and many of these were not reported.

One interviewee said:

*'Sometimes it can be once a week, sometimes it can be three times in a day. There's no set rule to it. Sometimes we have our freaky Fridays, where we get loads of people in, but it's not on a regular basis, but it's regular enough to notice it.'*

(Financial Assessor Manager, integrated office)

The following sections look specifically at incidents that staff had experienced in terms of events, actions and behaviour – and the associated consequences – over the last two years.

#### 3.4.1 Events

In terms of actual incidents, staff reported the following events:

- verbal incidents;
- physical incidents – assault, attempted assault and damage to property; and
- disturbing events, including self-harm and unusual actions.

### *Verbal abuse*

Section 3.3 on unacceptable customer behaviour identified that verbal abuse and swearing were common occurrences for staff in all types of front-line offices and Contact Centres. A small group of staff even questioned whether such abuse constituted an incident because it happened so frequently. As a consequence, these incidents went unreported, as one interviewee explained:

*'Because of the nature of this office swearing and other verbal has become an everyday occurrence... I know a number of staff would be spending all their time if they had to fill in verbal assault forms, it would bring the system to a grinding halt.'*

(Legacy Health and Safety Representative)

Staff had also experienced racial abuse as a particularly unacceptable form of verbal abuse. Two staff in one legacy area said the following about an incident involving two colleagues:

*'There's one particularly nasty incident that the person involved was really offensive – was making racist remarks to members of staff and the security guard. He was threatening... "I've got a gun at home and a knife at home and I'm going to come and get you."'*

(Legacy Manager)

*'He was shouting abuse at him, saying: "I'm going to get someone to kill your family. You're filthy, I won't get my hands dirty. Watch and see if anyone sees you on the street." He called him a black bastard.'*

(Legacy Adviser)

### *Physical assault*

Interviewees across integrated and legacy areas described assault, attempted and/or threatened assault and damage to property. Types of assaults experienced include:

- staff being spat at, in both screened and open environments (outlined only in legacy areas);
- customers fighting, with a member of staff, a security guard or each other; and
- staff being attacked, lunged at, 'thumped', hit, or pinned against a wall either in or outside their place of work.

On the basis of the research findings, weapons are rare, albeit significant in attacks on staff. Security guards in two legacy Social Security offices mentioned knives and needles as weapons, while a manager in a legacy Jobcentre was threatened with a knife. A security guard mentioned that different customer groups carried knives or needles for self-defence. Another said that he had removed from the office a customer who had been particularly threatening to staff and customers. It was not until he reviewed the video evidence later on that he realised that the customer had been carrying a knife.

Two of those reporting assaults on their person were women; both were in legacy Social Security offices. In both cases, the incidents happened some time ago: one five years ago and one three years ago. The first woman was hit by a customer with mental health problems while she was interviewing him about his benefits. The second had explained to a customer that he was ineligible for a Crisis Loan. This woman was in a screened environment and the customer punched the screen at the level of her face.

Attacks on two other female members of staff were also reported, one in a legacy case-study area, the other in an integrated area. Both attacks took place outside the office. The member of staff attacked in the legacy area was absent from work for four to five months and no longer walks to work. The customer was known and colleagues thought that this person could be violent.

One other reported incident did not involve Jobcentre Plus staff: a member of the public entered a Jobcentre Plus office and assaulted a customer.

In addition to actual assaults, staff mentioned attempted and threatened assaults. In some cases, assaults had been averted because security guards and/or other colleagues intervened. However, in other cases staff perception was that security guards had antagonised customers. One interviewee from an integrated area stated that customers' aggression was now directed at security staff rather than advisers.

### *Damage to property*

Two types of incidents linked to damage to property or threatened damage to property were reported:

- General, albeit significant, damage following an unfavourable decision or an extended waiting time, for example:
  - a customer who was told that Social Fund applications were dealt with in a different office returned later with a hammer and smashed the cubicles and glass partitions in the Social Security office;
  - a customer threw a chair at a window after being told that their benefits had been stopped because they had not attended an interview.
- General, seemingly unprovoked, damage to property. One customer used a railing as a battering ram and smashed windows and a door.

### *Disturbing events*

Interviewees identified the following four types of disturbing events they had experienced. Typically, these incidents were reported by interviewees from legacy Social Security offices; exceptions are noted:

- **Self-harm and attempted (or threatened) suicide** – staff in legacy Social Security offices identified exceptional instances of customers cutting themselves. The customers involved stated their reasons as either threatened suicide in which they would take a number of Jobcentre Plus staff with them or because they were not getting any money.
- **Events in waiting rooms/waiting areas** – staff in a legacy area reported evidence of intravenous drug users injecting themselves in the waiting room. The Security Supervisor had found syringes, while the TU H&S Representative said:

*'You have people openly injecting themselves and not just in their arm, they have their trousers around their ankles and they'll be injecting themselves in their groin, between their toes, in their ankle...'*

In the same office, a Social Fund Officer reported that someone had died in the waiting room.

- **Written abuse** – there were examples of staff receiving written abuse - an interviewee (in an integrated Jobcentre Plus office) received a disturbing note of a graphical sexual nature, while another member of staff received a Christmas card and was uncomfortable with its content (legacy Jobcentre).
- **Unusual interview situations** – a Visits Team Leader said that they and their team had experienced the following while interviewing customers:
  - having to ask people to get dressed, because they were only wearing their underwear;
  - watching people sharpen knives during interviews; and
  - a person playing with a cigarette lighter shaped like a gun.

### **3.4.2 Actions and behaviour**

Threatening behaviour was not as commonplace as verbal abuse. However, it was disturbing when it did occur. Staff felt that reception staff, new claims staff, security guards and floorwalkers were in the most vulnerable position because they did not know whether customers were PV.

Different types of threatening behaviour were reported, varying from direct threats of attack or threats of damage to property, through to menacing, aggressive or intimidating behaviour. As with verbal abuse, members of staff sometimes shrugged off threats. However, those that involved customers issuing threats such as *'I know where you live,'* or *'I'll wait for you outside'* were particularly disturbing, as well as threats involving staff's family members. These kinds of threats are illustrated in the following examples.

- A Visiting Officer said that she had been threatened with attack by a customer who was unhappy with the decision made. Later in the day, the Visiting Officer had gone to collect her daughter and saw this same customer talking to the girl. This event was reported to the police.
- A member of staff was concerned about letting her children out to play because they might be recognised as the children of someone who works for 'the Social Security office'.
- A customer threatened to wait outside for a member of staff. When the customer was seen waiting outside, the police were called.
- A Jobcentre Plus adviser reported two threats as follows:

*'I was interviewing somebody once and they leant across the desk and said, "some dark night I'm coming round to your house and I'm going to get you," and because I live on the doorstep and I live on my own but it freaked me out... I went sick for a while.'*

*'They introduced the system of job where I had to interview long-term unemployed and really force or persuade strongly to take jobs. This particular one wasn't very happy at having to take a low-paid job and I remember rightly, he went away, the next person came and sat at my desk, he doubled back, leant over my desk and threatened that he knew where I lived and he'd come round and get me. That was the final straw because I was under the weather, that was it and I rang sick the following morning.'*

- A Financial Assessor said that customers sometimes waited outside the Jobcentre Plus office and offered to walk members of staff home.

### 3.4.3 Consequences

Section 3.2.3 on feelings towards incidents outlined how incidents made staff feel. There were rare cases of staff who said that they took sick leave following physical incidents. Others commonly explained that incidents, particularly verbal incidents, were part of the job or it was their responsibility to manage or contain them. However, some staff reported isolated instances of colleagues being 'officious', which contributed to incidents escalating. Similarly, there was some evidence of a build up of stress, with staff saying that they did not always respond as they should, illustrated as follows:

*'I lost my temper I suppose, and I'd had enough. I wasn't going to listen to it any more and I'm not prepared to put up with them ranting and raving and I told them they could do whatever they liked and I walked away.'*

(Adviser, Jobcentre Plus)

One interviewee reported suffering shock, having witnessed an attack on a colleague. This member of staff had experienced ten incidents in the past year, but only completed an incident report associated with this attack, saying:

*'Because the person got physically violent with my colleague and I was just standing there and it did shock me quite a bit, and I thought something had to be done about it.'*

(Adviser, Jobcentre Plus)

Some managers and trade union representatives, however, were particularly surprised that staff were blasé about incidents and failed to report them, despite frequent requests to do so.

*'When you go and speak to the staff they say, "Oh it was just that he shouted at me". You can go on and on and on about it, and it doesn't seem to hammer home'*

(Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

However, some staff did not report incidents because they did not think that anything would be done about them. Hence there was apathy towards form filling (see also Chapter 6 on reporting).



## 4 Incident triggers and managing risk

This chapter of the report examines triggers for incidents and steps taken by staff to manage risk. Triggers common to both types of case-study area are discussed first, followed by triggers pertinent to integrated areas. Four main themes are examined: customers, staff, process, and environmental triggers. The chapter concludes by looking at risk management and the periodicity of incidents, to identify whether they occur at particular times in the year.

It is important to note that whilst we have made this thematic distinction based on the emphasis staff placed on their experiences, incident triggers were not absolute and they typically resulted from how different elements interfaced or even as the result of a culmination of events.

### 4.1 Customers

Staff identified a wide range of customers who might cause incidents, indeed some staff felt that any customer might cause an incident, depending on their personal circumstances and how they were handled. Due to the range of responses, findings have been broadly categorised as those influenced by external factors, customers who are disempowered and other factors.

#### 4.1.1 Customers influenced by external factors

Customers' behaviour under the following categories was influenced by external factors:

- substance abusers who were on drugs when they came to the office (or took drugs in the offices);
- customers with alcohol problems, especially those who came to the office drunk;

- customers with mental health problems, particularly those who failed to take their prescribed medication; and
- ex-offenders who demanded immediate access to money.

Customers with drugs and alcohol problems were by far the most frequently mentioned categories of customers causing incidents. Indeed, one of the observations in a Jobcentre Plus office saw a mother and daughter enter the office, both claiming that they had not received their giro. The mother was inebriated. An adviser agreed to see them and the security guards were alerted. During the interview three security guards surrounded the adviser's desk and as the situation diffused two of them backed away (but remained focused on the customers).

Staff recognised that customers with mental health problems were ill and were not necessarily violent or Potentially Violent (PV). However, they pointed out that problems associated with these customers' illnesses might contribute to incidents occurring.

Regarding ex-offenders, there were some front-line staff who mentioned them as people who might cause incidents. Staff recognised that ex-offenders had been taken out of an institutional environment and were anxious about how they would secure access to money. In some cases, they had been given incorrect advice, and hence they reacted when they could not get access to money as they expected.

#### **4.1.2 Customers who are disempowered**

Staff felt that customers signing on for various types of benefits were disempowered, and were anxious and distressed about their situation. Staff noted that the need to claim benefits was considered as the last resort. They said that customers with no previous experience of unemployment and those who had failed to secure work and were getting 'down' about their situation could cause incidents. As one interviewee said:

*'Sometimes some of the worst people are the ones who are thrown into the situation. They need to claim benefit and they think, assume, that the world owes them a living because they've paid into their taxes so many years, they can be worse...'*

(Business Manager, Social Security office)

In some cases, staff from Social Security offices identified that customers were wound up, and indeed wound themselves up before coming into the office. Customers sometimes targeted their anger about other personal problems at Social Security office and Jobcentre staff.

Other potential incident triggers involving customers concerned how customers who were anxious or disempowered interfaced with the benefits process. This included the following:

- lack of money and problems in accessing benefits payment – these were identified as key factors affecting how customers behaved (see also Section 4.3 which examines process triggers);
- customers who had to wait to be seen or who were waiting for money;
- customers who had applied for Crisis Loans that were turned down;
- customers who received unfavourable decisions – for example, being asked to comply with benefits requirements, or being sanctioned; and
- customers who did not like to deal with staff of the opposite sex.<sup>13</sup>

There were customers who would react badly to unfavourable decisions. This was particularly evident in failed applications for Crisis Loans and when customers' benefits had been stopped because they failed to comply with the requirements of their benefits (even though responsibility for compliance belongs to customers). In some cases, staff simply asking customers about job search could trigger incidents.

#### **4.1.3 Customer triggers and involvement in incidents**

Staff also identified the following categories of customers who, from their experience, might trigger or be involved in incidents<sup>14</sup>:

- young people – a number of staff raised the following issues relating to young people, which accounted for their behaviour:
  - aggression, fuelled in some cases by drugs and/or alcohol;
  - traumatic personal problems, such as housing problems or a history of abuse;
- homeless people, because they were vulnerable;
- 'revolving door' customers<sup>15</sup>; and
- older men and pensioners.

Customers' associates (friends and family) could also trigger incidents. Sometimes these associates were more volatile than the customers. One interviewee said:

*'Sometimes they [the customer] might be fairly reasonable, but perhaps their girlfriend or wife or partner is not.'*

(Signing Officer, Jobcentre Plus)

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<sup>13</sup> This was not common, but where it occurred these customers' preference to deal with a same-sex adviser was normally accommodated, to manage the associated risk to staff.

<sup>14</sup> This section describes research findings on staff perceptions about customers who might be involved in incidents.

<sup>15</sup> Customers who return to JSA because they do not sustain employment.

Both known and new customers could trigger incidents. While staff recognised that they could prepare for working with known individuals, they raised concerns about new customers because they did not know how they might react. Despite this, staff reported that they were used to reading customers' body language, facial expressions and attitudes and therefore could manage or diffuse most difficult situations. For example, an adviser said:

*'You can tell that something isn't right, you can see that. I think you need a lot of years experience to gather that, you can see it in their body language, their facial expressions or just their temperance [sic], with regards to receiving information or where to go or what to do next.'*

(Adviser, legacy Jobcentre)

## 4.2 Staff

Staff identified the following key incident triggers associated with staff: staffing levels, poor customer-handling and communication skills, communicating unfavourable decisions and saying 'no' to customers, managers overriding staff's decisions and administrative errors.

### 4.2.1 Staffing levels

Staff reported that at times a lack of staff resources, in general or through staff being off sick, could contribute to an increased risk of incidents and were key issues for open plan offices. For these offices, longer opening hours caused concern as full-time workers were often left alone in areas of the office at the end of the day.

There were examples of too few Financial Assessors in Jobcentre Plus offices, which meant that customers could not proceed to their work focused interview, or insufficient work focused interviews were taking place. This resulted in increased customer waiting times either in the office or for a work focused interview appointment from the Contact Centre. The delayed availability of an initial work focused interview appointment could result in increased customer frustration as their claim cannot be initiated and they remain without benefits until after this interview has taken place. A particular concern for managers was that they could not secure additional resources to cover temporarily inactive staff, for example those on maternity leave or extended sick leave. One interviewee added that having too few staff resulted in more mistakes and led to an increased risk of incidents occurring.

Typically staff sickness and holidays were also issues, but more so in smaller offices as they created a backlog and increased customer waiting times. Another knock-on effect was that some areas of the office were left with one or two staff members at lunchtime or for the last hour of the day. These staff felt vulnerable when there were too few colleagues in the vicinity to raise an alarm or act as a deterrent if necessary.

In one office, staff shortages were considered to be severe and interfering with the delivery of the Jobcentre Plus service because customer waiting times were so lengthy. Staff cited cases where this had directly resulted in incidents.

### 4.2.2 Poor customer-handling and communication skills

Staff explained that from their experience some colleagues had poor customer-handling skills which could trigger incidents. Particular concerns were colleagues who were condescending with customers or who patronised them. The following quotes illustrate these concerns:

*'Customers complain about the attitude of staff and the manner in which they are spoken to. A lot of them come to me and say, "Her down there, she's talking to me like I'm a five-year-old kid." A lot of them don't like that and say it's the staff's attitude, but I don't know because I'm not down that end to listen to them.'*

(Customer Care Officer, Jobcentre Plus)

*'It's the way you talk to people, like you shouldn't talk down to them, demeaning them, that can get people's backs up that way. I've seen that as well... I've watched many people who have just not got people skills and it's a cringe factor when you hear them talking to customers.'*

(Benefits Adviser, Social Security office)

In terms of communication skills, staff in both integrated and legacy areas identified that staff did not always explain things well to customers or give them information to help them understand what was happening (this was confirmed by observations). That said, an interviewee said that all staff had bad days sometimes, so the potential for incidents always existed. The observations confirmed that communication skills and customers not understanding process issues (because they have not been given information) can indeed contribute to escalating situations. Examples are provided below:

- A member of staff in a legacy office launched straight into a meeting without any introduction. The customer had lost their order book and had been to the office earlier in the week to report it missing. The observed adviser sought clarification from the advisers who had seen the customer previously, who confirmed that the necessary forms had been completed and posted to the processing centre. The customer got upset because they needed money (the observer noted that the customer was more upset than violent). The member of staff responded by saying that if they did not calm down, they would not get any money. The observer noted that the adviser was not sympathetic and appeared to make the situation worse.
- A First Contact Officer in a Contact Centre stopped talking to their customer while they were reading on-screen information, hence there were long silences during the call. The member of staff did not explain what they were doing to the customer, and the customer got agitated.

### 4.2.3 Communicating unfavourable decisions and saying 'no' to customers

Communicating bad news and explaining to customers that they were not eligible for benefits or that they had to reassess their job goals because they lacked the necessary qualifications could be problematic for staff. Staff also dealt with customers who were experiencing problems, such as benefit sanctions, because they had not received or did not understand correspondence about their benefits.

Some staff, particularly those dealing with Social Fund applications, said that saying 'no' was a common incident trigger. However, staff commonly recognised that saying 'no' was part of their job and believed that if they came across as helpful and doing their best, customers tended not to react badly.

### 4.2.4 Managers overriding staff decisions

Staff were concerned that managers' interventions to calm difficult situations could potentially backfire by reinforcing bad behaviour. A member of staff from a back-to-work team said that managers intervening and sorting out problems when customers 'cause a fuss' about money could show that bad behaviour might get them what they wanted quickly.

### 4.2.5 Administrative errors

A combination of factors contributed to administrative errors, which are outlined elsewhere in this section (see section 4.3.1 which identifies missing forms as a problem concerning payment-related triggers). Interviewees highlighted that administrative errors, either in processing or linked to customers attending key interviews, could lead to customers' benefits being stopped. As a result, staff were not surprised that incidents occurred when errors were made. One Team Leader said that she found it difficult to record incidents when she fully understood why a customer was upset.

However, staff were pragmatic about administrative errors. One said:

*'Sometimes an incident might arise, you know, end of the day we're all human we can all make mistakes, sometimes if a mistake is made on the person's claim affecting their benefit, that will cause, obviously, a bit of an incident as well.'*

(Personal Adviser, legacy Jobcentre)

## 4.3 Process

Staff reported the following key process issues that could trigger incidents:

- money, payment and payment handling;
- administration and 'the system';
- waiting;
- changes to the fortnightly job review process; and
- increased focus on sanctions.

### 4.3.1 Money, payment and payment handling

Without doubt, money and delayed payments were the most significant process issues that could trigger incidents. While ineligibility for Crisis Loans could cause incidents, non-payment or late benefit payments were key incident triggers. Delayed payments were particularly important for customers with families, where their benefits were the only source of household income.

*'If somebody can sense that either the benefit that they feel they are due is going to be delayed or they are not going to get something...somebody is going to start to kick off.'*

(Visiting Officer, Jobcentre Plus)

Off-site payment processing, particularly for new claims, exacerbated non-payment problems because staff and customers could not always get through to payment processing teams to check why money was delayed, or whether missing paperwork was causing delays. These issues occurred in integrated and legacy areas alike. A legacy Benefits Adviser explained the problem as follows:

*'We don't do Income Support here. So if somebody hasn't had their payment, it's lost, we have them fill in a form, we fax it over to [name of city 1], or we fax it over to [name of city 2]. We're going to have to wait for them to make a decision, they'll then fax it back, and then they're maybe asking us something else, and then we'll fax that back, and so it's a waiting process.'*

(Benefits Adviser, Social Security office)

### 4.3.2 Administration and 'the system'

Staff perceived the following two aspects to be overly bureaucratic and possible incident triggers:

- customers in integrated areas having to call the Contact Centre from the Jobcentre Plus office rather than dealing with a member of staff face to face; and
- fraud investigations associated with missing giros (according to one interviewee, this could take six or seven weeks).

System triggers manifested themselves in three different ways:

- customers being pushed from pillar to post in order to be seen by the appropriate staff member;
- customers not knowing the requirements of different benefits; and
- compliance and sanctioning issues.

There were staff who said that *'pillar to post syndrome'* existed, which meant that the process necessitated customers having to wait to see different staff members to deal with all of their issues. This caused staff problems, as illustrated by the following quote:

*'Sending people upstairs, downstairs when they've got one of these benefit enquiries. They might have been upstairs seeing an adviser and they are saying, "Oh well I can't deal with that, join the queue downstairs," and they come down here and there is an hour waiting time and they say [the customer], "well hang on a minute, you are sitting doing nothing here... why can't you do it?" and they say, "no, it's not my job, it's his."'*

(Business Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

Another adviser also pointed out that staff not dealing with irritated customers created more significant problems for the member of staff who finally dealt with them, so that inaction was indeed a false economy.

Staff thought that the process for new claims could make customers particularly tense for the following reasons:

- they were in a vulnerable position and could be emotional when they arrived at the Jobcentre;
- form filling could be a cause for concern for them;
- they were not always aware of, or did not understand, the conditions of benefit or why they had to provide personal information such as their bank account details or their address;
- they did not understand why they had to attend interviews with the Jobcentre/ Jobcentre Plus (non-Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers); and
- they were sometimes uncertain of what benefits they could access and how much money they might receive.

Other customers, however, reacted badly because access to benefits has been tightened up and they had to comply with new rules and regulations. Some customers did not always respond well to advisers asking/talking about:

- job-search activities (see also Section 4.3.4 which looks at the effect of changes to the fortnightly job review process);
- why they were late for their appointment; or
- mandating them to attend training programmes.

There were examples of staff who were also concerned that validating or probing customers' responses to questions could also trigger incidents.

Some staff felt that additional information explaining the benefits process, its procedures and the systems would help customers to understand what they had to do to access and continue to receive benefits. By contrast, other staff felt that *'they throw too much information at customers'*. Staff agreed, however, that customers needed to understand the benefits process so that they could comply with the requirements of their benefits and avoid sanctioning.

### 4.3.3 Waiting

Staff identified two particular triggers related to waiting: waiting to be seen and waiting for money. The following examples illustrate how waiting can trigger incidents in an office:

- In addition to general problems associated with customers waiting, staff identified the following problems:
  - a Business Manager was concerned that customers seen in the first hour of opening (from 09.00am) could not receive payment immediately because the finance office did not open until 10.00am;
  - counter staff in a case-study area struggled to get through to a central processing team, so customers had to wait.
- Staff in one office telephoned customers who had appointments with staff who called in sick, in order to minimise waiting and/or not being seen.
- A member of staff said that they were allocated ten-minute timeslots in the morning (thus seeing fewer customers), whereas they only had five-minute slots in the afternoon. The interviewee thought this should be looked at because it seemed unreasonable and they experienced more problems with angry customers in the afternoons.

#### 4.3.4 Changes to the fortnightly job review process

This was a particular concern for legacy staff. Staff had specific issues about how the fortnightly job review process made customers feel:

- customers felt they were *'being picked on'* (Front-line Adviser); and
- staff asking about unsuccessful job search made customers feel inadequate.

#### 4.3.5 Increased focus on sanctions

Staff reported the following perceptions of the increased focus on sanctions and how these might trigger incidents. Their perceptions were that the majority of sanctions occurred because customers had not complied with the requirements of their benefits. However, some occurred because of administrative errors, letters not being sent to customers, and customers not receiving letters. In addition, some customers did not understand the correspondence that was sent to them. While some customers were clearly breaking the rules, others got upset because they did not understand what they had to do to comply with their benefit requirements.

### 4.4 Environmental triggers

Three environmental factors featured as possible incident triggers:

- lack of privacy;
- hot weather and over-heated offices; and
- 'full moon' syndrome.

Lack of privacy related to lack of private interview space and desks being too close together. Background noise was also seen as a potential environmental trigger for incidents. Both of these issues were confirmed by observations in integrated and legacy offices. A particular issue that emerged from the observations was the lack of privacy for customers using warm phones.

Hot weather and in some cases no air-conditioning were identified as incident triggers too. Customers having to wait in hot and overcrowded waiting rooms could get bad-tempered as a result.

There were staff who also identified that the number of incidents rose on or around a full moon. The Business Manager in an integrated office said:

*'In all my 20-odd years I can guarantee that every office that I've ever been to, the staff will always tell you about the full moon. Without a doubt, it is completely ridiculous and I am sure there is no scientific fact.'*

(Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

## 4.5 Integrated offices

### 4.5.1 Customers

The following triggers were specifically linked to how customers interacted with the benefits process under Jobcentre Plus:

- customers not understanding the new processes;
- customers who were uneasy about using the warm phones either because of
  - a perceived lack of privacy
  - a perception that telephoning the Contact Centre was an unnecessary step (see Section 4.5.3); and
  - a reluctance amongst some customers to use a telephone service rather than being dealt with face-to-face; and
- non-JSA customers not realising:
  - that they had to attend meetings; and
  - why they had to attend meetings.

### 4.5.2 Staff

The main staff-related trigger particular to integrated areas was staff conveying the wrong messages to customers. Interviewees were concerned that reception staff and floorwalkers with poor customer-service skills were conveying the wrong customer-service messages to customers. This was a particular concern in a case-study area, where a Personal Adviser and a security guard commented on reception staff and floorwalkers being confrontational and insensitive with customers:

*'Some of our colleagues the way they talk to customers is not very good, not very good customer care. But if they knew someone in front of them had a PV marker on the system, then maybe they wouldn't speak to them in that way...because they would know, well if I speak to him like this I'm going get a scene.'*

(New Deal Personal Adviser, Jobcentre Plus)

### 4.5.3 Process

'The system' was a cause for concern in both legacy and integrated areas. However, for the integrated areas, aspects of the changed system and the introduction of Contact Centres have caused confusion – particularly for non-JSA customers. Income Support and Incapacity Benefit customers, in particular, have struggled to understand the new claim process, how it works and why they have to attend an interview.

*'We do have a lot of problems with the Income Support and Incapacity Benefit customers...because they're set in their ways in claiming...and now they've brought in new measures and they have to attend meetings and go through the process of looking for a job. It's very much of a culture shock and they don't really understand the processes and why they've got to do it. So that tends to create a bit of disharmony, because they don't understand.'*

(Financial Assessor Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

*'I think for us, because we're new in the process, and many of the customers aren't familiar with the process because their circumstances are such that they often regrettably get temporary work and then come back again. When you introduce them to a changed process, for them we probably seem like an unnecessary step, because they are in the Jobcentre, and in the past they would collect the forms they need, made their appointment, gone away and come back for their appointment. Suddenly they're being sent to a telephone.'*

(Deputy Manager, Contact Centre)

Many of the problems associated with the new processes related to customers not understanding the changes that have been introduced. However, there were examples of staff who commented that these changes were 'illogical' or did not make sense to them. While not the primary focus of this research, it is important to understand why such confusion exists.

There were also staff who mentioned that older people, who were less comfortable using the telephone, got anxious about having to call Contact Centres. This was confirmed by general office observations.

#### **4.5.4 Environmental triggers**

While steps have been taken to minimise environmental triggers in the Jobcentre Plus environment, interviewees and observations identified the following concerns that might contribute to incidents occurring:

- the size of the public office relative to its increased customer base since the introduction of Jobcentre Plus – one office in particular was overcrowded (confirmed by interviews and observations) while another often experienced congestion around the reception area;
- waiting for warm phones (particularly when they were being used for personal calls rather than to call Contact Centres or employers about jobs);
- jobpoints not working;
- Financial Assessors working with customers, without front-facing desks; and
- waiting customers being able to see on-screen, personal information when staff turned computer screens to face the customer they were attending to.

Further information on the safety of the environment is provided in Chapter 9.

### 4.5.5 Positive effects of integrated Jobcentre Plus offices

Whilst this chapter concentrates on the factors that might trigger incidents, there were elements of the new Jobcentre Plus set up that staff believed were positive. These included:

- the introduction of security guards/Customer Care Officers who provided a visible security presence in their office;
- the introduction of floorwalkers to navigate customers and assist them with the use of jobpoints;
- a recognition of the positive effect the refurbished and 'more professional' environment had on many customers; and
- the fact that a lack of screens encouraged better customer service from staff and has had a positive impact on customer behaviour too.

## 4.6 Managing risk

Earlier sub-sections have identified how staff might contribute to incidents. It is important to recognise that a combination of good customer handling skills and experience among staff means that many potential incidents are prevented.

A strong emphasis on good customer service was a key feature of Jobcentre Plus offices, where recent training had reinforced the importance of good customer handling skills. Interviewees in legacy Jobcentres and Social Security offices also emphasised the importance of treating customers well and delivering a good service. However, in particular cases there was limited emphasis on customer handling as a preventative measure and the contribution that staff behaviour and procedural issues made as incident triggers.

### 4.6.1 Risk management – office level

Looking at risk management, offices have adopted different approaches to minimise process triggers. Staff felt that it was important to thoroughly explain the process that the customer would go through in Jobcentre Plus (see also Section 4.2.3). Particular examples of approaches adopted in Jobcentre Plus offices included:

- the finance team circulated a note to other staff reminding them to ask customers to bring in identification (ID) so that they could collect their money without any difficulty; and
- staff had requested security guards to keep the security cameras on '*known individuals*'.

A key message from Jobcentre Plus staff (including advisers and security guards) was that while the floorwalker's role was potentially very effective in diffusing tensions and preventing incidents, this potential was not always realised. In particular, staff felt that floorwalkers were not always sufficiently proactive in identifying customers

who needed signposting or assistance, and that this could result in frustration on the part of customers. Staff also raised serious concerns about customers' ability to walk round all parts of the Jobcentre Plus office without being queried by floorwalking staff. They suggested that this might result in significant security breaches. That said, observations identified that customers sometimes got agitated when floorwalking staff asked them to report to reception, rather than just go to find their adviser.

#### **4.6.2 Staff approaches to risk management**

In many cases staff developed their own approaches to dealing with customers and minimising the risk of incidents. Staff did not generally rely on training and/or guidance they had received. In legacy areas this was either because their initial training had taken place so long ago or because they had developed their own approaches in their daily work. Social Security office staff had mixed feelings about the training offered to them on handling difficult situations. Some thought that the training was relevant, but others did not feel that it adequately prepared them for the situations they dealt with on a daily basis. The observations found examples of staff effectively diffusing difficult situations by being polite and displaying empathy.

Staff's individual techniques for successfully dealing with customers varied from a standard approach to deal with all customers to responding to customers on a case-by-case basis. However, the techniques described by staff tended to place strong emphasis on listening to customers, demonstrating empathy and understanding, showing a willingness to help them whilst avoiding to promise too much and finding different ways to say no. Staff in integrated areas also emphasised the importance of politeness, demonstrating respect, being firm with customers and stopping interviews to give customers a chance to calm down.

Some staff also indicated that they would pay attention to possible signs that a customer was becoming agitated, using cues from body language.

### **4.7 Periodicity**

While many staff felt that incidents could happen at any time, others identified particular points in the year when incidents might happen. Of those who reported incidents at particular points of the year, they identified Christmas and into January as a particularly difficult time. They explained that customers got money early – and subsequently some spent it quickly – and demand for Crisis Loans was high. Summer was also identified as a peak period for incidents because of staff holidays leading to staff shortages and the effect of hot weather on customers.

Other staff mentioned that incidents increased following postal strikes and their own industrial action, after computer failures (evident in the observations) and around bank holidays.

# 5 Incident handling

This chapter focuses on procedures and the training that staff receive on handling incidents. It examines staff's awareness and understanding of procedures, their training experience and the approaches adopted for handling incidents.

## 5.1 Guidance on procedures for handling incidents

Guidance on procedures for handling incidents is delivered to Jobcentre Plus staff in two forms: written guidance and through the delivery of training.

### 5.1.1 Department for Work and Pensions written guidance

There are two Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) guidance documents relating to incidents: *Jobcentre Plus framework for the management and reporting of serious incidents* and *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, 1 April 2003.

The former document outlines the incident managing and reporting roles and responsibilities for the Office Manager, the Risk Assessor, the appointed Trade Union Health and Safety Representative and the DWP Occupational Health and Safety Division. The guidance begins after the incident has taken place. The latter document includes guidance on handling customers; however, this again relates to customer handling following incidents, or handling of customers classified as potentially violent.<sup>16</sup> The DWP documents do not include any reference to how incidents might be prevented.

### 5.1.2 Staff's awareness of the guidance

Throughout integrated and legacy offices, staff were aware that safety-related guidance of some sort was available on the intranet and awareness was greater in high-incident offices. However, it was rare for members of staff to have actually

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<sup>16</sup> DWP, paras 89-94, *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*.

located the guidance and exceptional if they had read it. Often, staff were only able to recall the title of the guidance or an overview of its content, ie that it related to unacceptable customer behaviour and handling serious incidents. Where offices had a folder containing safety documents which had to be 'signed off' as read by all members of staff, only newer members of staff were likely to have read or looked through these documents. Some remembered being given the guidance, while others (sometimes in the same office) could not recall receiving it.

Staff attributed poor use of the guidance to a lack of time and the plethora of information sent to them on a daily basis. Staff generally viewed the guidance as something to refer to after a serious incident and as a matter for management to be knowledgeable about, not front line staff.

*'there is so much stuff that quite honestly you begin to shut it out, and you miss things that are important.'*

(Visiting Officer, Jobcentre Plus)

Staff also raised the issue of longer opening hours and the effect this has had on their ability to take in extra information and read guidance and circulars.

*'there's a mountain of stuff to go through, trying to find something that is specific to them isn't easy.'*

(Adviser, Jobcentre Plus)

Managers were aware that due to time constraints and overload of information staff often signed a document or folder off as being read without doing so.

What this limited awareness meant in practice was that standard procedures for dealing with staff safety incidents were not being followed. Staff tended to respond to incidents on an ad hoc basis, drawing on previous experience and to a lesser extent support and guidance from senior staff. This could result in individuals being uncertain about how they should respond – and how their colleagues would respond – in the event of an incident.

In one instance, a member of staff in a Jobcentre Plus office indicated that colleagues had called the police on her behalf while she was dealing with a verbally abusive customer. She was not aware that the police had been called, and was surprised when they arrived. She felt that the arrival of the police made the situation worse, and was upset with her colleagues for having made this decision without consulting her.

Some staff indicated that they were more likely to call the police (or actively involve security guards) if an incident became physical.

In one Jobcentre Plus public office, staff thought that the Jobcentre Plus framework for the management and reporting of serious incidents guidance related to fire and bomb procedures.

Some staff thought that guidance would be available on the intranet, and could be consulted if an incident occurred. Staff also exhibited low awareness of office-level guidance in Local Incident Management Plans (LIMPs), where these were in place, and risk assessments relating to staff safety (see Chapter 9).

### 5.1.3 Staff's perception of the guidance

Staff who were aware of the guidance expressed reservations about its content, as follows:

- One Visiting Officer felt that the guidance (they did not specify which guidance) described possible situations, but did not give clear advice on how to respond. As a consequence, staff's individual approaches had developed as the result of *'learning from other people's mistakes'*.
- Some staff felt that the guidance on unacceptable customer behaviour was unclear. This sometimes made it difficult to make decisions on whether or not to report a customer.
- Staff also pointed out that there was no distinction between how different types of incident would be treated, ie verbal as opposed to physical incidents. Others, however, suggested that verbal incidents could lead to physical incidents, so they thought that all incidents should be treated in the same manner.

Managers understood that some staff were not using the guidance because they found it unwieldy and confusing. Some managers criticised the guidance for being inaccessible and too lengthy. Managers, and staff with knowledge of the guidance, suggested that:

- the guidance should be practically based and streamlined;
- too much was left to staff's discretion; and
- it needed to be more precise and easier to follow.

In one area, an action group had been established to define unreasonable behaviour and standardise advisers' responses. Some managers wanted the guidance to be in a format whereby it could be delivered as an interactive session at communications meetings, to make it more accessible and ensure that it was embedded in daily routine. In one Jobcentre, a manager highlighted specific sections of the guidance which were relevant to staff and e-mailed it to them to encourage staff to read the guidance.

## 5.2 Training

Although not employed directly by DWP, attitudes to training and training needs of security guards are noted in Section 2.6.

### 5.2.1 Access to training

Almost all staff had experienced some sort of training in handling difficult customers, though many struggled to remember the names and the content of these courses because they happened some time ago. That said, the training described by staff incorporated customer care, handling difficult customers and handling difficult situations. Jobcentre staff, Jobcentre Plus staff and Visiting Officers also mentioned training for handling and resolving conflict situations, though it is unclear whether this was the same training as that mentioned above.

In rare instances, staff had heard of or attended training on incident handling procedures and reporting; those that had were generally Jobcentre Plus staff and new recruits.

Front-line staff new to the DWP generally accessed training as part of their induction as did internal staff transferring from a processing to a front-line role. Oversights occurred when staff transferred from Social Security offices to Jobcentre Plus and also for temporary positions. The volume of training being delivered as part of the roll-out of Jobcentre Plus had caused some delays for other offices wanting to access training, especially non-Jobcentre Plus offices. Smaller offices generally faced more delays in accessing training courses because they needed to wait for sufficient numbers to access the training together and because of the location of courses.

Interviewees who previously worked in legacy Jobcentres and Social Security offices did not mention any refresher training or Jobcentre Plus training when their office rolled out to Jobcentre Plus. Visiting Officers in integrated and legacy areas had attended training most recently, attended refresher courses and attended the full range of courses. Visiting Officers were among the minority of staff who received refresher training at the time of roll-out to Jobcentre Plus.

In one office, there was concern that temporary staff were performing a front-line role without the appropriate training because of problems with access to, and frequency of, the courses. The manager in another office confirmed that temporary staff in that office did not receive training due to lack of resources and the short-term nature of their contracts of employment.

### 5.2.2 Managers' views on training

Whilst some managers were particularly keen on formal training courses for all staff, other managers were comfortable with providing training to those staff who requested it. Also, there were managers who would have welcomed training for all their staff but had experienced difficulties in staff being able to access suitable training courses when they needed to. Managers reported the following approaches to training in their offices:

- the use of a training analysis log to track the training that staff had completed to ensure that they receive all that they need;

- a full induction for all new staff including training on incident reporting, health and safety and the Preventing and Calming Difficult Situations (PCDS) course. This was undertaken in addition to the basic induction their line manager delivered; and
- an annual programme of training on incident handling and in the event of a serious incident. Following training, managers undertake observations of staff and provide feedback.

As mentioned above, other managers preferred to let staff themselves take the lead in the need for training provision. Some managers themselves recounted their own years of practical experience and believed that to be more valuable than any training course.

### 5.2.3 Staff perceptions of training

Overall feedback was that the training was interesting and insightful. Staff valued that it was practical and allowed discussion and debate about different ways to handle difficult situations and real experiences, which enhanced their coping mechanisms. This said, there was an overall belief by staff that training comprised only a small fraction of an adviser's ability to calm a difficult situation and often it was a means to reinforce methods that individuals found effective.

*'It was useful, common sense stuff that seems to be highlighting it and bringing it to your attention so that you're more aware of it.'*

(Adviser, Social Security office)

One office was looking at proactive ways to learn from incidents by trying to ensure that after any incident (whether it was effectively dealt with or not) the member of staff met with a manager or team leader to discuss which approaches used by the individual had been successful, which had not and why. It was thought that this would develop and inspire good practice. Staff identified the following training needs and activities which they felt would help staff deal with potential incident triggers.

Training:

- thorough technical training on benefits and processes to improve standards and avoid incident triggers;
- training on handling specialist customer groups/difficulties (such as English for speakers of other languages and working with people with mental health problems and substance abusers);
- outreach work; and
- how to pre-empt and recognise incident triggers and reduce their occurrence.

Activities:

- office champions to remind staff and research specialist training;
- shadowing more experienced staff; and
- follow-up in the office, eg debriefs, case studies.

Staff felt that it was important to have face-to-face training time, because they viewed discussing experiences and different approaches as providing the most valuable and applicable information. They noted key factors which in some instances made the training accessible and memorable, and in others would improve training:

- use of real examples;
- sessions as interactive as possible;
- a mix of staff from different offices;
- tailored to specific job roles;
- at least two/three days in length; and
- training to be self-contained and include *all* the necessary information.

Whilst staff valued training, having to repeat any of the above courses was seen as negative and was only deemed necessary if there was a problem with someone's customer-service skills. Experience was viewed as providing all the additional expertise necessary to cope with difficult situations. While staff said that they would attend a mandatory refresher course or a course providing information about a specialist customer group, no one had requested or been recommended to attend repeat/refresher courses. Although staff believed that additional and advanced training was necessary to prepare them for dealing with some of the customers and situations they experienced, they felt that they had learnt everything they needed *'on the job'*. Staff speaking about the impact of staff training and benefit of experience said that training alone is not enough and it is being put in tough situations which teaches you how to react and deal with customers.

*'no matter how much training that you've done you can't change that, you can't put life experience into people.'*

(Adviser, legacy Jobcentre)

*'Unfortunately until you're in that situation with someone standing there ranting and raving you don't know how you're going to deal with it.'*

(Adviser, legacy Jobcentre)

In addition, where staff were able to access training from external specialist organisations (such as Drugline, Child Support Agency), they felt this to be invaluable and directly applicable to their day-to-day experiences. Specialist advisers who experienced training on Incapacity Benefit (IB) groups were positive about the quality and quantity of information provided, and reported that it had proved beneficial to their role.

#### **5.2.4 Training issues particular to Jobcentre Plus**

As staff should receive introductory/transition training at the point of Jobcentre Plus roll-out, we have included the following findings from staff in integrated areas as a distinct section. As noted in Section 2.1, Jobcentre Plus staff who had previously worked in Jobcentres and Social Security Offices did not mention any refresher training or Jobcentre Plus training when their office rolled out to Jobcentre Plus.

Staff had generally attended one or two courses on dealing with the public and handling difficult customers. The duration of courses varied, from one day, two to three days, to one or two weeks. The longer courses were an extended package of training for staff new to DWP and Jobcentre Plus, including customer service and difficult situations. Staff who attended one-day courses had generally worked in the Benefits Agency at the time of the training, and many had a role where most contact with customers was by telephone.

In one area, it was reported that not all front-line staff had attended the PCDS course. In other isolated incidents, advisers waited some time (three months and two years were mentioned by two interviewees) for PCDS training while performing a front-line adviser role. By contrast, in two offices all staff had attended PCDS courses and a group of staff had been selected to receive additional training on handling IB customer groups (mental health, substance abuse).

#### **5.2.5 Training issues particular to Contact Centres**

All new staff reported receiving customer-handling training upon starting the role. However, there was mixed feedback about the training received. Staff in one area were positive about its depth and intensity, while staff in others reported that the training was not tailored to the Contact Centre environment and lacked relevance to the demands of the role. Staff who had previously worked in call centres reported that the training received in the private sector was of a much higher standard and provided more practical advice, hence improvements could be made to Jobcentre Plus training.

As with Jobcentre Plus offices, staff transferring from a backroom to a front-line role were not provided with further training in customer handling if they had previously dealt with customers over the telephone. Staff felt that for this new and different role specific training in customer care/handling was needed. Staff who had the opportunity to shadow or 'buddy' a Financial Assessor and a Personal Adviser in a Jobcentre Plus public office felt that this was effective in demonstrating how customer service at one end of the chain directly affects customer-adviser interaction at the other end.

### 5.2.6 Training issues particular to security staff

Security staff reported that they received between four days and two weeks training from the security company that employed them. Security staff performing a customer-care role received additional 'on-the-job' training from colleagues. The level of training provided by the security companies generally impressed security staff, but they felt that the DWP training needed to be more structured as the training was ad hoc and purely 'on the job' or shadowing.

Security staff identified further training needs in addition to those provided by the security companies:

- arresting and restraining (using minimal force);
- dealing with customers with limited skills in English;
- training on handling particular customers (such as mental health, substance abuse); and
- more specific direction about when to intervene in an interaction between customers or staff and customer(s).

## 5.3 Procedures for handling incidents – managerial steer

There was little evidence across case-study areas of managers explicitly encouraging staff to handle incidents in a particular way. The most obvious managerial advice was for staff to remove themselves from a potentially dangerous situation and to telephone the police without hesitation.

The only noticeable involvement in incident handling by managers was the following individual examples where they expressed a need for strategic/whole-office solutions to safety training, such as:

- incident walk-throughs;
- incident debriefs (even if the incident was well managed); and
- higher level health and safety training for managers.

Conversely there were managers who believed that staff learned their own incident handling techniques through experience. One Adviser Manager had recently undergone training to better understand how the staff he managed were advised to deal with incidents and problematic customers. However, the manager did not find the training helpful as it was more about 'codes and processes' rather than practical techniques. In fact, he came away with the impression that front-line staff learn more from experience as opposed to training courses.

## 5.4 Procedures for handling incidents – other staff support

### 5.4.1 Peer support for handling incidents

As indicated above, there was little evidence of staff using formal incident-handling procedures. Across the case-study areas, staff tended to rely on peer support and, to a lesser extent, managerial support to resolve incidents.

Where incidents involved customers raising their voices (becoming agitated), most staff indicated that they would try to calm the situation down. If they were not able to resolve the incident or calm the situation, their colleagues would hear raised voices. Staff then assumed that colleagues – more experienced colleagues or managers, or security guards where available – would come to support them.

Staff said that they were generally aware of what was going on around them and would normally pick up changes in the tone or volume of colleagues' conversations which might indicate that there was going to be an incident. Where this happened, they would offer support.

The type of support offered by colleagues varied. In some cases, colleagues – including other front-line staff and security guards – would offer informal support by providing a physical presence in the locale. In other cases, colleagues – particularly more senior colleagues such as managers – might get involved in the discussion with the customer to see if they could help to resolve the problem. Staff also indicated that colleagues would support the member of staff concerned by reaffirming the message being given to the customer (especially where staff were having to deliver 'bad news').

Front-line staff across the case-study areas had also developed office or team strategies for alerting their colleagues if they needed support. These included hand signals, code words to alert managers to tension, or 'post-its' to alert colleagues to incidents. However, awareness of these procedures, and therefore their success, was mixed. Even in one case-study area where the code was mentioned in the LIMP, it was rarely used. In one Jobcentre, the use of code words had been terminated because incidents were so rare. In other offices, staff used informal procedures, for example telephoning to tell each other '*to keep an eye*' on particular customers.

In Social Security offices, views on incident handling were mixed. Some staff indicated that they would help their colleagues, while others felt that it was too difficult to move between the screened booths to help. Some staff felt that leaving their own customer was disruptive, and might therefore cause further incidents. In some cases, staff were encouraged to remove themselves from the position of danger, not get involved, and contact the police. In one high-incident office, staff indicated that they have been discouraged from helping colleagues because of the potential legal ramifications if the situation were to be mishandled. Staff emphasised getting the customer who was causing an incident out of the office. This was seen as important in ensuring that the person did not create substantial disruption and trigger further incidents among other customers.

Incidents in Contact Centres were reported as being relatively rare. Although customers sometimes became frustrated, First Contact Officers (FCOs) rarely experienced verbal incidents which upset or concerned them to the extent that they needed to take action. If FCOs were to experience a verbally abusive or especially difficult customer on the telephone, they would ask a team leader or possibly the Office Manager for support. The senior member of staff might then offer advice in handling the call, or might take over the call. In some cases, senior staff would hand the call back to the FCO once they had spoken to the customer, often having reinforced what the FCO was saying. In other cases, the senior staff member would take the call through to its conclusion.

#### **5.4.2 Managerial support for handling incidents**

Staff had mixed feelings about managers intervening, with little consensus on appropriate responses. In some cases, front-line staff felt that it was their personal responsibility to resolve incidents, in their capacity as a customer services representative. If managers got involved, this represented a failure on the part of the staff member. Others indicated that while welcoming managerial involvement in resolving incidents, managers did not always back staff up in the message they had been delivering to the customer. Staff viewed this very negatively. Other staff expected managers to become involved, and found it unhelpful if they did not.

In some Social Security offices, staff expected to receive management support, either because the manager would spontaneously appear from the backroom area, or because they could go and ask for the manager's help. In other offices, staff were not confident that they would receive managerial support. Some felt that calling managers in could make situations worse, while others felt that it was useful to have someone to come to reassert messages to customers.

#### **5.4.3 Security staff/police support for handling incidents**

Staff generally felt that security staff provided a good deterrent for difficult customers. They thought that if safety incidents occurred, security staff would be on hand to help to resolve situations or protect staff. However, there were staff who sometimes felt that their peers were more likely to intervene than the security guards.

Several staff noted that security guards' additional responsibilities could have an impact on security staff's responsiveness in dealing with incidents.

Where front-line staff felt that there was an immediate threat, they would use the security alarms. If security staff were not already in the area, staff were generally confident that they would respond quickly.

*'They'll [security staff] approach them, once it gets too much for us and our safety could be compromised, then...or even while you're discussing something, if you've got somebody that's shouting and swearing and I say to them, "look, would you stop". If security are already there, which nine times out of ten they are, they'll say, "this lady has asked you to stop swearing at them", they'll step in. So yes, it's fine.'*

(Personal Adviser, Jobcentre Plus)

Security staff shared this understanding of their role, but some indicated that they would wait for a cue from the staff member before intervening.

*'Yes, we're there when someone tells us to be there straightaway. Each situation that comes along, just go as a presence, get closer, we never step in without a member of staff telling us, but one or two times we have to step in because they'll end up getting clouted.'*

(Security Guard, Jobcentre Plus)

One security guard in a Jobcentre Plus office noted that they did not have sufficient powers to deal with incidents: *'Well to be honest I've got no more powers than you really, just visual deterrence'*. In another office, managers indicated that they have experienced concerns about security guards not being sufficiently assertive or proactive in intervening in potential staff safety incidents. Where this has occurred, managers have emphasised this element of the security guard's job description to the relevant agency.

However, Social Security staff in both low and high-incident offices expressed concern that security guards were not allowed to use physical force. Security guards would also ask customers to leave the office, but could not evict them from the building. This meant that staff were reliant on the police if situations became unmanageable (for example, if staff felt threatened or immediately at risk). One Jobcentre Plus security guard, however, noted that if an incident was physical, they would use physical force to remove the customer from the scene.

While Jobcentre Plus staff generally felt that the police would be available if there was a physical incident, Social Security office staff were concerned because they felt that the police were likely to arrive after the incident had happened. A recurring message across Social Security offices was that the police took a long time to get to the office, or in some instances did not come. As a result, staff did not feel confident that the police would be available to help in dealing with incidents. Jobcentre staff sometimes worried about raising false alarms with the police. In one Jobcentre, however, staff have been reassured that there would be no penalty if they called the police and it turned out to be a false alarm.



## 6 Incident reporting

This chapter examines systems and approaches for reporting incidents, staff's decisions for reporting incidents, and barriers to reporting. It concludes by looking specifically at reporting issues for security guards.

### 6.1 Office systems and approaches for reporting incidents

#### 6.1.1 Guidance on reporting incidents

The following forms used to report incidents are available on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) intranet, along with guidance on how to complete them:

- IF1 is used to report all incidents that involve either a customer, other member(s) of the customer's household or an unknown assailant(s).
- IF1 (verbal) is an abridged version of the IF1, which is used to report verbal threats or abuse to staff over the telephone.
- IF2, parts 1-5 are completed by the line manager on receipt of either a completed IF1 or a third-party referral (for example, the police).
- IF3 is completed by any person who witnesses an incident.

There is also detailed guidance on policy and incident reporting of unacceptable customer behaviour.<sup>17</sup> The guidance states that staff, including contract staff employed on DWP business (for example, security guards), should complete an IF1 form as soon as is practicable after an incident has occurred. Ideally this should be done on the same day as the incident, unless exceptional circumstances prevent it. If, because of injury or trauma, the staff member is unable to complete the form, it should be completed on their behalf by a manager. Physical assaults should also be detailed in the office accident book. Once completed, the IF1 form (and where applicable the IF3 form or forms) should be passed on to the staff member's line

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<sup>17</sup> DWP *Jobcentre Plus framework for the management and reporting of serious incidents and Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, both 1 April 2003.

manager. The guidance emphasises that line managers are responsible for allowing staff sufficient time to complete a form, and should help the staff member to do this if necessary.

Line managers are responsible for checking that the IF1 and IF3 forms have been fully and accurately completed and for completing the first sections of the IF2 form, and are then expected to pass them on to a nominated manager, responsible for dealing with all reported incidents.

The nominated manager is then responsible for:

- completing the second part of the IF2 form;
- taking appropriate action against the customer;
- making an immediate decision as to whether the customer should be classified as Potentially Violent (PV);
- notifying any DWP businesses which are likely to have face-to-face contact with the customer; and
- forwarding a copy of the IF1 form to the appropriate Health and Safety Division address and the local trade union representative.

They are also expected to review the IF1 form and consider whether there are any deficiencies in office procedures, and to review the local risk assessment.

### **6.1.2 Staff's understanding and use of reporting procedures**

Although 86 per cent of staff who responded to the 2003 DWP survey believed they were aware of the procedures for reporting the threat of or actual violence, staff interviewed in depth for this research exhibited very mixed understanding of the procedures for reporting incidents, and the responsibilities attached to doing so. Staff were aware that the onus was on the individual who experienced the incident to complete an incident form and submit it to a manager (usually their direct line manager). In some offices, staff also knew that colleagues should complete witness forms. In an exceptional case, staff were told by managers that they should complete forms for incidents experienced by colleagues, even if the colleague did not view the incident as being serious.

Reporting of staff safety incidents varied considerably across integrated and non-integrated areas and, in some cases, within offices. The research identified some examples of managers, senior staff, trade unions and safety representatives encouraging staff to report incidents. But staff's ability and willingness to do so still varied, for a range of practical reasons and perceptions about the efficacy and purpose of reporting.

Perceptions as to whether the reporting of staff safety incidents was voluntary or compulsory varied markedly across all office and staff types. Some staff felt that the process was compulsory for all incidents. Others felt that the process was voluntary because reporting required individual members of staff to decide whether or not an

incident merited being reported. Staff made this decision based on their interpretation of, and feelings about, the incident. While some staff supported reporting being voluntary and based on personal interpretation of a potential incident, others felt that the process should be compulsory.

Management's views on the importance of reporting incidents were mixed, and in some cases perceptions differed even within an office about whether or not staff were encouraged to report. There were examples of staff in both integrated and non-integrated offices being encouraged by their managers to report incidents. In some offices, staff were actively encouraged to report incidents immediately after they had occurred. In a few instances, managers would involve staff in deciding the most appropriate responses to the incident.

*'I'd ask them to complete an IF1 and also once they've done that and passed it and we perhaps have a chat with them about where they want to go with it really and what their options are, you know whether they feel they want me to actually talk to the customer or whether they feel a letter or whether they just don't want anything to happen at this stage.'*

(Office Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

Trade unions were viewed as playing an active role in encouraging reporting in some integrated and legacy offices. In one Jobcentre Plus office, the Trade Union Health and Safety (TU H&S) Representative indicated that they would chase the member of staff up to complete the incident form. However, if the member of staff was reluctant to do so, the Representative would try to get someone who witnessed the incident to complete a form. TU H&S Representatives felt that the more people who completed incident forms the better, but one form would suffice for recording purposes.

In other offices, security guards played an active role in encouraging front-line staff to report incidents.

Most managers described in-house procedures for dealing with customers following incidents, eg classifying the customer as PV, but did not say which other interested parties were informed of actions that they took. Staff were also not always certain about what happened to incident forms after they had given them to their managers. Some thought that the forms went to the District Office, whereas others thought they were passed to the Health and Safety Division in Sheffield. One interviewee thought that a form would be filled out for Group 4, the company providing security guards.

### **6.1.3 Office approaches to encourage and monitor reporting**

Some offices had developed individual approaches to encourage or monitor the reporting of staff safety incidents. In one legacy Jobcentre, the Office Manager provided feedback on the outcomes of staff-completed incident forms at communications meetings. This approach had been taken in order to encourage reporting of incidents, and to develop staff's understanding of the process. Staff members felt that this approach had indeed encouraged them to report incidents.

In one Jobcentre Plus office, the TU H&S Representative met with a manager on a weekly basis to check the number of incidents they had collected, and to see whether this matched with what the managers were sending to district management.

## 6.2 Individual staff decisions to report

A common message from front-line staff across all office types was that the decision to report an incident depended on how it affected them. This mirrored how staff described their feelings when defining incidents. Reasons to report included feeling:

- personally threatened – some staff would only report on this basis;
- uncomfortable, upset or distressed; or
- that the customer might approach them outside the office – commented on in particular by Social Security office staff.

In a few instances, staff made reference to agreed definitions of what constituted unacceptable behaviour.

Some staff members from a high-incident office indicated that they would not necessarily report an incident if the customer was shouting and making threats, but they would report it if the customer bordered on being violent or used verbal abuse. Physical incidents would automatically result in a report being completed. The only exception was in some Social Security offices: staff did not always report incidents where customers banged on the protective screen

Other staff measured the gravity of an incident (and the consequent need to report it) depending on how it had been handled or resolved. For example, if the customer had been asked to leave the office or had been removed from the office, they would report it. However, if a staff member had been able to resolve the incident, they would not report it.

Staff's decisions to report were influenced by the following factors:

- **Process or system failure** – some staff were reluctant to report incidents if they felt that customers had been distressed by a process or system failure and that this explained why they had reacted in a certain way. This is illustrated by the following quote:

*'I wouldn't report something like that unless it started getting threatening and verbal. Because you can understand when your money doesn't come, I'd go mad if my wages didn't go in the bank.'*

(Front-line staff, Jobcentre Plus)

- **Whether customers had a history of incidents** – staff indicated that they would take into consideration whether customers had caused problems before.

- **Likelihood of a future incident** – staff indicated that they might also consider whether customers were likely to cause another incident, and that they would report if customers continued to be threatening on subsequent occasions. As part of the reporting decision, staff felt very strongly that it was important to report incidents in order to protect their colleagues, particularly Visiting Officers, from potential harm.

In other cases, staff felt that all incidents should be recorded, so that there would be evidence to flag up customers as PV in the future (see Chapter 8).

Some staff were concerned that new members of staff – particularly in Contact Centres – might not have as strong an appreciation of the importance of reporting in order to protect colleagues who deal with customers face to face. Some staff also perceived staff in Social Security offices as being less likely to report incidents because of the protection afforded by screens.

Staff in legacy offices said that reporting had been given extra impetus by the introduction of Jobcentre Plus. Staff in Social Security offices, in particular, felt that it was important to record incidents in order to illustrate staff safety issues and make a case for maintaining a screened environment. In other instances, staff in established Jobcentre Plus offices had been encouraged to report incidents to support their managers' case for additional security staff.

Security guards also had a role in getting other staff to report incidents.

*'I never used to fill them [incident forms] out before, but in the last couple of years, I mean you will be reminded that you haven't filled it in, so they're very strict on that, they really do emphasise that you've got to fill that in, that you take time out and complete it...and take your time in filling it out. Security guards will tell you to complete it as well.'*

(Line Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

### 6.3 Barriers to reporting

Staff identified a range of different barriers to reporting incidents. These included:

- perceived lack of management support;
- practical issues, including time constraints and the time required to complete the form;
- limited understanding of, or confidence in, the aims and rationale of the reporting process; and
- lack of confidence in completing reports and also in relation to the impact of reporting.

### 6.3.1 Management support

While some staff reported that they were actively encouraged to report incidents, others repeatedly said that managers did not always actively promote the need to report incidents.

Staff across all offices felt that managers tolerated bad behaviour rather than encouraging staff to report it. Some felt that this was the result of organisational culture, and that there was an expectation on the part of both managers and staff that they had to tolerate levels of abuse that other organisations would not. This resulted in under-reporting of incidents.

*'I would think more went unreported because I think, although we shouldn't, we do accept that we will get abuse from people. It's absurd that you do get used to it and see it as part of your job. Because somebody might just sit there and you've sort of said say "oh, I'm sorry, whatever this, that and the other". And they're just "Eff this, eff that," and then get up and walk out and you most probably wouldn't put that down as an incident, even though somebody has been abusive.'*

(Manager, legacy Jobcentre)

In some cases, staff in legacy offices felt that the lack of information available to them on the outcomes of reporting was indicative of the lack of support from managers *'all the way up the tree'* (Front-line staff member, Social Security office).

### 6.3.2 Time available to report

The DWP guidance recommends completing forms immediately following an incident:

*'Staff ... should complete form IF1 as soon as practicable after the incident has occurred. This will enable them to recall exactly what was said or done while it is still fresh in the memory.'*

(Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting, para 26)

For some staff, having time immediately after an incident was highly important. One member of staff indicated that it was important to complete the forms promptly so that they did not forget details of the incident.

However, staff said that they did not have time to complete incident forms, and that this was the key barrier to reporting incidents. They therefore felt that they could not record all incidents. Some staff indicated that they were selective because of the frequency of incidents, as this would make it difficult to complete forms for all of them. In some cases, staff also felt that they did not have the management's support for using their time to report incidents.

Staff in high-incident offices felt particularly strongly about the lack of time available for reporting.

*'We are supposed to report every verbal abuse, literally we wouldn't get any work done, you would be spending all day writing forms out.'*

(Front-line staff member, Social Security office)

*'Historically because of the nature of this office, swearing and other verbal has become an everyday occurrence. We've become very blasé, and I know a number of staff would be spending all their time if they had to fill in verbal assault forms, it would bring the system to a grinding halt.'*

(Health and Safety Representative, Social Security office)

Front-line staff in both integrated and legacy areas also felt that they would not be able to get time away from the public in order to complete forms. One member of staff from a Social Security office indicated that staff shortages due to training and sick leave meant that it was difficult to spend time away from the counter. Also, they were concerned that members of staff leaving the counter to fill in forms could cause a backlog and result in further incidents. The difficulty in reconciling the requirement to fill in forms and needing to spend time away from customers would mean having to complete the forms outside office hours. Staff in Jobcentre Plus offices (and Contact Centres) who had extended working hours thought that it was especially unrealistic for them to complete the forms.

The IF1 form is a six-page document. A copy is included in Appendix A. Staff members include their name and the assailant's details on the first page. The following four pages include sections that solely require the appropriate tick box(es) to be selected and completed. Narrative of the incident is required in the final section on the last page.

Some staff were concerned about the amount of time available to them to complete forms because they perceived the forms as being very long and time-consuming, possibly because they had limited experience of completing them. Staff estimated that the forms would take between 45 minutes and an hour to complete. One member of staff observed that, *'you pick up an IF1 and it's like a magazine'* (Nominated Safety Manager, Social Security office).

However, some staff with health and safety responsibilities felt that the forms were perceived as being longer and more time-consuming to complete than was actually the case. One health and safety representative, for example, estimated that the IF1 form took ten minutes to complete, and that IF2s would take slightly longer. They indicated that the forms may appear to be more difficult to complete than they actually are. A manager felt that staff were put off by the length of the IF1 form, but indicated that it mainly comprised 'tick boxes'.

In other instances, staff queried the relevance of some of the information requested on the forms, for example asking how long the staff member involved in the incident has worked at the office. Some staff expressed a preference for the old Benefits Agency incident reporting forms because they were shorter and easier to complete.

### 6.3.3 Staff motivation and confidence to report

Some staff were not wholly confident about managers taking matters forward once incident reports had been completed. Other staff and managers acknowledged that some people lacked the motivation or confidence to report incidents. Interviewees said that this was because of limited understanding of, and confidence in, the aims, rationale and outcomes of the reporting process (outlined in Chapter 2).

Two TU H&S Representatives said:

*'The staff perceive that it's too much work. They don't recognise that they've got to be reported and they don't see the point because management don't follow it up.'*

(TU H&S Representative, Jobcentre Plus)

*'They [the forms] are seen as time-consuming, clumsily put together and doesn't seem to be any logical conclusion to it. It's just another form.'*

(TU H&S Representative, Social Security office)

Looking at motivation and confidence to report, the following key issues emerged:

- **Motivation to report** – staff lacked the motivation to report incidents because they had seen few changes associated with incident reporting in the past. Many did not know what happened to incident reports after they had been submitted to their managers (see Section 6.3.4).
- **Lack of experience** – some staff said that they were unfamiliar with the process of reporting and even where to find the forms.
- **Practicalities of reporting** – two issues were identified:
  - staff pointed out that the paperwork assumed that staff knew the identity of the individual causing the incident. However, this was not always the case if they were not a claimant, but a household member of the claimant; and
  - in a few cases, staff felt that there was confusion over reporting procedures as a result of the roll-out of integrated offices, as they still did not know what procedures they should be following.
- **Defining and describing incidents** – a small group of staff felt uncomfortable writing an account of incidents. They highlighted two particular issues:
  - how to define and describe customers' behaviour – for example, whether it made them feel uncomfortable, or whether it was PV:

*'I've seen a few people that I've felt quite threatened by that fact that they're quite...almost menacing. It's not what they say, but it's what they say in a very...almost slimy way, where I haven't actually followed it up because they haven't actually done anything to make an incident report about, but it's just how they are. It's quite unpleasant really. It's difficult because you can't really say "Oh that person was looking at me in a really menacing way," ... It's almost like...how do you write an incident report about someone who was threatening*

*in a calm way? It's strange... they could say, "Well if you don't pay my benefit then I will wait for you outside the office," but because they're not raising their voice... even if they were making a flippant comment nobody is really there to witness anything.'*

(Front-line staff member, Jobcentre Plus)

– recording specific words used as part of verbal abuse.

• **How the member of staff thought the incident might reflect on them** – two points emerged:

– Staff were uncomfortable about reporting incidents either because they perceived it as a failure to have experienced an incident, or because they thought that colleagues might perceive it as such.

*'We're told that any kind of abuse should be reported. Maybe some people... don't want to be seen as that we can't handle the situation, that we can't handle customers, we can't deal with customers. I didn't want to be seen as a wimp.'*

(Front-line staff member, Jobcentre Plus)

– Staff felt that they were vulnerable to scrutiny for two reasons. Firstly, because customers might see what staff had written about their behaviour (linked to data protection laws). Secondly, because incident reports were not confidential and some staff were uncomfortable with the trade union having access to their reports.

A number of staff across all office types suggested that verbal reporting would be easier for them than written reporting because it would make reporting quicker and easier. They felt that it would be a useful means of logging minor verbal abuse in particular. Others felt that a telephone system would be useful for those staff who were not competent in using Microsoft Word, and did not have access to paper forms. Another member of staff suggested that a telephone reporting service could also offer counselling.

### 6.3.4 Outcomes of reporting

Some staff felt that the outcomes of reporting were unsatisfactory; staff in legacy offices in particular had negative experiences of reporting outcomes. Staff indicated that one possible outcome was to get a customer banned from the office in which they had caused an incident. However, for this to happen entailed a long process and going to court, which did not always happen. Some staff members took the view that they would be more likely to report incidents if they knew that customers would be banned. In other instances, staff were uncertain as to the circumstances under which customers could be banned. In a few cases, Social Security offices indicated that they had used informal banning (without going through the courts), but recognised that it was not legal.

Staff in Jobcentre Plus offices were uncertain about the usefulness of banning customers. One front-line staff member observed that it *'just shifts the problem'*. Other staff indicated that banning was only temporary, so there was limited incentive to report customers. In other instances, staff perceived it to be of little use to report customers, because even if they had been reported they could still continue to cause incidents. Staff members indicated that if customers knew they had been reported, it might make their behaviour worse. In other instances, however, there were examples of customers having apologised for their behaviour after managers had spoken to them about it and told them that they had been reported.

Some managers felt that there was limited awareness and understanding among staff of the wider application of reporting outcomes.

*'I think the form again, because it's a generic form, doesn't sort of cover everything, the way it asks questions, loads of bloody paperwork to fill in and all the rest of it, and that might be part of it, the bureaucracy of it. But by taking that five minutes to fill them in means it gets recorded and then we've got a bigger database on which to start saying whether the risk assessments are right, reviewing training needs, reviewing the layout.'*

(Business Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

The cumulative result of all these barriers was evident in the repeated message from staff that safety incidents were under-reported, for all of the reasons described above. Some staff estimated that as many as half of all incidents went unreported.

## 6.4 Security guards

Whilst the DWP guidance on reporting incidents states that security guards should also complete a IF1 in the event of an incident, the security guards interviewed used separate reporting procedures to those used by Jobcentre Plus staff. One security guard reported that they were required to complete two forms, both different from the DWP forms. In some cases, security guards also used separate recording systems, such as a daily occurrence book, to inform their employer (Trillium or Group 4) of any incidents. Copies of these records would sometimes be shared with the Jobcentre.

In some offices, security guards appeared to take the lead on reporting incidents. One manager reported that it was sometimes the case that security guards filled in their forms, but members of staff did not. This presented problems for the manager:

*'If the security guards are saying that members of staff were being threatened, but the member of staff being threatened doesn't write that down, I can't really write to the customer and say "don't threaten our member of staff, or we are going to ban you from our office".'*

(Office Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

As with staff members (see Section 6.3.2), security guards sometimes had difficulty in reconciling their public responsibilities with their reporting responsibilities.

*'We have a loan of a desk, because other people share it, and when it gets busy we get pushed off. We've got nowhere to sit, that's one of our biggest bugs as well, We've got a pedestal now. But desk, we've got to share. Sometimes you don't even catch up with the paperwork, some days it's literally incident after incident after incident. You can have about six or seven incidents and you're standing around, we miss our tea breaks, sometimes we miss half our lunch break, but we know that's part of our job, we'll do it. But it's hard to catch up with the paperwork.'*

(Security guard, Jobcentre Plus office)



# 7 Support following incidents

This chapter outlines the guidance on support for staff after an incident, and examines what type of support was available to staff. Staff's views on the nature and adequacy of support are given, along with variations in levels of support across the different types of office.

## 7.1 The guidance

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) guidance *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting* (para 19) states that:

*'Staff must be given every support by management following an incident. This includes all managers:*

- *recognising the feelings of those most affected by showing empathy;*
- *sharing ideas and observations about action that could either prevent a recurrence or help staff to deal with a situation better next time;*
- *identifying whether those most affected by the incident would benefit from support provided by Care First for Jobcentre Plus staff and Corecare for DWP staff either as an individual or as part of a group;<sup>18</sup> and*
- *advising that their trade union representative can also offer assistance and support.'*

The guidance on incidents also indicates that procedures should be in place for reviewing documentation associated with risk management, primarily local incident management plans and risk assessments. Such reviews should be undertaken with the local/site Trade Union Health and Safety Representative and always following a serious incident (see Chapter 9).

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<sup>18</sup> Care First and Corecare provide confidential and specialised support for individuals or groups who experience emotional or physical stress as a result of dealing with aggression at work.

## 7.2 Support for staff

In the research, staff generally referred to the emotional or pastoral support available following a staff safety incident. Generally, this support came from managers and peers. There were examples of staff having received, or being aware of colleagues having received, feedback on their handling of a staff safety situation.

*'I'll speak to them... or then I might even get them to reflect on what they've [done], with the interview, or if I've spotted it and I've seen where it's gone wrong, I will tell them where I think it went wrong, and would they agree or not agree, or whatever, and maybe to give them advice how maybe to tackle it differently.'*

(Financial Assessor Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

In one office, managers would hold these discussions with staff, but might also speak to customers about the type of behaviour expected from them when they come into the Jobcentre Plus office.

### 7.2.1 Management support immediately following an incident

Staff identified a range of support for those who had experienced an incident. Provision depended on the perceived gravity of the incident and, to some extent, on the reaction of the staff member involved. The support offered was generally short-term. Staff and managers rarely made reference to on-going support or attention to the potential longer-term impact of a staff safety incident (for example, a 'delayed reaction').

Staff and managers across both integrated and legacy offices appeared to have a good understanding of what would happen in terms of support following an incident. In some cases, staff referred to a 'menu' of possible options from which they could choose. One manager explained that they:

*'Reminded them of Care First, if they wanted to go home early, support them if they wanted to call the police, although we would have called the police, and if they wanted to take private prosecution and stuff like that, but to make sure they're OK and be as caring and sharing, all that touchy feely stuff, as you can be.'*

(Office Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

Staff often rationalised incidents of customers' use of bad language and swearing as them 'letting off steam' and in some offices where this was common customer behaviour, staff accepted it as a normal every day occurrence (see Section 3.3). In other offices where front-line staff did not accept this behaviour, support, if needed following this type of incident, was predominantly from peers.

Staff regarded verbal threats directed at an individual as much more significant and were treated as such by their managers. Following these incidents and depending on the severity of the incident, managerial support included:

- talking to the staff member/witness(es) involved needing support;
- offering an additional break in the course of a working day;
- offering an early finish time;
- paid time away from work;
- the option to change roles from front-line to backroom processing, or to transfer to another office (not always available as options due to staff shortages); and
- referral to counselling (staff member involved and sometimes witnesses).

Managers were generally more proactive in dealing with more serious verbal and physical incidents. In addition to the support methods outlined above, examples include a manager who wrote to a customer who had caused an incident. On receipt of the letter, the customer came into the office and apologised for their behaviour, which made the staff member feel much better and well supported. Other examples include adviser managers who had a visible presence in the office and who called staff when they were off sick to see if their illness was in any way connected to an incident. There were rare exceptions to this proactive management of serious incidents, which involved Jobcentre Plus staff discovering corpses on the premises.

There was limited evidence of staff being actively encouraged to take up counselling support. In some cases, staff felt that support was offered to 'vulnerable' individuals, but not to other staff. In some cases, counselling was triggered by reporting of incidents: staff would be given the option of requesting counselling as part of their completion of the IF1 (Incident Form 1); see also Section 7.2.4, which looks at the use of Care First.

Where incidents had been more serious, or were likely to have an impact on the wider team, managers sometimes made counselling services more widely available. In one office, all staff members were given access to on-site counselling support from Care First (individual meetings and group support sessions), following a serious assault on a member of staff.

In some offices, however, there appeared to be a tension between the practical responses required after a staff safety incident and the role of management in providing pastoral support. For example, one staff member reported being told that they could not take stress-related sick leave until they had written an incident report.

Similarly, staff identified examples of tensions between staff safety and the customer-service ethos of Jobcentre Plus. One staff member had submitted an incident report, but management withdrew it after the customer concerned filed a complaint against the member of staff. This tension was also highlighted by other staff, who felt that there was much emphasis on the need to provide good customer service, but insufficient clarity about what kind of behaviour was expected from customers.

There was also mixed managerial support following incidents that took place off the office premises and/or out of office hours. Whilst some managers responded to staff concerns about travelling to and from work with offers of a lift home or the use of a taxi, one manager would not recognise out of office incidents as their responsibility. Safety outside office hours was a key issue for some staff who felt vulnerable because of their association with Jobcentre Plus. They generally felt that this issue received limited recognition from management. Staff acknowledged that it was sometimes difficult to provide evidence of incidents that occurred outside the office, or prove that incidents were associated with staff working for Jobcentre Plus. However, they still felt that this issue should receive more attention.

### **7.2.2 Staff views on adequacy of management support**

Staff had very variable levels of experience of incidents, and this was reflected in their awareness of the support available to them. In low-incident offices, staff had limited awareness of the support available and suggested that this was something they would explore if the need arose.

Staff were generally more positive about the support available from their line managers than that available from management 'higher up'. Line managers and supervisory staff were perceived as being more supportive because they had a better awareness of the challenges facing front-line staff. In some cases, staff felt that managers appeared to be more concerned with the need to report incidents than with the impact that incidents may have had on staff.

*'They do say "he or she is in tears, give them 15 minutes", but at the same time they do hand you the form still. There's no love lost sitting down and saying "let me try and comfort you," no.'*

(Front-line staff member, legacy Jobcentre Plus Office)

In one high-incident area, staff had on-going concerns about their safety, but acknowledged that management had responded positively to their concerns (and the attendant reporting of incidents) by providing additional security guards. However, some managers felt frustrated because they could not offer support as they were not aware of incidents having occurred.

In some cases, staff members also indicated that they might be offered support from the trade union, or would approach the union if they did not feel that management had been sufficiently supportive. In other cases, however, staff – although aware that support was available – had poor levels of understanding of the relevant individuals to whom they could go for support. These individuals had such a low profile that staff could not recall their names or titles.

A strong message from staff across all office types was that they felt that managers in particular were not always sufficiently firm with difficult customers. Staff sometimes perceived these customers as being rewarded for their poor behaviour by managers speeding up their claims/payments, or even giving them payments to which they might not be entitled. Where customers were not given a sufficiently

strong deterrent or sanctions, staff felt that they would be likely to behave equally badly in the future if they felt that it would help them to get what they wanted. Staff also indicated that if other customers witnessed poor behaviour being rewarded, they might behave in a similar way in order to get what they wanted.

*'I think we've got quite a weak management here. We've got customers that come in and kick off every week, and they get what they want, and I understand to a degree that they get what they want because it saves a lot of other aggravation for staff, and I can understand I suppose from a management point of view, but all that does is educate that person that they can get away with what they want, with the whole of the office, 150 people. And to me that's not acceptable either. He or she should not be treated any differently to all of the other people that come in here, and they should be taught that.'*

(Front-line staff member, Jobcentre Plus office)

Staff were particularly concerned about those instances where managers were perceived as having bent the rules to accommodate poorly behaved customers.

*'[they] will change the system to accommodate them – early benefit payments, change signing-on days to suit them ... Makes you respect management less, as they should be backing you.'*

(Front-line staff member, Jobcentre Plus office)

*'...feel the pendulum tends to swing too much towards the customer...because our managers don't want this trouble, they tend to say, "all right, just pay him and let him go," but the problem is like a wound, if it's not properly treated it will fester.'*

(Front-line staff member, legacy Jobcentre Plus office)

Staff also saw managers as not being sufficiently firm in backing them up in decisions they had made (such as sanctions, unsuccessful Social Fund or Crisis Loan and payment decisions). This resulted in staff feeling undermined and regarding managers poorly.

In some instances, managers were not present at the time of the incident, but might follow it up by contacting the customer to discuss their behaviour. Where this occurred, staff viewed this approach positively. Some managers indicated that if staff were to complete more detailed reports of incidents, this would provide good evidence to allow them to take action with customers.

### **7.2.3 Support offered by other staff**

In some Jobcentre Plus offices, security guards played an active role in following up staff safety incidents. This included providing first aid, offering support and checking to see if the staff member was suffering from shock. In some cases, security guards felt that the onus was on them to provide support, mentioning that managers sometimes did not check up on the 'victim' and that this was left to the security guard. Security guards also had a role in encouraging staff to complete incident forms.

Staff across all office types indicated that they predominantly received peer support following a staff safety incident. This entailed colleagues offering a 'listening ear' to them or discussing the incident with them.

Staff reporting support from the trade union representatives often linked this support to being encouraged to report incidents, although there were examples of staff who did mention the pastoral support that union representatives gave following incidents.

#### 7.2.4 Care First

Staff across all office types were generally aware of the support available through Care First. Managers commented on referring staff to Care First following incidents. However, staff usually only accessed the service if they or their colleagues had experienced what they termed a 'serious' incident. Even so, some staff who had experienced incidents did not recall having been referred to or using support from Care First.

Where staff had limited experience of incidents, they were not always sure how much Care First was used, or what the quality of the service was like.

Staff who had some dealings with Care First questioned its independence from Jobcentre Plus and the DWP. Others, however, were confident that Care First provided a confidential service.

*'[it's] an agency that's set up for staff to actually contact them, just to talk things through really on a one-to-one basis that's away from the Department.'*

(Front-line staff member, Jobcentre)

The research identified examples of staff having had negative experiences of trying to access Care First. One front-line staff member contacted the service after a serious incident in the office they worked in:

*'But personally myself, no I didn't find them helpful at all, they didn't get back to me at all, the number that I gave them to contact me and everything like that, and I thought, with that I didn't bother to ring back.'*

(Financial Assessor Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

### 7.3 Security guards

Security guards, because they were employed by external agencies, did not appear to have the same provision available to them if they experienced an incident. Security guards across all office types had limited awareness of Care First. If they were aware of it, they did not appear to see it as a service they could access.

In some offices, security guards indicated that they had no counselling or paid time off available to them in the event of a staff safety incident.

# 8 Potentially violent customers

This section focuses on the procedures used to identify and review Potentially Violent (PV) customers, and staff's understanding of these procedures. It also examines staff's awareness of PV markers and the impact of these on customer handling.

## 8.1 Procedures relating to potentially violent customers

Guidance from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) relating to PV customers is outlined in *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*. The guidance outlines the following:

- behaviour that should result in a PV classification;
- classification of a customer as PV;
- action following the PV decision;
- disclosure of PV markings;
- exchange of PV information; and
- reporting on the behaviour of a PV customer and the review of their PV markings.

The various aspects of the guidance are discussed throughout this section. Reference is made to the guidance's usability, and levels of awareness and application by staff.

## 8.2 Definitions of potentially violent customers

Paragraph 16 of the guidance stipulates that a person should be classified as PV under the circumstances outlined below.

*'A person should be classified as PV if they:*

- *commit an actual physical assault on a member of staff, regardless of whether the member of staff is injured;*
- *commit an actual physical assault on a member of staff's family, if it can be demonstrated that the assault was directly connected to the member of staff's work in the Department;*
- *attempt to commit a physical assault;*
- *stalk a particular member of staff (which is defined as 'the wilful, malicious and repeated following and harassing of another person');*
- *suffer from a severe mental illness and they, or a qualified medical practitioner or social worker, inform the Department that they are likely to pose a danger to staff;*
- *make a threat of violence either face to face, over the telephone or in writing; or*
- *display threatening or aggressive behaviour.'*

As can be seen from the above list, classification of PV status tends to follow a customer's threat of or actual display of aggression or violence. As noted in Chapter 3, staff have commonly experienced incidents with customers who have been threatening or intimidating or where their behaviour has created an uncomfortable atmosphere. As staff are generally unaware of the detailed content of the guidance, they do assume that the behaviour of these customers does not meet the guidance's definition of violent. As a result these customers might slip through the net.

## 8.3 Awareness of the PV identification process

In general, across both integrated and legacy areas, front-line staff had the least understanding of the process used to identify customers as PV. Awareness of the PV identification process varied by case-study area and by staff in individual offices. While most front-line staff were aware that the completion of forms was an integral part of the process, they referred to these forms in a variety of ways: 'PV marker', 'PV1' and 'IF1' (Incident Form 1) forms. In addition, while some staff were aware of certain aspects of the process, they did not necessarily know how these might fit into the process as a whole. There were isolated cases of Jobcentre staff who perceived that only the Social Security office used PV markers and that Jobcentres no longer used this system, but relied on word of mouth among staff to disseminate awareness of PV customers.

Across integrated areas, front-line staff had varying levels of understanding of the PV identification process. Jobcentre Plus public office staff were generally more aware than their Contact Centre colleagues. In non-integrated areas, staff who had been working in Jobcentres and Social Security offices for some time had a reasonable understanding of the PV identification process.

## 8.4 Allocation of PV markers

Staff reported a variety of reasons why the decision would be made to classify a customer as PV. Most obviously, a customer would be allocated a PV marker if they displayed aggressive, threatening or violent behaviour. In these instances, staff were generally aware that the PV classification followed the completion of IF1 and IF2 incident forms. There were also examples of staff experiencing situations with customers who made them feel uncomfortable or intimidated. Their managers had encouraged them to report all of these interactions so that a case file could be developed to support the allocation of a PV marker.

In addition to incidents with a staff member/in a public office, staff across offices also reported the following sources of information that could be used to classify a customer as PV:

- **information from a customer's General Practitioner (GP)** stating that an individual is liable to violent mood swings (on GP advice, these customers are often not notified of their PV status);
- **local newspaper reports** – there were examples of offices where staff would consider whether to classify a customer as PV if the local newspaper had reported the individual as being involved in a violent incident;
- **customers who had just left prison** – staff on one office stated that they issued ex-offenders with a PV marker; and
- **customers' self-declarations** – customers might include information on a benefit claim form that could lead to a PV classification. For example, the customer might state that they have a tendency to self-harm, lose control and strike out at innocent members of the public.

### 8.4.1 Responsibilities for allocating PV markers

Staff responsible for or involved in making PV decisions included:

- Office Managers;
- Nominated Safety Managers;
- Trade Union Health and Safety Representatives; and
- Customer Services team (in consultation with the Office Manager).

In one Jobcentre, it was not clear from any of the staff interviewed who allocated PV markers or how it was done; in one Social Security office, the manager forwarded the completed forms to district level for the decision to be made.

Staff's perception of who held the responsibility for allocating PV markers to customers varied from no understanding, to believing that it was the responsibility of a range of on-site staff, to believing that the responsibility lay with off-site bodies. Staff who believed that the responsibility lay with off-site bodies referred to a central person at District/Regional office or an office in Glasgow. They provided little additional information on which particular person in these locations it might be, nor on how decisions were made.

Across integrated and legacy areas, both front-line staff and staff involved in allocating PV markers referred, in various ways, to the level of responsibility attached to this task. One Trade Union Health and Safety Representative believed that allocating PV markers was a huge responsibility and should lie with specialist staff. Other interviewees with this responsibility talked about their own concerns. These included the following examples:

- The need for hard evidence to support the decision to allocate a PV marker. One Business Manager found it difficult to make this decision based on descriptions of incidents in the forms, as opposed to actually witnessing an incident and the nature of a customer's verbal manner.
- The hierarchical nature of the PV system and the time it takes to pass the necessary paperwork up to managers and for them to allocate a PV marker. One Financial Assessor (FA) Manager believed that, in the meantime, a serious incident could occur:

*'I don't think the action is quick enough to say this is PV or whatever. I think the nitty gritty is just too much sometimes.'*

(Financial Assessor Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

## 8.5 Dissemination of PV information to staff

Across all offices, some staff said they did not receive formal notification of new PV customers. Other staff, however, noted that various formal and informal methods were used in their office to inform them of both new and existing PV classified customers. Staff identified both written and oral methods used to notify them formally of PV classified customers, as follows:

- Written methods (hard copy or via e-mail):
  - updated PV lists circulated to team leaders, who then cascaded the information to their staff;
  - updated PV lists circulated to all staff; and
  - manual marking (red stamp) on the customer's file.

Not all staff referred to how frequently this information was circulated. Where mentioned, it was generally two or three times a year.

- Computerised methods (other than e-mail):
  - PV database;
  - tick boxes on the Labour Market System (LMS);
  - PV markers on 'JSAPS'(Jobseekers Allowance Payment System);
  - flashing PV indicator;
  - audible 'beep' sound when customer's record accessed; and
  - some interviewees referred generally to 'markers' on the computer screen (a tick, letter or number) without specifying where they were found.

However, there were examples of staff who were not sure whether computerised information was updated in line with the paper lists that were circulated.

- Oral methods (office meetings):
  - daily (ten-minute meetings before office opening);
  - weekly (scheduled office communication meetings); and
  - quarterly (Visiting Officers in one area included PV customers as a standing agenda item for each meeting).

Informal methods were used to inform colleagues of PV-classified customers and customers with a reputation for being difficult:

- word-of-mouth communication was common among front-line staff;
- longer-serving staff regarded it as their responsibility to inform less-experienced staff of any difficult customers; and
- using the 'conversations box' in LMS to relay customer information to the next staff member who accessed this system.

### **8.5.1 Staff perceptions of the adequacy of PV information**

Some staff found that the information they received – whether formally or informally – was insufficient for the following reasons:

- Written methods – staff questioned the effectiveness of circulated PV lists (both hard copy and e-mail) for the following reasons:
  - it was impractical to look through the list every time a customer came into the office and so they would not be aware of a customer's PV status;
  - staff questioned whether lists were updated promptly or whether they were updated once there were a number of newly classified PV customers; and
  - there was little consistency in the information on lists, which differed by Jobcentre Plus office.

- Markers on computer screens – staff’s main issues with this means of identifying a PV customer were that different computer systems used in the various Jobcentre Plus offices had different markers, as listed in Section 8.5. Also, not all staff interviewed were aware of the existence of computer-based markers.

Suggested improvements included:

- the need for a variety of markers to differentiate between types of incidents leading to PV marker allocation;
- a ‘hot spot’ which could be clicked on to inform staff of the nature of the customer’s violent behaviour; and
- a (national) standard database into which a customer’s name could be entered, and which would instantly show whether they were classified as PV.

Other staff were unable to use the information provided to them because of the nature of their work. Examples of this included finance staff who were too busy making payments to customers to be able to compare their names with the PV list, and a Floor Manager who believed it was not possible or practical to check the PV list every time a customer visited the office. Staff also recognised that reception staff were in a vulnerable position because they were greeting customers (new customers in particular) with no knowledge of their background or previous actions.

## 8.6 Dissemination of PV information to external agencies

The DWP guidance stipulates the following with regards to disseminating information on PV customers to external agencies:

*‘Where it is known that another Department, outside agency or organisation has contact with the customer, they should also be notified of the PV marking, using the pro-forma in Appendix 1. This must be done on a case-by-case basis.’<sup>19</sup>*

However, staff interviewed were confused over the legalities of the Data Protection Act with regards to disclosing such information.

Some staff were aware that they received information from and exchanged information with their ‘partner’ Contact Centre or Social Security office. A few offices in integrated areas also exchanged information with a small number of external organisations. In one instance, the primary reason for informing these agencies was to counteract benefit fraud rather than to notify of a PV marking. External organisations informed included:

- local authorities re PV marking and benefit fraud (Housing Office, Social Services, Council Tax);
- trade unions;

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<sup>19</sup> DWP *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, para 41.

- DWP District Office;
- Social Security office; and
- training providers.<sup>20</sup>

## 8.7 Dissemination of PV information to customers

The DWP guidance stipulates that:

*'When a customer is classified as PV to comply with the Data Protection Act they must normally be advised, in writing using [Letter Templates 1, 2 & 3](#), as appropriate. The legal requirements for this action, consequence of the marking, recording of the marking, notifying other organisations, recording their future behaviour and review periods should be explained.'*<sup>21</sup>

Managers in integrated areas informed customers of their PV marking, while those in non-integrated areas were more likely not to. One Office Manager chose to inform customers face to face rather than by letter. Among front-line staff, there was mixed awareness across all case-study areas and even within the same office about whether customers were informed of a newly allocated PV marking. Most front-line staff assumed that they were not informed because it could aggravate them.

Although staff had not actually experienced any consequences of informing customers of their PV status, their views on informing them and the perceived consequences of this varied. Some thought that under the Data Protection Act customers had a right to know if they had been allocated a PV marking. One Adviser Manager believed that it served as an effective warning to customers that their behaviour was not acceptable. Other staff were concerned that informing customers of a PV marking might provoke a reaction. One Nominated Safety Manager believed that he had been told by a DWP staff trainer not to inform customers as it could increase the dangerous nature of the situation.

## 8.8 Customers slipping through the PV net

Across integrated and non-integrated areas, staff had mixed views on whether customers slipped through the PV net. Under-reporting was the main reason for customers slipping through the net, as illustrated by the first three of the following points:

- **Staff tolerance of incidents** – staff responded to incidents in a variety of ways and many, often longer-serving, staff were quite resilient; they would choose to deal with difficult customers themselves rather than submit a formal report.

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<sup>20</sup> Example of practice before the Data Protection Act; customer access to information has stopped this practice.

<sup>21</sup> DWP *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, para 44

- **Consistent unacceptable behaviour** – staff dealt with customers who were often *'mouthy and aggressive'*, but who had not caused a particular incident.
- **Reporting process** – in addition to the previous two points, some staff found the reporting system too time-consuming and thought it involved too much paperwork. These interviewees said that they would report if the PV process were made simpler.
- **Substance abusers** – though staff dealing with these customers needed a particular type of warning, staff found their behaviour to be unpredictable rather than potentially violent.

Staff generally did not believe that PV customers were the main cause of incidents that had occurred in their office. A common view was that any customer could cause an incident, and some also stated that incidents tended to be unexpected and isolated events. (See Chapter 4 on incident triggers). Specific examples of factors that could lead to incidents include: customers who come into the office drunk; non-payment or delayed payment; frustration with the system and customers who regularly display unacceptable customer behaviour that goes unreported. The following example of unacceptable behaviour was given:

*'I've had two or three in particular on New Deal who were old PV clients and we've had our problems when they come in' ..... Adviser Manager goes on to describe one customer in particular ..... 'It's always payment related because he doesn't attend his interviews.'*

(Adviser Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

## 8.9 Effects of awareness of PV markers

### 8.9.1 Staff's manner in dealing with customers

Staff had mixed views on the effect that knowing a customer's PV marking had on the way they dealt with the customer. Many staff did not believe that it made any difference, as they were often unaware of customers' PV status. This might be because they had not looked for the marker or had not been informed of it. Receptionists and floorwalkers do not have access to PV information because they are dealing with people as they walk through the doors.

The implications for staff of this lack of knowledge varied. Some staff did not want to know of a customer's PV status as some front-line staff believed that prior knowledge of a PV marker could make them behave in an unusual manner towards the customer. Managers agreed and expressed concern that staff might deal with PV customers differently, resulting in a negative impact either for the customer or on the effectiveness of the benefit system. Other staff felt more vulnerable and treated all customers as though they might be PV. Their overall aim would be to avoid a negative reaction from the customer.

The research findings were somewhat contradictory with regard to staff's handling of PV customers as those staff who were aware of customers' PV status or who were concerned with the usual behaviour of certain customers most commonly described their manner they adopted as more:

- cautious;
- careful;
- polite;
- aware (of their own manner and the customer's reactions); and
- professional (ensuring that they knew the customer's record in advance).

At first glance these look like positive forms of behaviour to adopt with any customer, however, staff used these forms of behaviour to shield themselves from becoming too familiar/or appearing to become too familiar with customers they were wary of. In actual fact they were inadvertently rewarding the customers' bad behaviour by adopting a much more professional approach.

A smaller number of staff described stronger feelings and responses to PV-marked customers, which illustrated that they commonly assumed an interaction with these customers would be negative. Some staff were quite negative in their opinions and described themselves as:

- frightened;
- nervous;
- over-cautious;
- judgmental;
- intimidated; and
- automatically assuming that the customer would be violent.

Others were consistently more lenient with PV-marked customers as they wanted to deal with them quickly – sometimes ahead of other customers who had been waiting longer – so that they would leave the office. All of these respondents recognised that treating customers in this manner was a form of prejudice. These staff would:

- side-step certain issues and purposefully avoid tackling them;
- '*give in more easily*' if the customer showed signs of becoming agitated;
- deal with their issues more quickly so that PV customers would receive better service; and
- avoid job-search activities if they believed that this was an area that could cause a negative reaction.

*'We don't keep them waiting long. We see them straight away and don't hassle them. It's in and out as soon as possible so that it causes less aggravation to them as possible.'*

(Front-line staff member, Jobcentre)

One Jobcentre adviser gave an example of District Manager agreement to allow advisers to treat more leniently a 'known' customer who refused to talk:

*'He just wouldn't talk, wouldn't say anything. So he filled the form in and we sort of worked round it... Sometimes he would talk, and sometimes he wouldn't – it was just sign here and he would go. It's not worth that risk of getting into something happening... It was agreed to do things in a different way than you would for like 99.9 per cent of people.'*

(Adviser, Jobcentre)

### **8.9.2 Staff preparation for interviews with PV customers**

Many staff across both integrated and non-integrated areas did not prepare any differently for interviews with PV customers. Reasons given included choosing not to prepare any differently, no prior knowledge of the PV status, or no opportunity to prepare differently. Those staff without prior knowledge or opportunity to prepare were generally non-advisory and/or reception staff. These staff were more likely to feel vulnerable in their work place as they were the first port of call for whoever came through the door.

Preparation for interviews with PV customers that did take place was a combination of office procedure encouraged by managers (these were either instigated by managers or initiated by staff and approved by managers) and individually developed practices. Official systems that were put in place included:

- Social Security and Jobcentre Plus staff dealt with PV customers in a screened room, sometimes with a security guard positioned outside the door. At times, this required the customer to sign on in a different office.
- Financial Assessor Managers in one Jobcentre Plus office actively encouraged their staff to be familiar with the customer's case file in order to anticipate any particular queries that might arise. Front-line staff in another non-integrated office also did this independently of management guidance.
- In cases considered to be particularly dangerous, one Jobcentre Plus office had an established relationship with the local police, who would be informed of a customer's visit. Staff would also ensure that the CCTV cameras were directed at the customer in question.
- In all case-study areas, Visiting Officers always undertook accompanied visits to PV customers' homes, or to notorious estates. One Visiting Officer strongly believed that the accompanying colleague should be someone who had received 'Handling difficult customers' training rather than whoever was free at the specified time. Managers also encouraged Visiting Officers to look for an alternative means of dealing with such customers, for example by letter, telephone or in a screened area in the office.

The individually developed preparation methods used by front-line staff, in both non-integrated and integrated areas, centred on ensuring that someone else was aware of the customer's visit. They informed colleagues, security guards and/or line managers.

### 8.9.3 Deferring interviews to senior staff/colleagues

Most staff had the opportunity to defer interviews with particularly difficult customers. Senior colleagues (including Office Managers) or peers would undertake these interviews, depending on the particular situation. While one Jobcentre manager stated that the opportunity to defer existed, she preferred to take a supportive role to enable staff to learn from the situation.

A small number of interviewees did not believe that there was an opportunity to defer, as customers saw the next available staff member. Others chose not to defer interviews or would not consider deferring an interview, as they believed that customers were their responsibility and dealing with them successfully was part of their job role.

## 8.10 Opinions of PV markers and the PV system

Staff were generally dismissive of the usefulness of PV markers and the PV system because of the way the system works. This was because they did not see the relevance of it for all staff, and also because of the level of administrative work it created. They did not regard the current PV marker system as relevant for many of their colleagues who faced customers coming through the door and had to deal with them without any prior knowledge, as noted in Section 8.9.1. These staff tended to treat all customers as PV, since any one of them could be having 'a bad day' and might react negatively to something a member of staff said to them.

Other staff had little faith in the PV system because a marker could only be attributed once an incident had taken place, which negated the value of it. As one Visiting Officer highlighted:

*'you can't put someone on it [the PV list] until they have done something. The wording "potentially violent" suggests that you would include people who you think might be violent, but in fact you only record when incidents take place.'*

(Visiting Officer, Social Security Office)

Other interviewees in both non-integrated and integrated areas believed that some Social Security office staff used PV markers unnecessarily. All highlighted the need for caution when marking customers as PV, since they felt that in the majority of cases customers aired their frustrations as 'one off' events and some come into the office afterwards and apologise.

*'Sometimes people get a little excitable and want people marked as potentially violent and they are not threatening anybody at all. They are just being loud and demanding. Demanding what they feel is their rights, their benefits or whatever.'*

(Nominated Safety Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

### **8.10.1 PV customers as the cause of incidents**

Many staff interviewed did not regard PV customers to be the cause of incidents that took place in their office. Staff believed that any customer could become violent if they did not receive the information or benefits they expected, and that many incidents were ad hoc for this reason.

Staff believed that unreported, regular, unacceptable customer behaviour was more of an issue than the behaviour of PV customers. They described these customers as:

*'...coming in and chipping away with little bits of unacceptable customer behaviour that hasn't resulted in a full incident report.'*

(Business Manager, Jobcentre Plus)

## **8.11 Review of PV markings**

The DWP guidance states that:

*'To be an effective control measure PV markings cannot be maintained indefinitely. All PV markings must be justified at the annual review.'*<sup>22</sup>

and

*'The nominated manager reviewing cases should consider the:*

- nature of the original incident*
- type of incident which led to the original decision*
- number and type of contacts since the original incident; and*
- customer's behaviour since the original incident.'*<sup>23</sup>

In order to inform the review process, the DWP guidance<sup>24</sup> indicates that staff are required to report on PV customers' behaviour, using a standardised pro-forma, after every dealing they have with this customer group (whether face to face, by

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<sup>22</sup> DWP *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, para 58.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, para 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, para 55.

telephone or written correspondence). Staff should then pass the completed report to the nominated manager responsible for the PV review process.

Generally, staff in the majority of offices were aware that there was a review system and that their managers regularly reviewed PV customers' markings, although they were unable to provide details of the review process itself (for example, the frequency of reviews).

Although the majority of staff were aware that they were required to report on every dealing they had with PV customers, they did not complete these reports consistently. In some offices, staff never completed the reports. The common reason given across all areas was the fact that the PV system is time-consuming and creates an additional administrative burden.

Some managers highlighted the need for staff to be encouraged to review customer behaviour, to enable managers to be better and more appropriately informed when making the review decision. One manager was only able to overcome the lack of documented information by discussing PV customers' behaviour over the previous 12 months with various staff at the annual review stage.

A copy of the PV review form is attached in Appendix B. Whilst the one-page form includes numerous tick boxes and asks for relatively little narrative, some staff suggested that a quick and easy-to-complete review pro-forma would assist in ensuring that reports were completed as required. Suggestions included a computerised form and tick boxes rather than a lot of narrative.

### **8.11.1 Opinions on the removal of PV markers**

Social Security office staff in non-integrated areas held the strongest views on the current PV review system. All interviewees who expressed an opinion were negative about it. They believed that if a customer had been violent towards staff or other customers once, they could easily cause a safety incident again. Staff were also fearful of customers who had been convicted of violent crimes, who might not be identified as PV under the recently introduced system.

They generally believed that the review system was introduced to assist with the policy decision to roll out the Jobcentre Plus vision of service delivery and specifically the delivery of services in an open-plan environment without screens. They also thought that its introduction put both Visiting Officers and staff in open-plan offices at risk of a safety incident.



## 9 Safety management

This section explores safety management, including safety procedures and staff's awareness of procedures. It outlines the standard guidance on safety management and examines staff's knowledge and use of procedures and systems, followed by an overview of staff's perceptions of their own and others' roles and responsibilities in terms of maintaining safety.

### 9.1 Safety documentation

Each office, whether integrated or legacy, should have two specific safety documents a Local Incident Management Plan (LIMP) and a local Risk Assessment (RA). Guidance from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on safety management states the following:

- **LIMP** – The LIMP should include roles and responsibilities in terms of safety, procedures in the case of an incident, eg who to inform and procedures for reporting after an incident for all staff types. The LIMP should be reviewed at six-monthly intervals and following a serious incident. All staff should be aware of, and understand, the content of the LIMP.
- **RA** – in addition to the general RA for all Jobcentre Plus offices, each office is required to develop a local RA. It is intended that office managers, Trade Union Health and Safety Representatives (TU H&S Representatives) and Nominated Safety Managers (NSMs), and in some cases Trillium, will take part in the development and regular review of this document. It is the responsibility of management to ensure that recommendations are followed up and acted on.<sup>25</sup> There is no step-by-step guide to the content of a local RA. There is guidance on the principles of RA.<sup>26</sup> The main areas to be covered include identified risks, scale of risks, control measures in place, if there are practical measures which will improve/remove the situation, what would be the remaining risk and recommended action.

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<sup>25</sup> DWP *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, Part two – roles and responsibilities, 1st April 2003

<sup>26</sup> DWP *Risk assessments and hazards in the workplace*, Chapter nine

## 9.2 Local Incident Management Plans

### 9.2.1 Evidence of a LIMP in place

Commonly, a LIMP of some sort existed in offices. Generally managers, Nominated Safety Officers/Managers and TUH&S Representatives were aware of the LIMP. Typically, other staff had not seen or read a copy of it and were unaware of its content or purpose. Some had heard the term LIMP and were able to recall an e-mail or brief description of it at a communication meeting.

### 9.2.2 Opinions of the LIMP as a safety management tool

Managers and safety representatives (TU and NSM) generally lacked confidence in the LIMP. They often regarded it as bureaucratic and irrelevant to activity on the ground. As the content of the LIMP was often generic and lacked local relevance, managers did not take it on board as a safety management tool.

In the offices where LIMP were absent, managers did not mention any plans to develop one. Like managers in other areas, these managers did not think a LIMP would be an effective safety management tool due to its lack of local relevance. However, there was an example of a manager who found the LIMP to be effective as they ensured it was an evolving document, which was habitually reviewed following incidents.

### 9.2.3 Extent of staff consultation/option to influence development of the LIMP

Across both integrated and legacy offices, there was little evidence of staff consultation on the content of the LIMP. Where staff were consulted, this was by email or via a communication meeting and staff had little recall on the content. However, in one case study area staff were consulted following a serious incident. This office had established a 'zero tolerance' group to discuss and reach decisions about definitions of unacceptable behaviour, tolerance levels and reporting systems. While the office planned to include these in the LIMP, its main priority was to develop a practical reference/guidance tool on staff safety which could be used on a daily basis.

Managers developed the LIMP with some involvement from TU H&S Representatives and/or NSMs. However, where Trillium developed the LIMP, there was no evidence of staff consultation.

### 9.2.4 Procedures for reviewing the LIMP

As discussed in Section 9.1, all offices are required to have procedures in place to review the LIMP on a regular basis (every six to 12 months), and always following a serious incident. In practice, review and revision of the LIMP rarely occurred.

The research identified isolated examples of staff safety procedures having been reviewed:

- managers took steps to improve staff's awareness of safety procedures; and
- managers had appointed a stress counsellor and staff were encouraged to use this service.

In the integrated offices, the LIMP had been developed or revised within the last two years when Jobcentre Plus was rolled out. Managers had not felt the need to revise the LIMP because it had been developed so recently, even when serious incidents had occurred.

As noted in Section 9.2.1 a consistent view amongst managers was that the LIMP was a generic document with low-level impact on daily practice. In general, managers did not refer to the revision process and were not able to provide examples of this happening, although there were examples of managers who undertook revisions as a formality without making any real changes to the document and a manager who intended to revise their recently developed LIMP every three months to make sure it was effective.

### 9.2.5 Procedures to ensure that all staff read the LIMP

All managers have a responsibility to ensure that staff at all levels are aware of, fully understand and accede to the LIMP. This requirement is regardless of staff's status or length of service. It also requires dissemination to take place on a regular basis, after each revision of the LIMP.<sup>27</sup>

The level of dissemination of the LIMP across areas depended on whether management or team leaders regarded it as directly relevant to daily practice. In public offices managers reported active dissemination of the LIMP, whereas this was rare in offices that did not deal with customers face to face. Despite managers attempts to actively disseminate the LIMP through various methods (e-mail, intranet, aide-memoire, circulated folder or presentation at a communications meeting), staff's recall of it was poor. Management were aware of this.

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<sup>27</sup> DWP *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, Part two – roles and responsibilities, DWP, 1st April 2003.

### 9.2.6 Procedures to test staff's understanding of the LIMP

Managers are responsible for ensuring regular testing of office awareness of the LIMP, responsiveness to incidents and application of the LIMP (using mock incidents, for example).

In practice, offices rarely tested awareness and understanding of the LIMP. In one office, a mock bomb scare had been carried out during office hours, and procedures had been tested again when an actual suspicious package was found. In another office, communication meetings were used to discuss potential scenarios and ways of dealing with them. Management viewed this as an effective reminder and way of reaffirming awareness of procedures. In both cases, these methods were mentioned by managers or NSMs. Front-line staff did not mention or recall these checks and reminders.

It was rare for the LIMP to be embedded into office practices and procedures in any formal way. Where staff complied with the expectations of the LIMP, this was more out of common sense and experience gained from 'on-the-job learning' than through knowledge of the documentation.

### 9.2.7 Testing of safety equipment

Testing of safety equipment is expected to happen on a weekly basis:

*'...weekly testing and record-keeping of the tests carried out on personal safety/alarm equipment and CCTV.'*<sup>28</sup>

In practice, there were only exceptional examples of offices who undertook weekly checks of safety equipment. Commonly panic alarms were tested, although fire alarms were also mentioned. These varied from tests on all panic alarms to a small selection of them.

## 9.3 Risk assessments

### 9.3.1 Existence of risk assessments

All the offices visited had a RA of some sort for the building. RAs in existence included:

- RAs specifically tailored to the office;
- generic Jobcentre Plus RAs (including examples of RAs developed with no visit to the site in question);
- RAs developed by Trillium; and
- in one instance, no RA existed, only workstation evaluations.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Only managers, TU H&S Representatives and NSMs were aware of the RA process. Managers in integrated offices generally knew more about the content of the RA than those in legacy offices.

### **9.3.2 Trade union involvement in developing risk assessments**

If Trillium conducted the RA and TU H&S Representatives were based outside the office, the representatives were unlikely to be involved in developing the RA. In these instances, TU Representatives typically dismissed the process at ground level, regarding it as unrepresentative of local issues and lacking in relevance.

There were isolated examples of TU H&S Representatives who felt excluded from the RA process. Front-line staff reiterated this belief and felt that management/Trillium did not want issues raised which could not be resolved owing to financial constraints. These views arose because their trade union representatives had previously raised issues which had not been resolved by the RA process.

### **9.3.3 Periodicity of risk assessments**

Front-line and non-advisory staff were generally unaware of how often an RA was carried out, what it involved, and what could trigger revisions to an RA. Management and TU H&S Representatives in integrated offices understood that the process should be repeated every six months and following a serious incident. In legacy areas, the RA system was so remote that there was no awareness of what should and could be expected from the process. In smaller offices and areas where no serious incident had ever taken place, staff reported that the RA had never been reviewed.

There were some exceptions to this general picture. The security guard in one office had carried out a RA following an incident when a customer entered the staff area. In another office staff commented that the delay/waiting time for Trillium to repeat a RA following an incident was 20 days. Management deemed this to be unacceptable.

### **9.3.4 Staff awareness and opinions of risk assessments**

The findings on staff awareness and opinions of RAs are based on interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff and managers. It does not include Trillium's perspective and is, therefore, limited.

Typically, there was no dissemination of RAs, and no consultation or feedback on progress against the recommendations. Unless personally involved in developing the RA, staff at all levels were typically unclear about the RA process: who conducted it, what it involved, how often it was carried out and what happened as a result/impact for the office. Staff had a good level of awareness of workstation assessments, but far less so of the office RA. As with LIMPS, managers were aware of this issue.

Where Trillium was involved in the RA process this effected consultation, confidence, ownership and dissemination for some members of staff. Staff felt that if Trillium led the RA it was unlikely that they:

- visited the office sites;
- consulted staff; or
- invited staff to take part in the process.

Therefore, where Trillium led the RA process:

- managers distanced themselves from the process and viewed it purely as a function of Trillium, which led to a lack of ownership within the office. One manager described it as *'not worth the paper it is written on'*; and
- TU H&S Representatives lacked confidence in the document's reflection of local office issues or its ability to have any impact.

Dissemination of the RA was generally poor for offices that had a Trillium-developed document. Staff, including managers, found it difficult to access a copy of the RA.

It was common that RAs had failed to include some areas of the office (such as interview rooms or outreach sites). These gaps contributed to staff's poor opinion of RAs and the view that they were bureaucratic and did not actually improve safety for staff. Staff working in outreach sites felt especially let down, as Trillium had developed their generic RA without any visit to the site, and with no recognition of the local circumstances and issues.

It is evident that managers and front-line staff lacked conviction in the effectiveness of the RA. Amongst front-line staff, this was connected to a lack of confidence that managers would implement the necessary changes.

*'I'm not confident. No way... the risks have been identified as high and they've done nothing to look at how they're going to eliminate them or control them. The interview room should not be getting used because there are no safe routes of escape. They were taken out of commission but they use them.'*

(Trade Union Health & Safety Representative, Jobcentre Plus)

Managers were generally non-committal about the RA and did not champion it or actively integrate it into office systems and practice. However, the senior managers in one office were confident about the RA's influence and its ability to examine local issues as it had led to the office increasing the number of security guards.

In one office, staff were dissatisfied with the competence and experience of senior staff to conduct the RA, the general quality of information, and the lack of action to resolve issues identified and comply with recommendations:

*'They don't seem to be acted on if the management feel that they have done the best they can.'*

(Nominated Safety Manager, Legacy area)

In another office, managers and staff had very different views on the RA. Managers were positive, while front-line staff felt that it was bland and *'utterly meaningless'* (Adviser, Legacy area). Many of these frustrations were associated with their security guards' lack of pro-activity and absence of other practical measures, such as panic alarms and close circuit television (CCTV).

## 9.4 Screened areas in integrated Jobcentre Plus offices

The public offices visited either had a screened area within their public office or they made use of a screened area at their local Contact Centre (CC). Those offices with screens used them for customers requesting Social Fund loans. Whilst Managers in these offices stated that these areas were available for any staff member to use if needed, staff dealing with customers did not use them because of the need to book their use in advance or because they felt it would antagonise customers and they preferred to stay within an open plan environment.

Those offices with the screened area in a local CC did not deal with Social Fund payments at all as these were directed to the CC. In these instances customers with a PV marker were also more likely to be dealt with by staff in the screened area of the local CC.

## 9.5 Roles and responsibilities

Staff generally had poor awareness of both their own and other staff members' roles and responsibilities for safety as set out in the guidance. Staff roles and responsibilities are outlined below.

### 9.5.1 Managers

Business managers are responsible for ensuring that health and safety legislation is adhered to and that all DWP control measures are in place and practised (ie LIMP and RA). Other responsibilities include monitoring incidents, training staff, supporting staff, checking PV cases, dissemination to staff and consultation with the TU H&S Representative and NSM.<sup>29</sup>

Managers' understanding of their own role and responsibilities regarding safety differed between integrated and legacy offices:

- In integrated offices, managers perceived their role in terms of safety to be one of monitoring and enforcement. In the larger offices, this role was seen to be strategic, eg developing procedures. In smaller offices, managers described having responsibility for day-to-day activity and disseminating procedures. Managers said they were responsible for the building, staff and customers.

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<sup>29</sup> DWP *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, Part two – roles and responsibilities, DWP, 1st April 2003.

- In legacy offices, managers were reassured that Trillium had responsibility for the RA because they felt that they did not have the experience or expertise for what they considered a huge responsibility. They were concerned that they had not had any training to take on this role. Instead, managers were taking on the role of dissemination and raising awareness among staff.

Other staff's views on management roles and responsibilities were very much determined by their perception of, and confidence in, how proactive managers were in resolving safety issues. Staff commonly felt that managers were too remote from the actual activities of the office to make a difference. Staff believed that managers needed to have a greater presence in the office so that they were aware of the issues and have a role in influencing them. However, there were examples of staff, especially in smaller public offices, who felt that managers were aware of what was happening in the office and would intervene if customers were being difficult.

Overall, staff were uncertain about managers' health and safety roles and responsibilities, but generally knew that managers were responsible for the building, staff and customers. Staff did not mention managers' role in terms of the LIMP and RA, focusing instead on practical activity within the office. There was some difference by office type:

- **Jobcentre Plus public offices** – staff commonly pointed towards managers' role in determining PV markers and writing to customers who had caused incidents.
- **Legacy offices** – confidence in management was generally low. Staff felt that managers were more concerned with performance targets than their safety and wanted managers to be more open to discussing safety concerns, experience the environment themselves and be proactive.

*'it's just targets, targets, targets, staff just get left behind, way behind.'*

(Adviser, Legacy office)

### 9.5.2 Trade union health and safety representatives

TU H&S Representatives should be informed of any serious incidents and should be jointly involved in the investigation. There is also a shared responsibility with management to support individuals affected by an incident. The TU H&S Representative should also be consulted and should participate in the RA review.<sup>30</sup>

TU H&S Representatives customarily viewed their safety role as being the interface between management and staff. Representatives saw themselves as having joint responsibility alongside management for the safety of all staff. Other safety functions included:

- promoting good practice among staff;

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<sup>30</sup> *Jobcentre Plus framework for the management and reporting of serious incidents*, Para 5 – Involvement of appointed TU safety reps, DWP, 1st April 2003.

- being accessible and approachable should staff have concerns regarding safety;
- being a liaison point for clarifying guidance and reporting systems;
- ensuring that action is taken following an incident; and
- representing staff's concerns.

In integrated offices, staff felt that TU H&S Representatives were working alongside staff and management to resolve health and safety issues. Typically, staff in integrated offices placed substantial trust in the trade union to represent their needs and ensure safety in the working environment. In integrated offices, to some degree, front-line staff handed responsibility for personal safety over to trade union personnel. These staff did not take on board their own role in ensuring their own safety and that of colleagues.

In legacy offices, the perception of the TU H&S Representative's role was far more combative than in integrated offices. The perception was much more of TU H&S Representatives challenging management to achieve staff safety.

In legacy offices, where TU H&S Representatives were based within the office, staff generally were confident about their representatives' ability to ensure positive action to tackle safety issues. Some staff thought that the trade union was more concerned with safety than managers were. In these cases, staff placed more trust and confidence in TU H&S Representatives than in management. This was especially so where the trade union had played a major role in postponing the roll-out of Jobcentre Plus and therefore keeping screens in offices.

Where TU H&S Representative's were not based in the office, staff were not confident that TU H&S Representatives were aware of the office's needs and would take action. Where TU H&S Representatives operated from the District Office, staff perceived that the only action taken was responsive to a serious incident, eg providing support to the individual and that no preventative action was undertaken, eg highlighting risks and solutions. In these areas, staff awareness of the TU H&S Representative's role was low because visits to the office were rare and confidence in them was also low.

### **9.5.3 Individual staff and peer group as a whole**

The guidance clearly states that all staff are responsible for their own safety and that of colleagues by complying with any health and safety procedures, specifically the LIMP. Staff have a responsibility to ensure that they have participated in the necessary training and are fully aware of their own particular responsibilities. The guidance also states that all incidents should be reported on the day they occur. There is specific guidance relating to PV customers: staff are required to complete a pro-forma after every contact with a PV customer.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> DWP *Unacceptable customer behaviour – guidance on policy and incident reporting*, Part two – roles and responsibilities.

In practice, staff were unaware of the detail of the guidance and their office's LIMP, which meant that very few staff were clear about their responsibilities for their own safety. Their perceptions of their responsibilities were based on common sense and experience, rather than the content of the guidance or other safety documents.

Safety responsibility took different guises in each office, for example a tidy desk policy, not leaving staff alone in an area of the office, or focusing on the quality of customer service to avoid incidents. Staff echoed threats commonly mentioned by management or safety representatives in an office.

The relevance of staff's understanding of their safety responsibilities and the similarity or differences between legacy and integrated office staff is important as it highlights the impact associated with the roll-out of Jobcentre Plus. This includes a greater focus on customer service and the increase in ownership of Jobcentre Plus staff of their personal safety and the safety of their colleagues.

#### *Integrated offices: overall*

All individuals were aware that they were in part responsible for their own safety. Staff placed considerable trust in their colleagues and also had a sense of responsibility for the people working around them. In integrated offices there was a greater understanding of mutual responsibility, especially peer responsibilities.

#### *Jobcentre Plus offices*

Managers perceived that staff only put into practice their roles and responsibilities following a 'semi-serious' incident. This reiterated the message that staff felt very positive about the friendlier environment. However, the friendlier environment itself sometimes led to staff complacency and poor implementation of safety practices. Incidents generally prompted compliance with safety procedures and improvements in practices which were/had become lax.

Front-line staff within an office tended to use the same terms to describe safety responsibilities. These were common themes rather than a reference to roles as defined in the LIMP. These themes included awareness of potential weapons and hazards, managing customer waiting times and customer flow or being alert to customer/adviser interactions in the vicinity.

#### *Contact Centres*

Managers acknowledged that an essential role for First Contact Officers (FCOs) was to prevent frustrations being carried over into the Jobcentre Plus public office where staff worked with customers face to face. There was an isolated case where managers were concerned that staff did not appreciate the responsibility and potential knock-on effect for Jobcentre Plus staff. A further issue highlighted was ensuring that members of the public did not enter the building or see the code being used for staff to enter.

FCOs in one Contact Centre raised the issue that their responsibility was for themselves and the staff in the public office. These FCOs provided behaviour warnings in the conversation boxes<sup>32</sup> on the Labour Market System (LMS) to alert Financial Assessors (FA) and Personal Advisers (PA) in the public office. This practice was an exception.

### *Legacy offices: overall*

Overall, staff awareness, practice concerning safety roles and responsibilities and ownership of safety responsibilities were poor. This ranged from lack of clarity about what was expected, to dependency on screens (see subsection on Social Security offices), to holding managers wholly responsible for staff safety.

Staff in Jobcentres and Social Security offices offered very different views on their safety responsibilities:

- In Jobcentres there was a heightened sense of responsibility for colleagues because of the absence of security staff.
- In Social Security offices by contrast there was a reduced sense of responsibility because of the presence of screens.

### *Jobcentres*

In small offices, staff had a greater sense of responsibility for colleagues and what was going on around them. Managers in these offices were confident that staff would use 'common sense' and look out for each other because the office was small.

A key factor for Jobcentre staff, who were used to working in an open plan environment, was 'the approach' staff took with customers (communication style) and the potential effect on themselves and other members of staff. There was heightened awareness of safety practices, particularly in the offices where staff discussed the potential impact of communication styles on customer behaviour.

### *Social Security offices*

Staff and managers recognised that the presence of screens in Social Security offices meant that less emphasis was placed on personal responsibility and actions to ensure safety.

Managers and some staff recognised that the presence of a screen meant that staff were more likely to display poor customer service. Staff behaviour was described by a variety of interviewees as complacent, lacking in respect and flippant. This behaviour was commonly referred to when managers and staff discussed possible incident triggers.

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<sup>32</sup> Additional comments/observations about the interaction with the customer which can be seen by both Contact Centre and Jobcentre Plus advisers.

Some of the staff interviewed openly relied on screens to make them feel safe. This dependency meant that the presence of screens resulted in safety management procedures that were not proactive and staff often did not take ownership of their role and responsibilities for safety. In one office, staff regarded their managers as responsible for staff safety, and none mentioned any personal responsibility.

There were also examples of Social Security staff who were aware that screens were a hindrance in developing good customer relations and that their approach, attitude and customer service could minimise incidents. These staff commented that the screens made clients feel inferior to the staff member. Other staff who had previously worked in an open plan Jobcentre Plus office were fully supportive of the removal of screens as they strongly believed that their removal would reduce the chances of incidents because of the increased personal contact between staff and customers.

#### **9.5.4 Security staff**

The guidance available on the DWP Intranet outline security guards' duties (see Chapter 2). In general these are to provide:

- a visible and proactive presence in all parts of the office;
- a positive initial reception to customers;
- directional guidance;
- information on policies relating to smoking, drinking alcohol on the premises, and so on; and
- a co-ordinated approach to manage the office environment in close liaison with the Floor Manager.

In legacy offices, security staff purely provide a security function. In Jobcentre Plus offices, the role can be security or it can also include a customer care function. There is no defined policy of intervention and guards are constrained by legal issues. Whilst their role is mainly that of a deterrent, security staff are permitted to use reasonable force only where there is no perceived risk to themselves or others as a result.

Staff felt reassured to some extent by the presence of security staff, and vulnerable where there was no security presence. In the case of legacy Jobcentres, staff saw the potential introduction of security staff as the major benefit of roll-out to Jobcentre Plus. To maximise staff perception of safety, staff believed security staff needed to be:

- visible;
- proactive;
- responsive to the situation;
- constantly mobile around the office;
- know when to intervene and when just to make their presence felt; and
- be present on every floor.

In contrast, staff, most commonly in legacy Social Security offices, were negative about the effectiveness of security staff. They perceived there to be a lack of intervention by security staff. Staff believed that security staff were no deterrent and protected the building rather than the staff. They also regarded the security staff to be of 'poor quality'. They felt that the role demanded highly skilled and experienced security guards and that this was fundamental in reassuring staff, especially in higher-risk offices. Perceived poor security was linked to staff reluctance and opposition to roll-out to Jobcentre Plus.

### *Self-perception*

Security staff described their role as being responsible for the safety of the building, staff and customers. Security staff were only aware of management's strategic responsibilities regarding safety. They had no understanding of other staff's role concerning safety. Security guards had a clear remit from their employers to use reasonable force, but most were somewhat unclear about *when* to intervene. Security staff viewed this as having to take a subjective decision, depending on experience within the office and their level of integration within the team.

An exception to the above was in one Social Security office, where the security guards perceived that they were not responsible for staff safety because the staff were behind screens.

In Jobcentre Plus offices, where security staff also performed a customer-care role, they were concerned about their conflicting duties: meeting and greeting customers; helping customers to use facilities; and also miscellaneous tasks such as sorting post. The demands of the Customer Care Officer (CCO) role was perceived to, on occasion, interrupt and minimise their effectiveness as a security guard. That said, CCO's felt that their presence had a positive effect on the general safety of the office.

### *Integrated offices: other staff's perceptions*

Jobcentre Plus staff regarded the main functions of security staff to be

- ensuring that members of the general public who were in the office had a reason for being there;
- ensuring that the office was not used as a meeting place by customers and/or their friends; and
- a deterrent to incidents.

Whilst staff, on the whole, did not expect security guards to intervene, they regarded these functions as central to improving safety in the office.

In one integrated office, where there was a particularly high presence of security staff/CCOs, staff regarded them as integral members of the Jobcentre Plus team. Staff and CCOs were in constant communication throughout the day.

### *Legacy offices: other staff's perceptions*

Social Security office staff were generally cynical and sometimes negative about the roles and responsibilities of security staff. Some staff said their role was to protect the building rather than staff. The general view was that security staff remained in the background and did not have a significant presence or impact on the safety of the office.

## **9.5.5 Land Securities Trillium**

In 1998, the DWP signed an agreement, transferring ownership and management of almost all of its estate to Land Securities Trillium. Their responsibilities include:

- building management and maintenance;
- furniture and equipment maintenance;
- utilities management;
- security; and
- catering.

Trillium have also been responsible for developing and reviewing the locality-specific RAs for some offices.

Only management, TU H&S Representatives and NSMs had any insight into the services provided by Trillium. At all staff levels there was still some confusion about Trillium's exact role in relation to safety management. The main issue was one of communication between Trillium and Jobcentre Plus management. Where Trillium was responsible for developing the RA, dissemination was poor (see Section 9.3). In the case of rural offices, Trillium had not always visited offices and the level of communication with management was particularly low.

Commonly, managers in legacy offices had handed responsibility for safety over to Trillium. Trillium was therefore responsible for the RA and LIMP.

There was some confusion about the roles and responsibilities of NSMs and Trillium with NSMs assuming that Trillium were responsible for particular duties. Some of these safety representatives raised questions about the experience and expertise of the Trillium staff carrying out RA and LIMP. This lack of confidence worsened where there were delays of up to a month to respond to a serious incident.

*'Certain things I can ask... they should have been out straightaway to fix, it takes forever.'*

(Security guard, Jobcentre Plus)

### 9.5.6 Nominated Safety Managers

Consistently across integrated and legacy offices there was mixed awareness of the identity of the NSM and their role.

In integrated offices, NSMs were commonly confused about their role since Trillium had taken over office safety management. Only where Trillium did not conduct the RA did NSMs play an active role in this process. Where Trillium performed this function, there was limited consultation with NSMs.

There were some offices (both integrated and legacy) where there was no NSM. Where they were present, management did not refer to the role played by the NSM in developing or implementing the LIMP or RA.

Front-line staff across offices were commonly unclear who the NSM was. Those people who did know, had a very basic understanding of their role and responsibilities. This tended to be staff who had been in service for a number of years (five plus). Any awareness of the NSM was connected to workstation assessments, maintenance issues and checking fire extinguishers rather than incidents and office safety. Front-line staff were more aware of the TU H&S Representative's role and reported any safety issues to them rather than the NSM.

## 9.6 Perceived vulnerable areas

Interviews with staff and office observations explored which areas of their office, if any, they perceived to be vulnerable. All staff felt that certain aspects of the office environment were vulnerable and reduced their sense of safety. Some points were common to both integrated and legacy offices, while others were distinct to Jobcentre Plus.

### 9.6.1 Ground floor and main entrance

Jobcentres and Jobcentre Plus offices experienced specific difficulties on the ground floor and near the main entrance. In Jobcentre Plus offices there was generally a concentration of activity on the ground floor:

- all customers were stopped as they entered the office;
- customers using warmphones;
- customers using jobpoints;
- Fortnightly Job Review team were located in the area;
- general enquiries were dealt with in the area;
- job vacancies were dealt with in the area; and
- the giro/finance office was located in the area with people often waiting for decisions or payments.

In legacy areas the ground floor was where customers made their first contact, and was also where customers signed on and collected giro payments.

Office observations revealed that the issue of a concentration of customers was worsened by a general lack of seating in most offices which created a density of people, queues and elevated noise levels. In all offices this problem was greater after a communication meeting, and the resulting late opening which brought an influx of customers.

### **9.6.2 Interview rooms**

Interview rooms were viewed as being vulnerable areas in both Jobcentre Plus offices and legacy Jobcentres alike. Staff were anxious about using these rooms for the following reasons:

- only one exit, or exit behind adviser;
- a lack of panic alarms;
- poor visibility to other staff;
- their location – off corridors and out of sight;
- advisers felt ‘forgotten’ once they were in interview rooms and unguarded by their colleagues; and
- lack of CCTV coverage.

### **9.6.3 Leaving the building**

Staff in all types of offices found leaving the building and the area surrounding the office to be vulnerable. For some staff this was because colleagues had experienced incidents when leaving the building. Specific factors included:

- the nature of the area including the local crime rate;
- lack of CCTV;
- staff living in the vicinity of the office who were worried about being recognised by customers or customers knowing where they lived; and
- availability of secure car parking (ie whether locked).

Where there was a car park outside the building, staff were particularly anxious that this facility may be removed; in isolated cases, this was a deciding factor for whether staff remained with an office.

### **9.6.4 Close Circuit Television**

In every office where CCTV was in place, staff raised the issue of poor coverage of the area around staircases. This was more of a concern in Jobcentre Plus offices because floorwalkers were regularly using the public stairs.

Staff were generally aware of any blind spots or areas not covered by the CCTV, and some actively avoided going into these areas. Where the CCTV coverage was poor or not monitored, staff had little confidence in its effectiveness. Staff in these offices all commented that improved CCTV would enhance their confidence in office safety. Security staff also raised the issue that poor CCTV coverage made them vulnerable to customer accusations because there would be no evidence to show what took place in an interaction.

Where coverage was comprehensive and CCTV was constantly monitored it acted as a deterrent for incidents. Indeed it was used to pre-empt incidents, by allowing early intervention and monitoring customer behaviour. Staff were confident that security staff would respond quickly to anything suspicious and that there would always be evidence.

*'I feel safe because I know that everyone that comes in is on camera...they're not that stupid to punch you in front of a camera.'*

(Customer Care Officer, Jobcentre Plus)

### **9.6.5 Seating**

The availability of seating for customers was a problem generally in Jobcentre Plus offices, but also in legacy Jobcentres. This issue arose mostly in the larger offices. A lack of seating resulted in customers standing close to advisers' workstations, thus invading the privacy of other customers and unnerving advisers. Also, customers would sometimes sit in unused chairs at advisers workstations because there was nowhere else to sit. In other instances, customers leaned on walls or barriers near jobpoints or warm phones, which compromised the privacy of other customers.

### **9.6.6 Doors to staff areas**

Practices around door-entry systems to staff areas varied across offices. There was commonly some complacency about the use of door codes and staff not shutting these doors. There were staff in each office who perceived this as a real threat to security and safety.

### **9.6.7 Finance area/giros issued**

There were examples of Jobcentre Plus offices where the giro payment/finance area was perceived to be an area of real concern in the office and one which staff avoided. The main reasons for this were waiting times and lack of customer seating. In one office, this area was at the far side of the room. This meant that customers who were anxious for payments had to walk through the whole office. In another office, giro payment took place in an annexe with a one-way entrance system; staff were more reassured by this arrangement.

### **9.6.8 Open environment**

The core difference in staff's perceptions of office safety focused on desk layout. While the Jobcentre Plus format was seen as creating a friendly environment, some staff were aware that the lack of a barrier between them and customers increased their vulnerability. Some staff (especially ex-Benefit Agency staff) felt that the open environment created the opportunity for any incident to escalate and increased the potential seriousness of any attack.

### **9.6.9 Warm phones**

Staff in the larger and busier Jobcentre Plus offices raised the issue of customers receiving unwelcome news via the warm phone (explained in Chapter 2). Staff were concerned (some because of past experience) that this could lead to anger and frustration being brought into the office unnecessarily.

### **9.6.10 Lack of privacy**

In both legacy and integrated offices, privacy for customers affected staff's perceptions of safety in the office. The issues that needed to be resolved in order to improve safety by targeting incident triggers were:

- lack of interview rooms;
- cramped seating and interview areas;
- lack of soundproof screens; and
- lack of interview desks.

Staff were aware that customers could be overheard and that some were uncomfortable by the proximity of other customers – in some instances this was upsetting and in others antagonising for customers.

### **9.6.11 Panic alarms**

Panic alarms were generally only mentioned within Jobcentre Plus offices. Panic alarms in other offices were for interview rooms rather than personal use. On the whole, there was a lack of confidence in the reliability of the alarms, or complacency meant that they were not worn or used by staff. Where staff had audible or silent alarms, these were rarely or never activated. Staff with silent alarms believed that these would be effective in case of an incident and were reassured. Audible alarms were far less likely to be worn or used by staff. Staff feared that using an audible alarm would put them more at risk by alerting the customer that they were scared. There was a firm belief that all offices should have silent alarms fitted to all desks and in private interview rooms.

# 10 Conclusions and recommendations

## 10.1 Staff safety in Jobcentre Plus

Staff working in integrated areas are more immediately aware of and responsible for safety issues than their counterparts in legacy areas. However, they appear unconcerned about the content of office-specific safety management documentation such as the Local Incident Management Plan (LIMP), Risk Assessment (RA) and the 'Potentially Violent' (PV) guidance in particular. These documents are not necessarily seen, read, understood or followed. Indeed, with longer opening hours and the amount of information that staff are expected to read and understand, some guidance can be overlooked. Staff tended to regard these documents as management tools rather than guidance that concerns their day-to-day behaviour. The consequence of this view is that many incidents go unreported because staff feel that the incident reporting process and the process for allocating PV markers are overly bureaucratic. This is a particular concern among managers and Trade Union Health and Safety Representatives.

Front-line staff could be quite sceptical about managers' commitment to staff safety and questioned whether managers wanted to address issues that they faced with some of their problem customers. Like customers, staff have a right to be treated well, and it is their managers responsibility to ensure that this happens. Staff tolerate unacceptable behaviour and were concerned that there were cases when difficult customers received 'special' treatment, which implies that bad behaviour is rewarded.

Many of the staff interviewed have experienced incidents, though there were isolated cases where staff have had no incident experience. Most incidents tend to be verbal, though physical incidents directed at individuals and/or property do occur, albeit on a much less frequent basis. A key issue for Jobcentre Plus is that, assault/threat of assault aside, staff's tolerance to incidents vary and what one

member of staff might define as an incident another might see as challenging, but not unacceptable, behaviour. This lack of consistency means that should any steps be taken to improve the current position, these differences of opinion need to be reflected.

The research found no real patterns in terms of levels and periodicity of incidents that could be attributed to an integrated or legacy environment. Factors influencing incidents included geographical location, office size and the nature of the customer group.

## 10.2 Impact of the new Jobcentre Plus claims process and office environment on staff safety

The new claims process is causing problems for customers with a signing history who have not used Contact Centres before, and elderly people, who might be anxious about using the telephone. The findings on incident triggers suggest that there are three particular aspects of the process that are causing concerns:

- initial contact – customers calling a Contact Centre rather than dropping in to a public office to arrange an interview;
- money, payments and payment handling; and
- the increased work focus – with customers being asked to attend interviews as part of the new claims process (particularly important among non-JSA customers) or being asked about their activities to find work as part of the fortnightly job review process.

In part these are bedding-in issues, with customers having to get used to different processes from those experienced in the past. There are particular frustrations for customers who have travelled to a Jobcentre Plus office and are then directed towards a warm phone and invariably have to return to the office at a later date for an interview. Once the system is better known, combined with an increased emphasis on customer care in Jobcentre Plus offices, these actions should avert incidents.

Staff generally feel safe working in the Jobcentre Plus office environment and value the various safety measures put in place and the welcoming, professional image of the new offices. Whilst staff recognise that the office environment has improved, where they worked before the roll-out to Jobcentre Plus continues to influence their perceptions of safety within the open office environment. Ex-Social Security office staff in both integrated and legacy offices continue to be anxious about the threat of incidents in an open environment.

The Jobcentre Plus office environment has impacted positively on staff's ownership of their safety roles and responsibilities – for themselves and their colleagues. In integrated offices there is evidence that improved customer service skills are having a positive effect, particularly in relation to managing escalating situations. The only

adverse effect of this friendlier, welcoming manner is the potential for staff to become 'too comfortable' and complacent about safety.

Staff in legacy areas, particularly front-line Social Security office staff, are concerned about working in an open environment. In terms of safety responsibilities, many of these staff use screens as their main safety measure and many felt that their safety was someone else's responsibility. Screens seem to allow staff with poor customer service skills to continue to deliver front-line services. Interviewees in all areas acknowledged that some front-line staff have poor customer service skills and the key issue for Jobcentre Plus roll-out is that these skills need to be addressed in order that incident risk is minimised both for the individuals concerned and their colleagues.

### 10.3 Measures designed to ensure the safety of staff in Jobcentre Plus

#### 10.3.1 Risk Assessments and Local Incident Management Plans

In terms of its legal responsibility to staff Jobcentre Plus has put in place mechanisms to ensure their health, safety and welfare. There are two mechanisms in place: RAs and LIMPs. RAs preceded Jobcentre Plus and have been reassessed as part of the roll-out process because of the changes in the operational processes and practices. LIMPs and customer handling training for staff, however, were introduced in response to discussions about the general RA for the introduction of Jobcentre Plus. Operational staff, health and safety officials and the trade unions representing Jobcentre Plus staff were involved in these discussions.

While RAs and LIMPs are in place (more so in integrated offices than in legacy offices), knowledge and understanding of these documents, what they mean for staff and ownership of them is limited among staff at all levels. Indeed, reviews and revisions to these documents rarely occur. There are two particular concerns that emerge in relation to these documents:

- staff, most significantly managers and health and safety representatives, lack confidence in LIMPs as an effective safety management tool; and
- both LIMPs and RAs are not necessarily tailored to reflect local circumstances or cover all parts of the office or sites.

Where Trillium have been given responsibility for conducting RAs and preparing LIMPs, knowledge and understanding of the content of these documents is minimal. Staff have been particularly critical of Trillium and their safety roles and responsibilities – however, the element which appears most lacking in the process is feedback once documents have been prepared. That said, staff welcomed and were reassured by the visible security guards in offices.

### **10.3.2 Guidance: unacceptable customer behaviour and managing and reporting serious incidents**

In addition to RAs and LIMPs which provide a strategic context for risk management, in April 2003 the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) published and circulated operational guidance on unacceptable customer behaviour and managing and reporting serious incidents. These documents have been widely circulated and staff tend to be aware that they exist, but are not aware of the detailed content and the processes they describe. Indeed, many managers have endeavoured to ensure that staff have read the documents, with little effect. The common response from staff is that they have not got the time to read the information, which is problematic given staff's own responsibilities in terms of day-to-day risk management. Staff dealing with customers, therefore, are putting themselves – and possibly their colleagues – at risk by not being aware of the mechanisms in place to manage risk or minimise risk for the future.

This lack of knowledge of the detail of guidance is a particular concern in relation to handling and reporting customers who are Potentially Violent (PV). Staff reported that customers had to be violent before they could be recorded as PV, whereas the guidance clearly states that attempted assault and cases where customers display threatening or violent behaviour should be reported. That said, staff were concerned about the practicalities of reporting such behaviour because threatening and violent behaviour is not always simple to explain. For example, staff found it difficult to articulate their concerns about silent and threatening behaviour rather than customers who were loud and confrontational. It is important to acknowledge that there is a level of unacceptable customer behaviour that is tolerated, rightly or wrongly, for the following reasons:

- some staff empathise with customers, particularly where 'the system' is at fault or has failed them; and
- reporting unacceptable behaviour is perceived as a 'weakness' and implies that staff cannot manage and contain an escalating situation with a customer.

In practice the safety management process is generally followed retrospectively, with guidance consulted after an incident has occurred. That said, the guidance itself starts from the point where an incident occurs, rather than being embedded in customer service processes and procedures. A further consequence of this retrospective approach is that staff find reasons not to report incidents, for example, saying they did not have time, did not know where to find the form or did not have the IT skills to fill the form in. What this means in practice, is that many incidents are unreported, hence subsequent actions to update procedures and practices do not occur because there is no documented evidence upon which changes can be made.

There is limited consistency in the operation of safety procedures outlined in the guidance as much of the guidance on reporting and handling incidents puts the onus on the individual to report interactions that they would classify as incidents. This is further complicated by individuals' own views of an incident and differences

in their tolerance to incidents. Staff also have to take into account the effect that reporting an incident might have on their continuing contact with the customer group. An example of this is within the guidance for the identification of PV customers. Staff are asked to consider any extenuating circumstances that might have led the customer to behave in a certain manner and for many staff, as identified above, they empathise with customers' views.

The level and patterns of incidents varied across and within offices. Whether an office was an integrated or legacy office was not a key incident trigger. Without systematic analysis of numbers and types of incidents, which is not the focus of this research, it is not clear whether there are more or less incidents in integrated or legacy offices. That said, there are two key issues that emerge from the research:

- some legacy Social Security staff continue to resist the introduction of Jobcentre Plus, citing serious incidents as part of their argument on why, from their perspective, the open Jobcentre Plus environment is inappropriate; and
- the increased focus on customer service and a greater understanding of individuals' roles and responsibilities in relation to safety management implies a more proactive approach to incident prevention and risk management in the Jobcentre Plus environment where staff use their customer handling skills to talk down a situation.

It is important to recognise that risk can be minimised, but risk cannot be removed. Jobcentre Plus staff have to communicate unfavourable decisions and say 'no' to customers who are ineligible for services or who have failed to meet the requirements of their benefits. Rightly or wrongly in these types of circumstances, customers might react.

#### 10.4 Incident triggers and staff attitudes towards safety

Staff are very aware of common incident triggers which are broadly described as people (staff and customers), process and environmental issues. Generally it is the interface between two or more of these triggers, one of which is normally the customer, that can cause incidents. Money without doubt is the key process trigger and incidents occur where customers fail to access money or lose money as a result of their actions or system errors. Front-facing staff generally have to deal with or take the consequences of system failures and errors as they are the people who meet customers on a day-to-day basis. Staff acknowledge that errors occur (and indeed acknowledge that some errors are caused by their own mistakes) and this can slow down payments or mean that payments are suspended. What are essentially backroom errors need to be minimised to reduce risk for staff. That said, customers' circumstances – addiction, illness, anxieties about money and a general feeling of disempowerment for example – can contribute to incidents occurring as can staff's poor customer service skills.

The security measures introduced to address these triggers in Jobcentre Plus offices have gone some way towards improving staff's attitudes towards safety and they have made staff more aware of the need for good customer service. Similarly improvements in the office environment have had a positive effect too. However, it is important to recognise that risk can be managed but incidents might still occur irrespective of measures in place to minimise problems occurring.

## 10.5 Recommendations

The recommendations below concern the following issues:

- safety/risk management;
- back-office functions and the associated issues for front-line staff; and
- strategic and operational roles and responsibilities.

### 10.5.1 Safety/risk management

There are three aspects of safety/risk management that would benefit from attention:

- the safety management documents (RAs, LIMPs and guidance);
- training; and
- the associated communication process.

The research findings show that the safety management documents are not always seen, read understood or followed. This is a particular issue for RAs and LIMPs. There would be merit, therefore in re-examining these documents to establish whether they need further work in order that staff find them pertinent to them and their job, accessible and user friendly. Indeed, there might be merit in the following actions:

- establishing a working group to address the emerging issues associated with RAs and LIMPs so that these documents increase in significance and fulfil their intended purposes; and
- streamlining the unacceptable customer behaviour guidance and managing and reporting serious incidents guidance so they are embedded into guidance on customer handling. Such an approach would mean that managing and reporting serious incidents and unacceptable customer behaviour would sit alongside guidance on incident prevention and managing risk. Such an approach might increase the likelihood that the information will be read and acted on.

Any changes in the guidance should be fed into any associated staff training so guidance and training is mutually reinforcing.

### **10.5.2 Customer service training**

The Jobcentre Plus vision is quite a departure from the way the welfare system has been delivered in the past. The emphasis on customer service means that training is a key priority, particularly given the link between good customer handling skills and minimising risk. It is imperative therefore that staff, including managers, undertake adequate customer service training which is relevant to their particular circumstances. For front-line staff, especially ex-Social Security staff this will need to focus on communication skills and their responsibilities in delivering the service to customers. For managers, training should concentrate on the way in which customers' bad behaviour is managed in a manner that does not undermine or compromise their front-line staff at that point in time or in the future.

### **10.5.3 Communication processes**

Assuming that staff reading and acting on safety and risk management information is a key priority for DWP/Jobcentre Plus, then there needs to be some development work on how the methods used to cascade information to staff can be improved. Alternative or additional approaches might include office managers and/or representatives from the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union/Trillium making presentations at staff meetings, information posters for staffrooms and practice incidents (which should take place anyhow).

In addition to circulating improved LIMPs, RAs and guidance about safety management there would be real benefit in circulating good practice information about safety in Jobcentre Plus to staff in legacy areas. Such information could contribute to a better understanding of the reality of working in the Jobcentre Plus environment and might assist in removing some of the current 'urban myths' and anxieties surrounding forthcoming roll-out. What would be central to such communication is information about staff's own safety roles and responsibilities and the link between safety and well-developed customer service skills. Ideally such information would be most powerful if endorsed by all parties (DWP, Jobcentre Plus, PCS and Trillium).

### **10.5.4 Back-office functions and the associated issues for front-line staff**

It is important that staff in back-office functions are aware of the effect of system and/or administrative errors on front-line staff in all types of public-facing roles. Such errors need to be minimised in order to reduce risk for colleagues. The logistics on how this might be achieved would require further work and should be linked to other Jobcentre Plus performance research. Perhaps there would be merit in monitoring the relationship between administrative/payment errors and incidents.

### **10.5.5 Strategic and operational roles and responsibilities**

There would be merit in improved understanding and communication of individual parties' safety roles and responsibilities both centrally and in the field. It is particularly important that Jobcentre Plus, PCS and Trillium's roles and responsibilities are well

known and understood by staff at all levels. Similarly feedback and communication between strategy and operations staff centrally and staff in the field is important to ensure that lessons are learned and acted upon. It is imperative for staff in the field to understand what steps are being taken centrally to manage risk associated with their day-to-day activities. Appropriate communication channels should be explored, again, to ensure that such information informs practice.

Operational roles and responsibilities for Jobcentre Plus, PCS and Trillium should be outlined in the LIMP, assuming LIMPs in some form exist in the future.

# Appendix A

## DWP IF1 form

IF1

## INCIDENT / ASSAULT REPORT

**To be completed by DWP staff on the day the incident / assault occurs.**

### 1. OFFICE NAME & ADDRESS (written not stamped)

**Official office name**

Postcode

Region

Telephone number

Fax number

**Type of office**

Jobcentre Plus

Social security office

Jobcentre

Contact centre

Other (specify)

### 2. ASSAILANT DETAILS (if known)

Name

Address

NINO

Age

Male  Female

Currently marked PV? Yes  No

**Please read the guidance notes to help you fill in this form**

**3. CUSTOMER DETAILS (if different from the assailant)**

Name	NINO
Relationship to assailant (e.g. partner)	

**4. YOUR DETAILS**

Name	Staff / pay number
Age	Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/>

**5. ABOUT YOUR CURRENT JOB**

**To which business do you belong?**

Jobcentre Plus       The Pension Service       Child Support Agency

The Appeals Service       Debt Management       Disability & Carers Service

Security Guard       Other  (please state)

Length of time in current Business:      years      months

Length of time in current job:      years      months

**Have you received training in handling difficult customers / situations?**    Yes     No

**Do you agree to your personal details being disclosed to the TUS?**      Yes     No

**6. TIME OF THE INCIDENT**

Day:	Date:	Time:
------	-------	-------

**7. TYPE OF INCIDENT**

7a Did the incident take place in a screened area? YES  NO

7b If you **were not touched** in any way, pick one of the following:

- 1. Verbal abuse (face to face)
- 2. Verbal abuse (telephone)
- 3. Abusive written correspondence
- 4. Threatening you either face to face or over the telephone (e.g. threats to follow you, 'get you outside', 'don't send anyone near my house', intimidation, harassment (including sexual or racial), waving objects around but not aimed at you)
- 5. Small items (papers, pens, etc) aimed or thrown at you but **missed**
- 6. Large items aimed or thrown at you but **missed**
- 7. Assailant lunged at you or attempted to hit you but **missed**
- 8. Spitting aimed at you but **missed**
- 9. Thumping the security screen
- 10. Hitting or kicking furniture, slamming/kicking doors (but not damaged)

7c If you **were touched** in any way, pick one of the following:

- 11. Spitting
- 12. Small items thrown at you and **hit you** (e.g. papers, pens etc)
- 13. Large items were thrown at you and **hit you** (e.g. furniture, office equipment etc)
- 14. Struck by assailant (includes touching, holding, kicking, head butting)
- 15. Struck with a weapon owned by the assailant
- 16. Struck with a weapon found on the premises

7d Other circumstances (tick as appropriate)

- 1. Damage to property (e.g. office equipment damaged, windows broken)
- 2. Customers fighting each other

8. AFTERMATH complete (a), (b) and (c):		
a) Injury (tick one)	(b) Shock/distress (tick one)	c) Medical treatment (tick one)
<input type="checkbox"/> 1. No physical injury	<input type="checkbox"/> 1. No shock/distress experienced	<input type="checkbox"/> 1. No medical treatment required
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Cuts and bruises	<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Shock / distress at time, now recovered	<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Required local first aid
<input type="checkbox"/> 3. More than cuts and bruises (give details)	<input type="checkbox"/> 3. Shock / distress continuing (give details)	<input type="checkbox"/> 3. Required medical treatment (give details)
Details of injury/shock/medical treatment:		

**9. EVENTS LEADING UP TO INCIDENT (select up to 3 items)**

- 1 Enforcement of business rules (e.g. failure to provide evidence or information on time, availability, actively seeking, Jobseeker's directions, mandatory programme, DNA testing, presumption of parentage etc)
- 2 Benefit/money/maintenance/fares etc stopped/reduced/disallowed, closure of claim
- 3 Social Fund/Hardship payment dispute (e.g. eligibility, delays, demands)
- 4a Refusal to replace lost/delayed GIRO/payment
- 4b Refusal of advance payment request
- 5 Payment/GIRO late
- 6a Long waiting time to be seen/sign
- 6b Long waiting time for counter payment
- 6c Long delay in telephone being answered
- 7 Customer appointment problems (e.g. notification of interview, signing late, attending late for appointment, failure to attend, attending on wrong day, etc)
- 8 Non specific hostility to staff/no apparent issues leading up to incident
- 9 Assailant appeared to be under the influence of alcohol/drugs
- 10 Assailant behaviour unstable, erratic, odd
- 11 Office error, clerical error

- 12 Forcing or attempting forced entry; issues around access and office opening times
- 13 Issues affecting partner of customer
- 14 Notification of visit
- 15 Issues surrounding fraud and other investigations e.g. interviews under caution
- 16 Other\* (Please give details)      \***Only** use this box if none of the above apply

**10. LOCATION (tick one)****11. OFFICE CONDITIONS  
(only tick if applicable)**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Initial reception   | <input type="checkbox"/> Office crowded                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Public waiting area   | <input type="checkbox"/> Temperature uncomfortable       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Public contact/interview areas including tribunal suites and medical boards | <input type="checkbox"/> Staffing levels less than usual |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Private interview rooms   | <input type="checkbox"/> Office noisier than usual       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Non public (staff/restricted areas)   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Stairs  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Entrance/doorways   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Outside office (e.g. car park, on street, staff home)                       |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 9. During visit (e.g. to customer's home, NRP, Employers premises etc)         |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10. Telephone/correspondence   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 11. Outreach location (e.g. CAB)   |  |

**12. EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE SERVICE e.g. CARE FIRST/CORECARE**

- I will seek / have sought support from Employee Assistance Service
- I will not seek support from Employee Assistance Service

**13. ACCOUNT OF INCIDENT (Please write clearly)**

Briefly outline what happened, noting what led up to the incident, what was said or done, who was involved, role of the security guard if appropriate. Where possible please record exact words used (even if this is unpleasant) and avoid jargon or abbreviations. To comply with the Data Protection Act information must be accurate, factual and relevant, so stick to the facts and try to avoid making assumptions. Use a separate sheet if necessary.

Name any witnesses to the incident .....

Signature ..... Print Name .....

Date form completed and passed to line manager .....



Appendix B  
DWP form to record *'contact  
with customer already noted  
as PVP'*

**Contact with customer already noted as PVP**

Any contact with known PVP must be recorded to assist with annual review  
**This form does not replace IF1 which should be used to record any incident.**

<b>Customers name:</b>	<b>NI No:</b>
<b>Address:</b>	

**How was contact made:**

Visit  In office  Telephone  Other (give details)

If seen in the office was a private interview room used: YES  NO

Did the contact take place behind a screen: YES  NO

**Why was contact made:** e.g. collecting payment, general enquiry etc

**Reason for PVP marking not known:**

Did customer's behaviour give any indication that PVP marking is appropriate?

YES  NO

Comment (continue overleaf if required)

**Reason for PVP marking known:**

Has the customer's behaviour improved? YES  NO

Comment (continue overleaf if required)

Name (Block capitals)	Duty:	Office:
Telephone No:	Date:	

Refer to nominated HEO PV officer: