Introduction

1 Following feedback from Jobcentre Plus, the LSC commissioned the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, in June 2009, to look into the issue of post-referral waiting times for Jobcentre Plus customers in three of the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trial areas.

2 The report, ‘Integrated Employment and Skills – Waiting times for the nextstep service’, will be published shortly. The report highlights the issues that all partners need to address to ensure that the service to customers is the best we can achieve – and that we are learning lessons to ensure continuous improvement.

3 This is the LSC National Office’s response to the report and covers:
   1. The aims of the study
   2. The conclusions – a snapshot
   3. Key issues arising from the report
   4. LSC actions to reduce waiting times.

The aims of the study

4 The study involved qualitative interviews with a small number of national stakeholders at the Learning and Skills Council, but it mainly focused on three of the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trial areas:
   • the West Midlands (across the whole region)
   • the South East region (Hampshire and the Isle of Wight)
   • the East region (Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk)
5 The LSC is extremely grateful to everyone who contributed to the study – and to the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (CESI) team for their hard work in producing the report.

The scope of the study

6 The CESI team looked at the following key questions:
   • What are the variations in waiting times?
   • How do the following affect waiting times?
     ▪ management and delivery arrangements
     ▪ referral systems
     ▪ staff capacity
     ▪ premises capacity
     ▪ contracting and planning with Jobcentre Plus
   • What factors challenge the ability of nextstep to provide a responsive service?

The conclusions – a snapshot

7 The study highlights many inter-linking factors that contribute to the length of waiting times for nextstep customers in the IES trials. In brief, these factors include the:
   • lack of consistent and robust data on referrals, including waiting times, to help manage performance and plan capacity;
   • level and quality of referrals from Jobcentre Plus to nextstep;
   • confusion between nextstep IES provision and nextstep mainstream provision;
   • confusion about where appointments can take place;
   • lack of awareness about what the nextstep service offers;
   • constraints on increasing adviser numbers – and associated funding issues;
   • high failure to attend (FTA) rates from customers making it more difficult for nextstep contractors to take the financial risks to increase adviser capacity when demand is high;
   • lack of premises and costs of venue hire; and
   • whether a nextstep contractor or sub-contractor can ‘borrow’ or ‘share’ advisers from other neighbouring areas when demand is high.

8 The report made suggestions for future action under the following headings:
   • Increasing adviser capacity and flexibility
   • Managing adviser time
   • Increasing attendance rates
   • Meeting premises requirements
   • The funding model

9 The LSC responds to the report suggestions – and makes some additional ones in section 4: LSC actions to reduce waiting times.
Key issues arising from the research

10 The post-referral waiting time – i.e. the length of time a customer has to wait after being referred to nextstep by a Jobcentre Plus adviser – was always going to be an important element in the customer experience and a number of important issues about waiting times are set out in the study:

Consistent data on referrals essential
11 The report shows that although waiting times vary between and within regions there is currently a lack of consistent and robust data being collected about waiting times in the IES trials by either Jobcentre Plus or nextstep.

12 It is essential that referral data is collected, including core information about the date on which a customer is referred and the date on which their nextstep appointment takes place. Good data will enable waiting times to be monitored and managed better – and form the basis on which the provider can plan ahead to make best use of their existing resources; and the areas where there is a need for capacity building.

Confusion between IES trials and mainstream provision
13 The research shows that there is confusion among some contractors and sub-contractors about the perceived difference between mainstream nextstep activities that come within the scope of the core contract and the IES trials.

14 This confusion has meant that some nextstep service providers have assigned dedicated advisers to look after the ‘mainstream services’ on the one hand, while others are assigned to look after only Jobcentre Plus customers, referred through the IES trials.

15 The key issue in future is to make sure that all nextstep advisers can see all customers regardless of whether they are being referred via the IES trials or through other means.

Location for interview
16 There is also some confusion about whether IES customers must be seen on Jobcentre Plus premises – or whether they can be seen elsewhere. Although in some cases it might be more convenient for the customer to see the nextstep adviser in a Jobcentre Plus location, this is not mandatory and, indeed, might not be desirable where the constraints of co-location result in delays to interview times, outweighing the benefits of geographical convenience.

Appointment-setting practices and five-day waiting time
17 There is an assumption among many nextstep and Jobcentre Plus staff that, despite widely-differing circumstances, Jobcentre Plus customers referred to nextstep should be subject to the same appointment-setting
practices and targets as other *nextstep* customers. This has meant there is sometimes an expectation that customers should not have to wait more than five days for a *nextstep* appointment even though that customer might prefer to combine their appointment with their next signing-on day at the Jobcentre – every 14 days.

18 The five-day waiting time is not part of the *nextstep* contract or delivery targets for IES customers. Having said that, it is important that customers are offered an appointment time that is convenient to them – and, in some cases, that should be within five days.

**Volatile cycles of demand**

19 Demand for *nextstep* services depends on an extremely wide range of factors including the impact of the recession, changing conditions in the local labour market, customer feedback to Jobcentre Plus and whether or not there is a genuine understanding of what the *nextstep* service offers.

20 However, demand for services can be volatile as a result of a continuing ‘vicious circle’: Jobcentre Plus advisers refer high numbers of customers to *nextstep* services so waiting times get longer as the demand increases. Jobcentre Plus advisers then stop referring customers to *nextstep* because waiting times are too long – so demand goes down again. This cycle, therefore, makes it very difficult to plan or anticipate demand.

21 There are three key actions that are needed to help break this cycle: first, to make sure that the right customers are being referred; second, that these customers understand what the *nextstep* service can offer them; and third that Jobcentre Plus do not simply ‘stop’ referring but immediately raise waiting time issues with the LSC and the Prime Contractor.

22 The report shows that those areas identified as having longer waiting times also have the highest number of referrals per adviser.

23 During the initial planning stages for the IES trials, assumptions were made about the proportion of Jobcentre Plus customers that would be referred at the New Jobseeker's Interview (5 per cent), the 13-week interview (10 per cent) and the 26-week interview (30 per cent). It appears that these figures might be perceived by some Jobcentre Plus advisers as being specific targets or even quotas. Therefore, once the required percentage is reached, Jobcentre Plus advisers are much more likely to ‘signpost’ rather than ‘refer’ as they perceive that they have met the target/quotas. The administrative burden on Jobcentre advisers is much reduced for a signpost.

24 This target-driven approach encourages advisers to send greater volumes of people at certain times, regardless of the quality of the referral, which in turn can greatly exacerbate the failure-to-attend rates. The key issue is to make sure that there are quality referrals.
Building on good practice

25 The report highlights a great deal of good practice among **nextstep** contractors in reducing waiting times including:

- booking evening and Saturday appointments;
- ‘borrowing’ advisers from other areas within the region to target specific waiting times;
- liaising with Jobcentre Plus advisers to promote immediate ‘walk-in’ appointments – particularly to those customers who did not attend a first appointment;
- reminding customers via phone calls or texts they have an appointment coming up; and
- ‘spider booking’ i.e. booking 45-minute appointments every 30 minutes.

26 It is important that good practice is shared and then developed across all regions to help reduce waiting times.

LSC actions to reduce waiting times

27 The LSC welcomes the suggestions put forward by the report. We have also identified a number of actions that, working with our prime contractors, sub-contractors, partners and stakeholders, we propose to take forward over the coming months:

**Improving data on referrals**

- Work with our prime contractors to make sure that there is clear, consistent and robust Management Information data on referrals, including waiting times, to support future planning and capacity building – and agree a timeline by which the data will be introduced.

**Increasing adviser capacity and flexibility**

- Outline the specific roles and responsibilities of **nextstep** advisers in managing IES customers in the context of the wider mainstream contract and to communicate the importance of a seamless service.
- Continue to develop best practice to build capacity and greater flexibility into reducing waiting times for all IES customers.

**Managing adviser time**

- Consider wider use of spider bookings – particularly in **nextstep** locations where there is more than one adviser in place.
- Liaise more closely with Jobcentre Plus colleagues to examine ways in which Jobcentre Plus can inform **nextstep** about likely referral peaks to help **nextstep** manage appointment flows.
Increasing attendance rates
- Liaise more closely with Jobcentre Plus colleagues to communicate what nextstep can offer – and thereby improve the quality of referrals and reduce the failure-to-attend (FTA) appointment rates.

- In areas where waiting times are at risk of becoming too long, to consider the wider use of flexible advisers who are brought in at short notice and who can work across several sites. We anticipate that this strategy will be particularly helpful in rural areas.

- Build on best practice to have more Saturday and/or evening appointments in those areas where waiting times are longer.

- Build on best practice to remind customers about their appointment times with a nextstep adviser via texts or a phone call – using the opportunity to remind customers about the benefits of the nextstep service.

Meeting premises requirements
- Communicate to nextstep staff that they do not have to be on Jobcentre Plus premises to meet IES customers; while recognising the many advantages of co-location with Jobcentre Plus.

- Work with Jobcentre Plus colleagues to see if it is feasible for nextstep advisers to co-locate on ‘extra’ days when there is capacity at Jobcentre Plus offices.

- Liaise with nextstep contractors to consider the feasibility of using webcams or other technology to carry out appointments with some customers in rural or remote locations.

nextstep Standards Charter
- Refresh the nextstep Standards Charter to reflect the work in the IES trials and the waiting times issues.