

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 445

Qualitative assessment of Jobcentre Plus delivery of Jobseeker's Allowance and New Deal interventions

Sara Davis, Laura James and Siobhan Tuohy

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

Corporate Document Services

© Crown Copyright 2007. Published for the Department for Work and Pensions under licence from the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office by Corporate Document Services, Leeds.

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

First Published 2007.

ISBN 978 1 84712 230 8

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

Printed by Corporate Document Services.

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
The Authors.....	viii
Abbreviations and acronyms	ix
Glossary of terms	xiii
Summary	1
1 Introduction.....	9
1.1 Aims and objectives of the research	9
1.2 Research methodology	10
1.2.1 <i>Identification of key facets of the JSA regime</i>	10
1.2.2 <i>Identification of Jobcentre Plus districts</i>	11
1.2.3 <i>Developing research materials</i>	12
1.2.4 <i>Main fieldwork</i>	12
1.3 Report structure.....	13
2 Operational context and organisation of delivery.....	15
2.1 Operational background	15
2.1.1 <i>District A</i>	15
2.1.2 <i>District B</i>	16
2.1.3 <i>District C</i>	16
2.2 Impact of labour market context and organisational changes.....	17
2.2.1 <i>Number of claimants and size of office</i>	17
2.2.2 <i>Organisational change</i>	18

2.3	Strengthening and refocusing of JSA interventions.....	20
2.3.1	<i>Views on the strengthening and refocusing of JSA interventions.....</i>	20
2.4	Jobcentre Plus Advisory Service model	22
2.4.1	<i>Views on the Jobcentre Plus Advisory Service model.....</i>	22
2.5	Measurement of outcomes	24
2.5.1	<i>Views on the change from JET to JOT.....</i>	25
2.5.1	<i>Job submissions.....</i>	26
2.5.2	<i>Work with employers</i>	27
2.5.3	<i>Performance outcomes.....</i>	28
2.6	Chapter summary	28
3	JSA interventions	31
3.1	New Jobseeker Interviews	31
3.1.1	<i>Key aspects of the prescribed model.....</i>	31
3.1.2	<i>Variations from the prescribed model</i>	32
3.2	Fortnightly Jobseeker Reviews.....	34
3.2.1	<i>Key aspects of the prescribed model.....</i>	34
3.2.2	<i>Variations from the prescribed model</i>	34
3.3	13 week interviews/end of permitted periods.....	37
3.3.1	<i>Key aspects of the prescribed model.....</i>	37
3.3.2	<i>Variations from the prescribed model</i>	37
3.4	Restart interviews	39
3.4.1	<i>Key aspects of the prescribed model.....</i>	39
3.4.2	<i>Variations from the prescribed model</i>	39
3.5	Cross-cutting themes.....	40
3.5.1	<i>Monitoring of staff.....</i>	40
3.5.2	<i>Training.....</i>	41
3.5.3	<i>Alternative channels.....</i>	42
3.5.4	<i>Availability of provision.....</i>	43

3.6	Chapter summary	45
3.6.1	<i>Key variations in JSA delivery</i>	45
3.6.2	<i>Explanatory factors</i>	46
4	New Deal interventions	49
4.1	New Deal initial interview	49
4.1.1	<i>Key aspects of the prescribed model</i>	50
4.1.2	<i>Variations from the prescribed process</i>	50
4.2	The Gateway	54
4.2.1	<i>Key aspects of the prescribed model</i>	54
4.2.2	<i>Variations from the prescribed model</i>	54
4.3	Options/IAP	58
4.3.1	<i>Key aspects of the prescribed model</i>	58
4.3.2	<i>Variations from the prescribed model</i>	59
4.4	Follow Through	61
4.4.1	<i>Key aspects of the prescribed model</i>	61
4.4.2	<i>Variations from the prescribed model</i>	61
4.5	Cross-cutting themes	62
4.5.1	<i>Referrals to decision makers</i>	62
4.5.2	<i>Providers</i>	64
4.5.3	<i>Training and monitoring of advisers</i>	67
4.6	Chapter summary	67
4.6.1	<i>Key variations in New Deal delivery</i>	67
4.6.2	<i>Key explanatory factors</i>	68
5	Conclusions	71
5.1	Review apparent inter-district variation in the delivery of certain different aspects of the Jobseeker's Allowance/ New Deal regime	71
5.2	Confirm the extent and character of differences in delivery	72
5.2.1	<i>Quality of interventions</i>	72
5.2.2	<i>Timing, frequency and duration of interventions</i>	72
5.2.3	<i>Gateway overstayers</i>	73

5.2.4	<i>Quality, availability and staff awareness of provision</i>	73
5.2.5	<i>Referrals to decision makers</i>	73
5.2.6	<i>Alternative channels</i>	74
5.3	Assess why districts deliver these aspects of JSA and New Deal differently, and identify perceived obstacles that districts face in delivering the full regime	74
5.3.1	<i>Complexity of the system</i>	74
5.3.2	<i>Staff</i>	75
5.3.3	<i>Training</i>	75
5.3.4	<i>Time and resources</i>	75
5.3.5	<i>Monitoring</i>	75
5.3.6	<i>Cumulative effects</i>	75
5.4	Consider the likely effects of variations from the model	76
5.4.1	<i>Performance</i>	76
5.4.2	<i>Quality of service</i>	76
5.4.3	<i>Staff morale</i>	76
5.5	Identify factors which might be addressed to improve the consistency of JSA/New Deal delivery and ascertain how districts would improve delivery of the regime	77
5.5.1	<i>Training</i>	77
5.5.2	<i>Sharing good practice</i>	77
5.5.3	<i>Time and resources</i>	77
5.5.4	<i>Quality and availability of provision</i>	77
5.5.5	<i>Better monitoring of individual performance</i>	78
5.6	Consider appropriate and suitable research or monitoring avenues which could produce a clearer and more insightful means of reviewing delivery	78
Appendix	Discussion guides	81
List of tables		
Table 1.1	District performance by key indicators	12

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Pauline Heather who managed this project and for the support of all other staff involved at the DWP. We would also like to thank the key individuals within Jobcentre Plus who facilitated this work locally, as well as their colleagues from district and local offices.

The Authors

Sara Davis is a Research Fellow at IES, and works in the Unemployment, Disadvantage and Labour Market Research Team. Sara has much experience of using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and her research at IES is mainly focused around welfare-to-work programmes and disadvantaged groups. She has been involved in a number of evaluations for the DWP, including research on Permitted Work Rules, the IAP50plus Pilots and the evaluation of the Working Neighbourhoods Pilot. She is currently managing the Skills Coaching Trials and Skills Passports project for the Learning and Skills Council.

Laura James is a Research Officer at IES, and works in the Unemployment, Disadvantage and Labour Market Research Team. Laura is experienced in quantitative and qualitative research and her work at IES focuses on welfare-to-work policies, disadvantaged social groups and diversity in the labour market. Recently she has worked on evaluations of Care to Learn and Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres.

Siobhan Tuohy is a Research Officer at IES, and works in the Unemployment, Disadvantage and Labour Market Research Team. Siobhan is experienced in both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Her research at IES has focused primarily on socially and economically disadvantaged groups, the links between skills and employment and promoting diversity of opportunity within the labour market. Recently she has worked on projects evaluating the IAP50plus Pilots for DWP and the Evaluation of Skill Coaching Trials and Skills Passports for the Learning and Skills Council, the latter of which is still ongoing.

Abbreviations and acronyms

AAT	Adviser Achievement Tool
ADF	Adviser Discretionary Fund
ASM	Advisory Services Manager
BA	Benefits Agency
BDC	Benefit Delivery Centre
BET	Basic Employability Training
BIS	Business Information System
BOC	Better-Off Calculation
CETL	Customer Engagement Team Leader
CV	Curriculum vitae
DASO	Diary/Administrative Support Officer
DM	District Manager
DMA	Decision Maker
DPM	District Performance Manager
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESF	European Social Fund
ERA	European Retention and Advancement demonstration project
FLAT	Frontline adviser Achievement Tool
FJR	Fortnightly Jobsearch Review

FTET	Full Time Education and Training Option
IAP	Intensive Activity Period
GtW	Gateway to Work
IAP	Intensive Activity Period
IB	Incapacity Benefit
IES	Institute for Employment Studies
IS	Income Support
IT	Information technology
JCM	Jobcentre Manager
JET	Job Entry Target
JOT	Job Outcome Target
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
JSAg	Jobseeker's Agreement
KMI	Key Management Indicators
LA	Local authority
LMS	Labour Market System
LMU	Labour Market Unit
MI	Management Information
ND	New Deal
ND25+	New Deal 25 Plus
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NDPA	New Deal Personal Adviser
NDYP	New Deal for Young People
NI	National Insurance
NJI	New Jobseeker Interview
OM	Operations Manager
PA	Personal Adviser

PSL	Private Sector Led
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework
TIS	Travel Interview Scheme

Glossary of terms

Alternative Channels are job search activities other than direct job submissions by Jobcentre Plus staff. Alternative channels might include the use of Jobseeker Direct, Job Points, newspapers, the internet or employment agencies. Customers who are able should be referred to alternative channels so that staff can focus their efforts on the harder to help.

Adviser Routeway is the training course for new Personal Advisers (PAs). It consists of a series of modules on adviser skills delivered at a training centre followed by a period of consolidation on the job.

DMA Referral is the process of sending a customer's case to a Decision Maker (DMA) who will decide whether a benefit sanction should be imposed. At the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) this may be because a customer left their previous job voluntarily or was dismissed for misconduct. Subsequently, Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers' cases may be referred to a DMA if Jobcentre Plus staff believe that they are not available and actively seeking work or they fail to attend an appointment or provision.

Follow Through is the third element of New Deal 25 Plus (ND25+) and New Deal for Young People (NDYP), and provides additional support for those who have not found work after taking part in the Intensive Activity Period (IAP). It consists of intensive job search activity and regular meetings with a New Deal Personal Adviser (NDPA) and usually lasts for six weeks (ND25+) or 16 weeks (NDYP).

Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) is the fortnightly interview, conducted by FJR officers, that customers must attend to sign on for JSA. During these interviews, customers must present a record of the steps that they have taken to look for work in the past fortnight. In some cases these interviews may take place on a weekly or daily basis.

Gateway is the first element of ND25+ and NDYP, and lasts for up to 16 weeks. It includes: basic skills assessment; weekly meetings with a PA; individualised advice, support and guidance; and provision to improve customers' employability.

Gateway to Work (GtW) is an intensive two-week course which NDYP customers must attend before week five of the New Deal Gateway. It comprises a series of modules designed to improve customers' employability; for example, it may include sessions on interview technique or writing a CV.

Incapacity Benefit (IB) is a benefit for those who are incapable of taking paid employment due to an illness or disability and are aged between 16 and 65 (or 60 for women).

Intensive Activity Period (IAP) is the second element of ND25+ and provides additional help for those who have not found work from the Gateway. It consists of a set of tailored activities to meet individual needs, usually comprising some mixture of employability training, job search help, work experience and/or skill training. It is mandatory, except for those aged 50 or over.

Job Entry Target (JET) was a target which required Jobcentre Plus to demonstrate that an intervention had taken place in order to claim a job entry point. This was replaced by Job Outcome Target (JOT) in 2006.

Job Outcome Target (JOT) replaced JET in 2006 and enables Jobcentre Plus to claim points on off-flows from benefit into work, whether or not a specific intervention has taken place.

New Deal 25plus (ND25+) is the principal welfare-to-work programme for long-term unemployed adults. It is mandatory for people aged 25 or over who have been claiming JSA for 18 of the previous 21 months. It comprises three elements: the Gateway; the IAP and Follow Through.

New Deal for Young People (NDYP) is the principle welfare-to-work plan for adults aged 18-24. It is mandatory for all 18-24 year olds who have been claiming JSA continuously for six months. It comprises three elements: the Gateway; an Option Period; and Follow Through.

New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) is the initial Work Focused Interview (WFI) that a customer attends in order to claim JSA. This interview is conducted by a PA who draws up a Jobseekers' Agreement (JSAg), which must be signed by the customer, outlining the steps that the customer will take to look for paid work. At this interview JSA customers must also agree to be available and actively seeking employment.

Options are the second element of the NDYP and provide additional help for those who have not found work from the Gateway. It consists of a variety of Options that are intended to provide individuals with skills and experience which will help them move into employment. An Option involves mandatory activity for a minimum of 30 hours a week for 13 weeks. The main options are: Full Time Education and Training Option, Environment Task Force Option, Voluntary Sector Option and the Employment Option.

Permitted period is a set length of time, agreed at the NJI, during which a customer may limit the type of job that they look for. Permitted periods are intended for those who have a usual occupation or specialised set of skills. They may last up to 13 weeks, after which the customer must widen their job search if they have not found employment.

Restart interview takes place at six and 12 months for individuals aged 25 and over. It is an in-depth interview with a PA to discuss any barriers to employment the customer may face. After six months customers may be able to access further support or provision to help them overcome any barriers.

13 week interview is an interview with a PA which all customers must attend once they have been unemployed for 13 weeks.

Summary

This report presents the findings from a qualitative assessment of Jobcentre Plus delivery of the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and New Deal (ND) interventions undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) for the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). This research was conducted between October 2006 and February 2007.

Aims of the research

This small-scale and exploratory piece of research reviews how the JSA and ND regime is delivered in three districts, in order to gain an understanding of how and why delivery may differ from the 'prescribed' model, in order to identify possible performance improvements.

The research objectives were to:

- review apparent inter-district variation in the delivery of certain different aspects of the JSA/New Deal regime;
- confirm the extent and character of such differences in delivery;
- assess why districts deliver these aspects of JSA and New Deal differently, and to identify perceived obstacles that districts face in delivering the full regime;
- consider the likely effects of such variations from the model;
- identify factors that might be addressed to improve the consistency of JSA/ New Deal delivery and ascertain how districts would improve delivery of the interventions regime.

A further objective was methodological: to consider appropriate and suitable research or monitoring avenues which could produce a clearer and more insightful means of reviewing JSA delivery which could provide a reliable yardstick against which to assess local delivery of the regime.

Methodology

As already noted, this was a short, small-scale piece of research and, as such, comprised of detailed case study work with a range of staff within three Jobcentre Plus districts, as follows:

- District Office:
 - District Manager (DM);
 - District Performance Manager (DPM);
 - Operations Manager (OM);
- Jobcentre (three per district):
 - Jobcentre Manager (JCM);
 - Advisory Services Manager (ASM);
 - Customer Engagement Team Leader (CETL);
 - New Deal Personal Adviser (NDPA);
 - Personal Adviser (PA);
 - Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) Officer.

The research explored staff views on how the JSA and ND regime is delivered, why it may differ from the 'prescribed' model, and how that may impact on performance.

The Jobcentre Plus staff involved in the research were not representative of Jobcentre Plus staff in general, although the findings noted here illustrate the breadth of issues and common threads of their experience.

Key findings and conclusions

Key variations

For the most part, variability between offices was greater than that between districts. Offices in District A followed the prescribed model most closely. They generally delivered high quality interventions, at the correct time, and maintained a high level of referrals to Decision Makers (DMAs). Staff had a good awareness of available provision and made use of a range of alternative channels. The New Deal was usually delivered according to the prescribed model and customers were moved through the different stages in a timely fashion. There were very few problems with Gateway overstayers or customers taking the so-called 'fifth option'. There was less consistency in Districts B and C. Some offices within these districts followed the prescribed model to deliver parts of the JSA/New Deal regime; others did not. In particular, the timing, frequency, duration and content of interventions varied, as did the consistency of referrals to DMAs, the number of overstayers on New Deal, and the availability and quality of provision.

There were a number of key differences in delivery of the JSA and New Deal regimes between Jobcentre Plus offices, as follows:

- **Quality of interventions:** The quality of Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAs) drawn up at the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) was variable between advisers. Many Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) officers felt that unrealistic Jobseeker's Agreements (JSAs) were being drawn up in NJIs. The quality of FJR interventions was also variable. At some offices, where only five minutes were allowed to sign each customer, staff did not always undertake a job search, submit customers to jobs or take DMA action. The variation in the quality of particular interventions was usually between individual advisers rather than districts. However, there may also be district-level variations due to the quality of staff and availability of training.
- **Timing, frequency and duration of interventions:** The timing of the interventions varied between offices as well as between districts. In some offices, particularly in the lower performing districts, there had been some problems booking the PA interventions (such as Restart interviews) as the hotspots were missed by frontline staff. In other cases, claims were not closed down properly on the Labour Market System (LMS), and consequently customers who were no longer unemployed were booked for interviews. Sometimes New Deal markers were also missed which resulted in some customers not being referred to New Deal initially, or not being re-referred if they signed off and made another claim within 13 weeks. In Districts B and C, formal case conferences rarely took place. The duration of FJR interventions varied the most, ranging from five to 15-plus minutes between offices. In some offices, in Districts B and C, all customers had five-minute interviews up until week 13, and ten minutes thereafter. For these offices the 'harder to help' customers were defined as those who had been unemployed longer. In other offices, specifically those in the higher performing district (District A), the 'harder to help' customers were defined from the start and had ten-minute interviews whereas all other customers had five-minute interviews throughout their claim. There were also some slight differences observed in the duration of other interventions such as the 13 week/end of permitted period interviews. The duration of these interviews varied across districts, ranging from 15 to 30 minutes in length. District A had the longest duration, whereas Districts B and C had less time allocated for these interviews.
- **Gateway overstayers:** In Districts B and C, certain offices had had problems moving customers from Gateway to an Option at the right time and as a result, had significant numbers of Gateway overstayers. This was due to a variety of reasons, including failure to refer customers to DMA if they failed to start an Option, lack of provision, and poor LMS housekeeping.

- **Quality, availability and staff awareness of provision:** Contracted provision was variable in quality and availability within and between districts and this was accompanied by variation in staff's awareness of provision. The best performing district had set up an Adviser Search Portal which enabled staff to search all locally available provision. Staff in this district were more aware of provision in comparison to other districts. Mainstream contracted provision was limited across all districts; for example, some offices could utilise Local Authority Action Teams or New Deal for Communities' provision.
- **Referrals to decision makers:** The number and consistency of referrals to DMAs varied between and within districts and offices. It was most consistent in District A. A range of explanations were suggested for below average rates of DMA referrals. These included: lack of knowledge/poor training; fear of confrontation; lack of monitoring; lack of time; advisers empathising with the customer and trying to remove barriers before taking action. Across the districts it appeared that DMA referrals were most likely to take place at the FJR, although this may be partly explained by the fact that this intervention took place most frequently.
- **Alternative channels:** Staff across the districts reported that they encouraged customers to use alternative channels. However, there was no monitoring of customers' use of alternative channels so it was impossible to determine the extent to which customers actually used them. Some staff were unsure whether directing customers to alternative channels would have an adverse impact on other targets such as job submission targets. Other staff mentioned that customers with little or no IT skills, or poor literacy, would find the channels hard to use. Referrals to alternative channels were most likely to be made at FJR.

Factors affecting performance

The research identified several key factors which provide likely explanations for variations in the ability of offices to deliver the JSA/New Deal regime according to the prescribed model. These include:

- **Complexity of the system:** The JSA and New Deal regime is complex, both in terms of the number and interdependency of interventions (and the rules which govern them) and the actual procedures and paperwork that staff must become familiar with. The demands this complexity places on staff are increased by the large numbers of customers who pass through the system. In particular, LMS is difficult to use and this was one of the most important factors affecting timing-related performance. General LMS housekeeping, especially when shutting down claims, was also critical. Thus, staff needed a good grasp of the overall regime, and the meaning and importance of hotspots. Staff also needed to be more aware of the interdependency of the different parts of the JSA regime, so they are aware of the importance of their particular role within it.

- **Staff quality:** Given that the JSA regime is complex and that LMS is not an easy system to use, the quality of the staff who deliver JSA and New Deal is crucial. If staff were inexperienced or temporary, it was more likely that they would miss hotspots or fail to refer customers to DMAs. The fact that it is the most junior staff, undertaking the most intense, high volume FJR interventions, who have primary responsibility for policing the regime and actioning hotspots, made this even more likely to happen.
- **Training:** Current training which focuses on adviser skills rather than processes, backed up by e-learning and mentoring was felt to be inadequate. District A, which was the best performing district, had training coaches, which suggests that this extra layer adds value. Furthermore, recent DMA training in one of the poorer performing districts seems to have had a positive impact on referral rates.
- **Time and resources:** In offices where the JSA regime was already stretched, unexpected increases in claimant count or staff sickness could easily strain the system and result in missed performance targets. This was a particular problem for FJR interviews as these are already extremely short and a large number of customers must be processed every day. The effective time for adviser interventions might also be squeezed if earlier interventions were not rigorous enough (for example, if JSAs had to be rewritten) or, in the case of FJRs, had overrun.
- **Monitoring:** Staff reported that a lack of monitoring impacted negatively on the quality of an intervention as well as the volume of DMA referrals. Staff were more likely to follow the prescribed model if they knew that their work was being checked. In District C they had recently re-focused on DMA. As a result of training and increased monitoring the referral rate had improved.
- **Cumulative effects:** When more than one of these factors was operating at the same time, variations from the prescribed model appeared more likely to occur. In addition, the interdependency of different parts of the JSA regime meant that poor performance in one intervention was likely to have a negative impact on others.

Likely effects of variations from the model

Failure to follow the prescribed model is likely to have a number of consequences for office and district level performance, and the quality of service provided to customers:

- **Performance:** Divergence from the prescribed delivery of JSA is likely to result in performance targets being missed, although this is not always the case. For example, District A performed well on all Key Management Indicators (KMI) but was not getting good results under Job Outcome Target (JOT). In a number of areas, adherence to the model is a target in itself, for example in the content of interviews or booking and conducting interviews within a particular timeframe.

However, the interdependency of the different parts of the JSA regime means that failure to follow the model in one intervention may have a much wider impact on performance. For example, failure to refer customers to DMAs may make it more likely that customers will play the system, claim benefit to which they are not entitled and remain unemployed for longer than they might otherwise have done.

- **Quality of service:** Customers may remain unemployed for longer if the JSA/New Deal regime is not delivered according to the prescribed model and policed rigorously. In particular, good JSAs and consistent referrals to DMAs for failure to attend, availability and actively seeking work, are crucial to ensuring that customers make every effort to find a job and that all customers are treated fairly. Making sure that LMS data is accurate, up to date and that hotspots are acted upon promptly is also critical. If customers are not referred to Restart interviews or the New Deal, then they will miss out on the more intensive help to which they are entitled and may be unemployed for longer.
- **Staff morale:** If JSA/New Deal was not delivered according to the prescribed model and performance is poor, staff seemed more likely to find their work stressful and suffer from poor morale, which in turn may have impacted on performance.

Reducing variation in the delivery of JSA/New Deal

The research identified a number of factors which might be addressed to reduce variation in the delivery of JSA/New Deal and improve performance:

- **Training:** Many staff wanted a return to classroom-based training, especially on the use of LMS and hotspots and the process for making referrals to DMAs, in addition to the current training on adviser skills. It was also seen as important to get the foundations of JSA right, namely good JSAs and rigorous FJR interventions. Clarification of a nationwide strategy and raising staff awareness of the interdependency of different parts of the JSA regime would help staff understand the importance of their particular job for the whole process.
- **Sharing good practice:** Formal mechanisms, such as staff meetings, seminars or district level events, to share best practice between different staff and offices could help drive up performance. The collation of useful information, such as the very successful advisers' portal in District A, where advisers could easily find information about local provision in one place, would save time and improve customer service.
- **Time and resources:** At present, some offices are very stretched and staff felt that having longer with customers, especially at the FJR, would improve the quality of the intervention and policing of the regime.
- **Quality and availability of provision:** The quality and availability of provision was variable. Good provision is believed to improve the employability of customers and may increase the chances that they will find paid work and sign off JSA.

- **Better monitoring of individual performance:** Staff are more likely to follow the prescribed model if they know that their interventions are being checked and any problems with delivery can be picked up quickly.

Recommendations for future monitoring and research

In considering appropriate and suitable research or monitoring avenues which could produce a clearer and more insightful means of reviewing JSA delivery, the research suggested that any future study is larger in scale and focuses on the key variations and explanatory factors identified in this report. These key issues could then be explored in greater depth to gain a fuller understanding of their operation and impact. Such further research ought properly to include:

- extensive preliminary use of quantitative analysis to provide a more robust empirical underpinning to both the sampling for the substantive research and for the hypotheses to be examined;
- a linked series of inquiries each separately focused on key axes of performance variation. Our recommendation would be to devise a linked series of research inquiries, each focused on particular aspects of JSA or New Deal delivery, but each informed by a common set of substantive concerns and methodological approaches;
- research teams which combine external research specialists and internal experience.

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings from a qualitative assessment of Jobcentre Plus (Jobcentre Plus) delivery of the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and New Deal (ND) interventions undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). This research was conducted between October 2006 and February 2007.

1.1 Aims and objectives of the research

In 2005, analysts from Jobseekers Crosscutting Division in DWP carried out a detailed review of the JSA regime and its delivery, covering the whole of the regime from initial signings for new claims through to participation in the New Deal (18-24 and 25+). This review was occasioned by considerable variation between and within Jobcentre Plus districts in the ways that, and the extent to which, different elements of the regime were delivered in practice. The review confirmed the existence of these variations and led to the JSA regime being refocused and relaunched at the end of April 2006.

However, concerns about variations in delivery continued, and therefore, this small-scale and exploratory piece of research was commissioned to review how the JSA and ND regime is delivered, and attempt to gain an understanding of how and why it may differ from the 'prescribed' model in order to identify possible performance improvements.

The research objectives were to:

- review apparent inter-district variation in the delivery of certain different aspects of the JSA/New Deal regime;
- confirm the extent and character of such differences in delivery;
- assess why districts deliver these aspects of JSA and New Deal differently, and to identify perceived obstacles that districts face in delivering the full regime;
- consider the likely effects of such variations from the model;

- identify factors that might be addressed to improve the consistency of JSA/ New Deal delivery and ascertain how districts would improve delivery of the interventions regime.

A further objective was methodological: to consider appropriate and suitable research or monitoring avenues which could produce a clearer and more insightful means of reviewing JSA delivery, which could provide a reliable yardstick against which to assess local delivery of the regime.

It is important to note here that this research was intended solely to be investigative rather than evaluative, ie the intention was to enhance understanding and not to target participating districts.

1.2 Research methodology

It was understood at the outset that this was to be a small-scale and exploratory study, because it was not wholly clear that qualitative research of the kind envisaged could satisfactorily answer these questions and secondly because the resource, timescale and financial parameters which applied to the work precluded both large-scale sampling within Jobcentre Plus and a full review of the many different elements which make up the JSA regime.

Therefore, the study was focused in two ways:

- It was restricted in scope to three Jobcentre Plus districts; one which was believed to conform to the prescribed model for delivering the JSA regime, and two which were believed to diverge significantly from it.
- It focused on certain key features of the JSA regime, where DWP was most concerned about the level and/or potential effects of variance from that model.

Details of how both the key features of the JSA regime and the three different Jobcentre Plus districts were chosen are discussed below.

1.2.1 Identification of key facets of the JSA regime

The JSA regime is both multi-faceted and extensive, covering interventions from the 'day one' new entrants, to the various elements of the New Deal programme for adults unemployed for 18 months or more. To make the research more practical, it focused on specific aspects or elements within this regime which were believed to be:

- important, ie that variations from the specified model around such elements are likely to have serious knock-on consequences for outcomes;
- subject to observable inter-district differences in performance;
- subject to a formal 'prescription', ie there really does exist a model to which delivery should conform.

DWP used Key Management Indicators (KMI) on the delivery of the JSA regime to identify a number of these key facets which were to be the subject of the research. The key elements were:

- content of Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews (FJR);
- content and timing of Adviser interventions;
- consistency of referral to New Deal (eg timing of referral, percentage of early entries, percentage identified as not required);
- Gateway overstayers and take-up of Gateway to Work;
- New Deal 'fifth optioners';
- referrals for sanctions and sanctions upheld.

1.2.2 Identification of Jobcentre Plus districts

Using the KMI, DWP identified three Jobcentre Plus districts where significant variation from such prescriptions (see above) appeared to be taking place. This was achieved by producing a group of districts with 'average' labour market characteristics using:

- population weighted density;
- unemployment: three individual measures, short-term claimant count, long-term claimant count (both divided by working age population) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) unemployment, and their standardised average;
- Incapacity Benefit (IB) rate, equal to IB claimants divided by the working age population.

This gave a sample of 21 districts, and of these, relatively good and not so good performers were chosen based on their recent KMI performance using:

- percentage of Gateway overstayers;
- 13 and 26 week interventions (percentage conducted within six weeks); and
- percentage of sanction referrals.

From this sample, three districts were chosen: two (Districts B and C) performing in, or near, the bottom quartile and therefore, believed to be varying from the prescribed regime, and one (District A) in, or near, the top quartile and therefore, believed to be following the prescribed method (see Table 1.1). For background information on each of the districts that took part in the research, see Chapters 2 and 3.

As already noted, the purpose of using the three districts was to draw out general themes and gain an understanding of why districts may differ in the delivery of JSA and New Deal interventions. The intention was to enhance understanding and not to target participating districts. In this report, therefore, the districts and staff are not identified individually; rather, districts are referred to as District A,

District B and District C (for a brief description of these districts see Chapter 2) and respondents are referred to by their role (for example, New Deal Personal Adviser (NDPA)).

Table 1.1 District performance by key indicators

	May - July % Overstayers	13 Week interventions percentage within six weeks Aug 06 YTD	26 Week interventions percentage within six weeks Aug 06 YTD	Referrals percentage JSA CC
District A	17	82	86	6.1
District B	28	60	37	4.0
District C	21	61	59	2.4
Average	16.4	73.2	66.5	4.8
25th percentile	13.1	63.6	59.3	4.1
75th percentile	18.6	80.0	76.2	5.6

Source: DWP 2006.

1.2.3 Developing research materials

As mentioned above, the fieldwork was focused both by district and by different elements within the JSA regime but as befits exploratory research of this kind, the approach was relatively flexible in its coverage and in the scope of discussions. To this end:

- appropriate and fairly open-ended discussion guides for the different levels of staff to be interviewed were designed (see the Appendix for the full discussion guides);
- early pilot interviews in a separate district were conducted. These interviews helped both test out the kinds of questions that seemed to be the most productive and built up more familiarity with the policy terrain and practical considerations of delivering interventions on it, in a 'friendly' environment prior to the main fieldwork commencing.

1.2.4 Main fieldwork

The main fieldwork took the form of case studies of JSA delivery in the three districts identified by DWP above. It comprised of mainly face-to-face interviews with a range of actors within the district and covered the District Office and three jobcentres within the district, as follows:

- District Office:
 - District Manager (DM);
 - District Performance Manager (DPM);
 - Operations Manager (OM);

- Jobcentre (three per district):
 - Jobcentre Manager (JCM);
 - Advisory Services Manager (ASM);
 - Customer Engagement Team Leader (CETL);
 - New Deal Personal Adviser (NDPA);
 - Personal Adviser (PA);
 - Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) Officer.

The number of interviewees seen in each district varied due to the difficulties in orchestrating such a large number of interviews, but around 15 to 19 interviews were conducted per district. The total number of interviews conducted was 49.

1.3 Report structure

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 provides background to the three districts that took part in the research, describing their labour market contexts and operational structure. It also provides an overview of the impact of some of the recent changes in the organisational delivery of Jobcentre Plus; namely, the strengthening and refocusing of JSA, the new Jobcentre Plus Operational Model and the change in the measurement of outcomes (Job Entry Target (JET) to Job Outcome Target (JOT)).
- Chapter 3 outlines the process of JSA interventions: New Jobseeker Interviews (NJIs), Fortnightly Jobseeker Reviews (FJR), 13 Week Reviews, Restart interviews, Alternative Channels and provision, and examines, in detail, any variations from the prescribed method and reasons why.
- Chapter 4 outlines the process of New Deal interventions: the New Deal Initial Interview, the Gateway, Options/Intensive Activity Period (IAP) and provision, and again examines, in detail, any variations from the prescribed method and reasons why.
- Chapter 5 reviews and summarises the evidence presented in the report to draw some overall conclusions in reference to the research objectives.

One final point to reiterate is that this was a small-scale qualitative study. The Jobcentre Plus staff involved in the research were not representative of Jobcentre Plus staff in general, although the findings noted here illustrate the breadth of issues and common threads of their experience.

2 Operational context and organisation of delivery

This chapter describes the context within which Jobcentre Plus operated in each of the three districts. It outlines the key aspects of the labour market and organisational structure in each district and then discusses the impact of recent changes in the organisation of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) delivery on performance. These changes include the introduction of the new Advisory Services (AS) model, the strengthening and refocusing of the JSA regime, and changes to the measurement of outcomes.

2.1 Operational background

As described in the introduction, at the time at which this research was conducted, the three districts varied in performance in terms of the Key Management Indicators (KMI) chosen by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (see Table 1.1). As already noted:

- District A was chosen as an example of a 'highly' performing district in terms of the KMI;
- Districts B and C were chosen as examples of 'poorly' performing districts in terms of the KMI.

In this section, the operational context and organisational structure of each district is described in greater depth.

2.1.1 District A

District A has undergone major restructuring over the last five years with the roll-out of Jobcentre Plus. It is large geographically, with concentrations of population in large urban areas and a dispersed population in the smaller rural areas. Its Jobcentre Plus offices vary considerably in size from large offices in urban areas to smaller offices in more rural areas.

There are vast variations in labour markets and patterns across the district. The labour market is quite buoyant within the city centre areas but not so within the more rural ones. Job opportunities are to be found in light manufacturing, administration and clerical work in the rural areas and in retail in the city centres.

Staff turnover, on the whole, was low and most of the respondents interviewed had been employed by Jobcentre Plus for a number of years.

New Deal provision varied slightly within the district, with some provision private-sector led and some delivered by Jobcentre Plus.

2.1.2 District B

There has been significant restructuring within some of the Jobcentre Plus offices within this district during 2006. As well as the roll-out of Jobcentre Plus, the district had a number of office closures. The resulting merged offices are now one large office (within the city centre). Managers here mentioned that this restructuring has led to a decrease of long-serving, experienced staff as these staff were the most likely to accept the redundancy packages offered.

In their area, unemployment has recently grown quickly. The recent redundancies resulting from the closure of a large factory in the area were seen to have had an impact on this figure but staff generally felt that the register was rising anyway. However, the labour market in the area is still buoyant, with over 5,000 vacancies a month in the whole of the district.

The main employment sectors in District B are warehousing and retail, with some call centre work; although one manager highlighted the differences across parts of the district, with some relatively affluent areas doing well while other parts faced more challenging labour market conditions:

'All our car factories have gone, there's no engineering, there's no factory labouring. We've started saying to people: "it's no point putting warehouse picking and packing on your JSAg because that work just isn't available".'

(District B)

There has been a relatively normal turnover of staff although this has risen recently due to the changes outlined above.

2.1.3 District C

District C had also recently merged with another district in the region. This district is made up of three distinct areas:

- **A major city:** The employment rate in the city is around 65 per cent against the Government target of 80 per cent. The labour market in this area is buoyant with vacancies in the retail and construction sectors.

- **A very affluent rural area with an employment rate over 80 per cent:** A buoyant labour market and small register compared to the other parts of the district.
- **A distinct area with a major town:** It has high employment, over 80 per cent. Employment is buoyant, but jobs in the area are generally low skilled.

All New Deal provision is both Private Sector Led (PSL) and Jobcentre Plus-led.

For those areas with PSL New Deal provision, advisers conduct the initial New Deal interview with customers and then refer them on to the PSL who deliver the Gateway and Intensive Activity Period (IAP)/Options via different sub-contractors. The PSL are paid start fees and job entry fees.

There appeared to be a high turnover of casual staff (to cover sick leave, etc.) in the major city part of the district but most staff in the other areas were long serving.

2.2 Impact of labour market context and organisational changes

The following sections discuss, in greater depth, the impact of factors relating to labour market context and the organisation of delivery.

2.2.1 Number of claimants and size of office

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the characteristics of customer groups and the size of the unemployment register were considered by staff to have a significant impact on performance.

Staff from one office in District C felt that they had a 'larger than average' number of deprived wards in their area together with a relatively high ethnic minority population. Staff reported that the different, and numerous, barriers these customers present makes them 'harder to help'. Indeed, one manager commented that these customer groups take longer than others to go through the interventions process and are particularly difficult to find employment for. This was seen as one factor that had impacted on performance.

'So, we struggle with performance, with delivering what the organisation wants us to deliver, particularly with the customer groups we have. We're dealing with particularly hard customer groups.'

(District C)

In terms of size of the unemployment register, managers from District B mentioned that there had been a significant rise in unemployment in their area as a whole, and in their city office, the JSA register had grown by 17.5 per cent in the last year. Most managers and staff thought that this had had an impact on performance:

'The larger the register the harder it is to keep on top of all interventions.'

(District B)

The relationship between size of register, the physical size of Jobcentre Plus offices and the number of staff was also reported to affect performance at some offices. Staff from a large city centre office in District B, felt that the scale of their office had had a negative impact on the timing of interventions and, therefore, performance. For example, one member of staff mentioned that on some occasions, because of the size of the office, it had taken up to five minutes for a Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) officer to find their next appointment. This was especially the case if it was a busy 'signing day' and the customer was unable to sit in the right 'signing' area. Staff reported that this cut into FJR interview time and meant that important parts of the 'signing on' process had been missed.

A related, but different, problem concerning office layout was highlighted by staff from a particular office in District C. Staff here reported that they were up to their full capacity with regards to staff numbers for the size of the office and in nearly all cases they were required to share desks. Staff also reported that they had struggled to find enough frontline facing desks to meet the volume of customers they had coming in. The desks were also packed tightly together which had raised customer concerns about privacy. Staff felt that these issues had impacted on the length of interviews and on how comfortable the customer felt in discussing personal or financial information. This, in turn, was seen as impacting negatively on following the prescribed regime.

Staff

The quantity of staff was also mentioned by managers. In general, most felt that they did not have enough staff to cover sick leave or when staff resources need to be moved to cover other areas of work. For example, a manager from District B mentioned that there had been huge redundancies in their area and staff had been pulled off other work to help take new claims within the allotted time. The decrease of staff from other areas to cover that particular process had led to delays in the subsequent parts of the interventions regime.

'The resources don't respond to big redundancies and the subsequent moving of staff to cover. There isn't any flexibility as you have a headcount and that's it.'

(District B)

2.2.2 Organisational change

The districts in this study had undergone a series of organisational changes in recent months and these were described by managers in two districts (Districts A and B) as having had a significant impact on performance.

Managers from District B argued that the restructuring and merging of their three city centre offices into one had impacted negatively on their performance in the district. They reported that to ensure a smooth 'merging' process, ie vacating three premises, moving into another and consolidating three registers into one, all signing had ceased for three days. They described how this had led to a backlog of customers, a backlog of appointments and consequently, a backlog of interventions. This had taken time to address and, in the meantime, affected their key performance targets.

In contrast, however, managers from District A saw organisational change as having a positive influence on performance. They felt that a period of change in their district (ie merging with other districts in the region) had impacted positively on staff behaviour. Managers felt it had made their staff more open and willing to take on new ideas and processes and therefore, more able to deal with change:

'As a district I think that people are more used to change here than in any other districts. Staff are therefore more willing to take on new ideas and changes ...'

(District A)

One manager from this district also reported that the period of change they had experienced had encouraged them to focus on all processes to ensure that all staff (new or otherwise) were 'singing from the same hymn sheet'. This appeared to have greatly improved their interventions and therefore, their performance.

'I think that because we've had such different cultures to deal with, we've focused on trying to get people to do the right thing at the right time, so we've probably had more of a focus on compliance than most others [districts] have.'

(District A)

Staff

The organisational changes which the districts had undergone had been accompanied by changes in the Jobcentre Plus workforce. For example, in District B, long-serving, experienced staff had been lost when offices were merged last year, as these staff were more likely to take the redundancy packages on offer. Managers mentioned that they had since experienced a delay in recruiting new staff because of the delay in training them.

'This meant that we lost some of those people who were very experienced and knew what they were doing – the people that had been with us for years and would benefit from taking the package. We replaced some of those people with staff who hadn't done labour work for years or dealt with the public. Another thing is that you lose the experienced ones and there is a delay for the new ones to come because you have to train them.'

(District B)

A manager from this district also mentioned that the bringing together of staff from three offices into one had led to variations in some of the prescribed JSA methods. She reported that staff from the three different offices all had different views on how the processes should be conducted, and all had thought 'their way was the best way'. Encouraging a more uniform approach to ensure interventions were carried out in the prescribed manner had taken time to sort out, which had impacted on their performance.

'It takes time to get everyone singing from the same hymn sheet.'

(District B)

However, a lack of staff turnover could also lead to problems. Most of the respondents in District A had worked in Jobcentre Plus offices for a number of years and managers there reported that they had experienced staff who knew how to deliver the interventions. However, one or two managers argued that long-serving staff may develop certain behaviours that can be hard to change when new processes or priorities are introduced.

'Some have always done things a certain way and it can be hard to change their ways now. This can be hard when it comes to introducing new measures.'

(District A)

Thus, the impact of organisational change in general appeared to be mixed, with some adverse and some positive impacts. The impact of specific organisational changes – namely, the strengthening and refocusing of the JSA regime, the introduction of the new Advisory Services (AS) model and change from JET to JOT as a means of measuring outcomes – are discussed in the following sections.

2.3 Strengthening and refocusing of JSA interventions

Research carried out by analysts from Jobseekers Crosscutting Division, in 2005, on a review of JSA interventions regime and a review of New Deal appeared to show that there was considerable variation between, and within, Jobcentre Plus districts in the ways in which different elements of the regime were delivered in practice. This led to the JSA regime being refocused and relaunched at the end of April 2006.

The aim of the refocusing was to re-emphasise to all districts that they should be carrying out a tighter delivery of JSA and New Deal interventions without any deviation from the prescribed way.

2.3.1 Views on the strengthening and refocusing of JSA interventions

In general, most staff reported that they welcomed the refocusing of the regime and understood that it was needed in order to tighten up on the policing of JSA because of the recent rise in short-term unemployment.

'With JSA customers rising we've got to get back to basics and make sure they are actively seeking work.'

(District A)

'Registers are rising; referrals to adjudication are not in line. Are we really checking that people are eligible?'

(District B)

'Ministerial concerns over the register rising and whether we were actually administering the system as we should have been.'

(District C)

'We do know about the importance of the JSA regime and the refocusing. When unemployment is going up they look to us and our processes to see what's happening.'

(District C)

A handful of staff also mentioned that JSA interventions had taken a back seat recently in respect of other, more pressing, targets such as submitting customers to vacancies, and the refocusing of JSA was about bringing it back on track.

'What's happened is that over the years that stricter benefit regime has slipped off the radar for the majority of staff and we're having to go back to that now.'

(District A)

'What the refocused regime has highlighted is that we have gone way off the mark. For some staff it's about getting back to the process but for others it would be: "let's find out about the processes". Staff would have learnt the processes from a colleague and it may not necessarily have been the correct way.'

(District B)

A point of concern highlighted by managers from all districts concerned the balance between the different JSA and New Deal priorities. Managers felt that JSA and New Deal interventions cover a range of different targets for staff and although their staff have a prescribed way to deliver the interventions, some are prioritised at different times for different reasons. For example, one manager mentioned that if an intervention is not taken within the right time all staff would be required to focus on that at the expense of other parts of the regime. Managers felt that this leads to staff becoming confused over which part of the intervention regime to prioritise, which in turn would lead to processes not carried out in the prescribed manner.

'What doesn't help is instead of getting a communication that says you have to deliver these things in a balanced way, you get something going disastrously wrong in one area of work, eg ND overstayers, and a stark message will come down with instructions to sort it out straight away. In order to sort it out within the timescale they want we have to move resources around to do it. It gets a bit disproportionate because you're under so much pressure to put that right. You then get that plate spinning and because of the resource and time you've spent on that, another plate drops and then what happens is another instruction will come down. This can lead to staff in the offices becoming confused as to what is the priority.'

(District C)

Despite this, most staff felt the refocusing had been successful in highlighting the need to get 'back to basics' and ensure that the regime is carried out in the prescribed manner. At one particular office in District C, for example, a member of staff mentioned that before there had not been much discussion between new claim advisers and customers around providing evidence of job search activities and spelling out their responsibilities. This was now seen to happen much more and consequently, Jobseeker's Agreements (JSAs) were much more explicit about what customers are required to do.

2.4 Jobcentre Plus Advisory Service model

The Jobcentre operational model was recently revised (September 2006) with the introduction of an AS model. The overall aim of the new AS model was to provide stronger managerial and administrative support to advisers. This means that all jobcentres are now typically managed by two Band D managers – an Advisory Services Manager (ASM) responsible for welfare-to-work advisory services and a Jobcentre Manager (JCM); who is accountable for delivery of individual and employer customer service, JSA conditionality and customer compliance. A new Band C Customer Engagement Team Leader (CETL) post had also been created to provide technical support to the Personal Adviser (PA) team with the help of a Diary/Administrative Support Officer (DASO).

2.4.1 Views on the Jobcentre Plus Advisory Service model

All districts were operating the new model, although there was variation within offices as to the number of staff within each role. For example, JCMs were allocated responsibility for a differing numbers of jobcentres depending on the staff headcount at each office. So, for the smaller, more rural, areas there was likely to be one JCM for two or three offices. Furthermore, offices had more than one ASM if adviser headcount was large (ie a large office). If there was more than one ASM in an office, the different types of advisers (eg PAs, New Deal Personal Advisers (NDPAs)) were divided among them. Most staff felt this arrangement worked well. Indeed, one Jobcentre Plus manager from District A mentioned that, on the whole, this division of labour and staff did not cause any difficulties as long as there was excellent communication between sites and staff.

'Communication is key to making it work. You may have two ASMs in one office but everyone has to feel that it is one office all working to the same procedures.'

(District A)

However, one or two staff from one particular office in District C mentioned that they had experienced problems with the way management was now split between different offices. Where there was one JCM covering two or three offices, staff reported that they were often left confused as to when their manager would be coming in and whether they would be 'up to speed' with what had been happening there. Staff from one office in District B also mentioned that where the ASMs and JCM were split across two or three sites, communication appeared to have suffered.

JCM role

Although most staff in all districts were positive about the new JCM role, apart from the one or two issues mentioned above, one JCM, who was covering two Jobcentre Plus offices, highlighted a further issue regarding her new role. She mentioned that covering her main duties over two offices was particularly difficult as she would occasionally get swamped by issues such as health and safety at the expense of performance targets. She did also say, however, that this may be something which would settle down after a couple of months.

'The new JCM role is okay ... the biggest thing to get to grips with is all the health and safety issues because you are having to double everything as I'm now responsible for two offices ... this may be stopping or hindering some of the performance issues because you are having to spend so much time on the health and safety aspect.'

(District A)

ASM role

The new ASM role was welcomed by all staff within all districts. For the most part, staff felt that the new Band D manager now had more managerial control than previous adviser managers who had been the same grade as their contemporaries.

'I think being a band D you'll have more clout; I know from before people would say: "well, she is the same grade as us why is she telling us what to do?".'

(District A)

Staff also reported that ASMs were now freer to concentrate on the advisers and their performance rather than carrying out management duties alongside customer interviews.

CETL role

The CETL role was also seen by staff in all areas as a positive step. In particular, staff felt that the role of the DASO and CETL had helped in the organisation of diaries and freed up the time of both ASMs and advisers, enabling them to focus more on their other duties.

'I don't think the ASM could do the variety of performance tasks they're meant to do without support from the CETL.'

(District C)

A further point highlighted by staff was that as the CETLs are usually experienced advisers, they are also available to provide support to the adviser teams when needed (eg to cover sickness leave or heavy demand for new claims).

There was only one negative comment and this referred to when the CETL role was part-time. This seemed to cause problems for one office in District C as the part-time CETL was not always up-to-date on what had happened on the days when they were not working.

Despite the one or two issues surrounding communication for managers who work part-time, or who cover more than one office, the new AS model was positively viewed by most respondents in all districts. Most staff felt that the new roles had introduced clarity to the organisation model as each member of staff was aware of what was expected of them. It was seen as a more structured approach with a reduction in administration for the advisers.

2.5 Measurement of outcomes

The Job Outcome Target (JOT) was introduced in April 2006 and replaced the Job Entry Target (JET) that had been in operation since 2002. Under JET, Jobcentre Plus had to demonstrate that an intervention had taken place in order to claim a job entry point for performance measurement. Under JOT, all off-flows from benefits into work are measured, including those for which there has been no specific intervention.

Under JET, job entry points were attributed to individual members of staff. This was felt to impact negatively on staff as they might be influenced to either work more with the easiest to help customers, as they would be able to guarantee job entry points or seek to generate an intervention where one was not necessarily needed in order to help a customer into work and claim the points. For example, a customer who had already found their own job could be offered unnecessary help such as financial assistance or training provision so staff could claim the job as their own entry. There was a worry that under JET, staff may be more concerned about their own performance than helping customers back into work.

JOT, however, counts all job outcomes, through data from HM Revenue and Customs and is, therefore, unable to attribute job outcomes to individual staff

or Jobcentre Plus offices. This, in theory, means that staff can prioritise customers and concentrate on those in most need of help and direct those able to help themselves to self-help channels (such as Job Points, Jobseekers Direct etc.). This, in turn, supports the strategic direction of Jobcentre Plus by encouraging those customers who can help themselves to make use of their self-help channels, and allow Jobcentre Plus to be more flexible in addressing the needs of priority customers.

2.5.1 Views on the change from JET to JOT

Views on the impact of the shift from JET to JOT were mixed. Most staff welcomed the move because they felt that the implication is that quality of submissions is more important than quantity.

'It used to be – throw mud at the wall and hope some sticks [job submission].'

(District B)

Staff reported that they were pleased to be able to spend more time with the 'harder to help' customers whilst directing the other customers to use alternative methods.

However, the change in how JOT performance is measured (ie at district level rather than individual level) was highlighted as a concern by certain members of staff in all districts. Many staff reported that they now find it hard to get to grips with how they, as individuals, are performing. Most staff mentioned that they had found JET easier to understand and benchmark their performance against.

'It's really hard with regards to JOT, we haven't got a clue; we used to know with JET because you had your daily placing list which detailed each placement inputted the day before and you knew how many points each customer is worth and so you knew where you were in terms of your target. District office do send the information through from JOT, the last one we got as a district I think we were at around -20 something per cent, but what does that mean in numbers? What does it mean for my office? As a manager trying to manage performance it's really difficult.'

(District A)

'Staff find it harder to decipher...it is more complicated.'

(District A)

Staff also reported that under JET they had got a great deal of job satisfaction from knowing how many people they had submitted to jobs and how many had gained employment from those submissions:

'People used to get excited when they got a job entry. There isn't that now, and you know, they could say: "I've got x number of placings this month", and there was a sense of friendly rivalry between people.'

(District B)

'I feel we've lost something a bit with JOT, because it was lovely to see our customers get the jobs and get the feedback but now you don't really get the feedback; you just see targets and percentages. It's not personal any more so I don't feel personally the achievement I felt before.'

(District C)

'It's a very different way of working. For a lot of the advisers it's taken away the feel good factor because getting someone a job is the best success and you feel really good about that. Also, it's retrospective which is really difficult.'

(District C)

There were, however, one or two members of staff who felt that JOT had taken the pressure off staff to 'compete with one another' for submitting customers to vacancies:

'I didn't really think it [JET] was that good because people used to fight for submissions. There used to be lots of underhand stuff even in an office like this where staff have a lot of respect for each other ... now we've got a district target it's better.'

(District A)

A number of staff in District B thought that the shift from JET to JOT had had little impact, partly because it had happened during a period of restructuring.

'I'm not aware of any issues. How it used to be, you were probably a bit keener to sub them to jobs because it was an individual target. When it came, it was when we had all the changes, so it didn't have such an impact as it would have done otherwise.'

(District B)

2.5.1 Job submissions

There was some concern, amongst all districts, that there wasn't a clear enough message regarding JOT and job submissions. Managers reported that some members of staff now thought they could scale down job searching and submissions for all customers. This had led to fewer job submissions in most of the offices.

'Submissions levels have dropped considerably since JOT ...'

(District A)

'I don't do as much as I used to...I don't go as far with a customer. Before I would have rung up employers and really pushed customers whereas now I don't do this as much. I let the customer phone the employer as we get the points either way. It gives me more time to do other things with customers.'

(District C)

To rectify this, all districts had reminded staff that there were still job submission targets to be met. Managers felt that this was a way of ensuring submissions were still done for the harder to help customers but meant that some staff were left confused as to what they were supposed to be focusing on.

'I do think that what we've done is send mixed messages to our people about what we want them to focus on and our priorities and this is at a senior level. For our FJR team last year it was all about submitting customer for the JET; this year it's about the intervention and making sure people are actively seeking work. That takes time to do if you're going to do it properly. There is now a concern that we are not getting our JOT so people want to go back to doing more submissions. Sometimes we do get mixed messages. Managers have to be clear as to what the staff should be doing with the customers. I think as an organisation we have knee-jerk reactions. I don't think we hold our nerve sometimes and if we're not careful we just introduce new changes for the sake of it.'

(District C)

2.5.2 Work with employers

Other staff felt that the introduction of JOT had impacted adversely on their work with employers. Under JET, a considerable amount of time and resources would be used to follow up vacancies with employers as it was a way of ensuring job entry points. Under JOT, there was less of a need to do this as the district would eventually get the points. Staff and managers from all districts were concerned that this impacted on the customer service employers now received from Jobcentre Plus offices:

'With JOT the outcome eventually ends up with us if the person goes back to work. What that has done has changed the views of our staff. It doesn't matter if we deal with that employer or that vacancy because we will get the points anyway. So it's changed the way staff deal with employers – their view of them. The way we support and manage our customers. We don't talk to employers as much as we used to because we don't need the vacancies as much now. We're not trying to influence them about recruitment practices or recruiting disadvantaged groups. We've lost that, the influence, because we don't need the vacancies to get the outcome from it. Submissions levels have dropped considerably since JOT because we don't need to. JOT has changed the customer service.'

(District C)

2.5.3 Performance outcomes

A final point was related to performance outcomes. Most district-level staff reported they were still trying to get to grips with JOT and understand what factors will influence good performance within it. Many reported that, for them, it was a matter of following the correct processes and hoping that JOT will follow.

'We still haven't got our head around JOT and it's hard to know what will influence good performance there. With the register going up we've honed in on: "let's do the process properly and hopefully JOT will follow".'

(District Performance Manager)

However, following the processes and therefore gaining job outcome points did not seem to have worked in one district. District A was not performing well under JOT despite good performance in all other key management areas, eg all interventions done in time, and this had led to some confusion.

'Under JET you can easily manage it and see how many job entries you got per office but we don't get that type of information under JOT so it's very difficult to identify why we're not getting job outcomes especially as we do a lot of work in ensuring that the markers are right and the processes are followed. That's all you can do to make sure you get JOT performance.'

(District A)

Managers from this district felt that this issue was bound to change once the period of adjustment, which inevitably ensues from any major change, had passed.

For the most part it appeared that the general principle of JOT was welcomed by most staff within the three districts, especially the encouragement to focus more on the harder to help customer. However, it appeared that the significant changes in process and performance measurement was taking time to embed and adjust to.

2.6 Chapter summary

As described already, the three districts covered varied labour markets and had experienced organisational change in different ways. However, there appear to have been certain common impacts on delivery within the three districts.

Unsurprisingly, register composition and size were thought to have a significant impact on performance. Some staff also discussed the relationship between office size, number of claimants and staff levels as an important factor. Organisational change, in general, had a mixed impact, with some adverse and some positive effects.

In terms of specific organisational changes, the strengthening and refocusing of JSA interventions appeared to have taken place in spite of the varying problems (outlined already) experienced by the districts. The new AS model has added clarity to the whole organisational structure and meant that managers have more time to concentrate on their advisers and therefore, their performance; and the change

from JET to JOT had encouraged more of a move from quantity to quality in terms of job submissions, with a refocus on helping the 'harder to help' customer. Although there were one or two issues to be ironed out, these recent changes appeared to have led to an overall tightening up of the interventions regime within the three districts in this research.

Against this background, the next two chapters examine specific JSA and New Deal interventions in detail. They consider how the interventions should work in theory and explore the causes and consequences of any variations from the prescribed model.

3 JSA interventions

This chapter examines variations in the delivery of specific Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) interventions within the three districts in the study. The first four sections focus in turn on the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI), Fortnightly Jobseeker Reviews (FJR), and 13 week interviews/end of permitted periods. Each section begins with a description of the prescribed model, followed by a discussion of any variations and the likely explanations for them. Issues that cut across the JSA interventions, namely: monitoring, training, alternative channels and provision, are then discussed.

3.1 New Jobseeker Interviews

In order to claim JSA, customers must first attend a NJI with a Personal Adviser (PA) at their local Jobcentre Plus office.

3.1.1 Key aspects of the prescribed model

NJIs are booked by staff at the First Contact Centre, who collect information about the customer's employment history, the kind of work they are looking for and any restrictions on their availability to work. An NJI is then booked with a PA. Customers are required to come in early for the NJI to attend a 20 minute interview with a financial adviser beforehand. The financial adviser establishes whether the customer is entitled to claim JSA and deals with any benefit and tax credit paperwork.

During the NJI the PA should:

- discuss and draw up a Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) which should be realistic, and commit the customer to using all available channels to find a job;
- ensure that customers understand that they must be available and actively seeking work to be entitled to JSA;
- issue a Job search Activity Log (ES4) and encourage customers to use it to keep a record of their job search activities;

- ensure that customers understand that their job search activity will be reviewed every time they attend the office;
- identify customers who have 'an established usual occupation' and, where appropriate, agree a 'permitted period' of up to 13 weeks during which a customer can restrict their search to this occupation and/or a minimum salary;
- arrange the time of the customer's FJR and inform them that they will be seen by an adviser at the end of their permitted period, or at week 13, to review their JSAg, after which they will be expected to take any suitable job;
- undertake a Better-Off Calculation (BOC);
- match and submit customers to jobs;
- refer cases to a Decision Maker (DMA) where appropriate.

3.1.2 Variations from the prescribed model

In general, it appeared that NJIs were taking place as prescribed across the districts. In all offices, the full 40 minutes were allocated to conduct the interviews and staff felt that this was sufficient. In fact, for some customers, it was more than enough (eg if they were making a rapid reclaim for benefit). Staff reported that the JSAg was always drawn up, an ES4 always issued and job search always undertaken. However, there were some variations in terms of the quality of the JSAg, volume of referrals to DMAs, and the allocation of permitted periods.

Quality of the Jobseeker's Agreement

There appeared to be some divergence from the prescribed model in terms of the quality of the intervention, particularly the quality of the JSAg. There were concerns from FJR officers, across districts, that these were not drawn up properly at the NJI and were unrealistic, especially in terms of customer skills and the local labour market:

'JSAs are not what they should be. Driving – we get driving all the time and the customers don't even have a licence! JSAs need to be more realistic.'

(District B)

Problems with JSAs occurred in all districts, suggesting that individual advisers were the issue rather than district practices. Staff suggested that inexperienced colleagues might produce JSAs of a poorer quality and also that training on how to draw up JSAs was sometimes inadequate. One or two staff members also suggested that regular training was needed to refresh/consolidate advisers' ability to draw up realistic, high quality JSAs.

Some staff reported that the contact centre did not always correctly note down customer characteristics, such as their availability to work etc. This could also impact on quality of the overall interview, as well as JSAs, if time in NJIs was taken up with the correction of basic details rather than ensuring that customers were aware of their responsibilities.

Referrals to decision makers

The number of DMA referrals at the NJI was reported to be fairly low across all districts in comparison to other interventions and centred on reasons why the customer had left their last job (ie gross misconduct and leaving voluntarily). Staff suggested a number of reasons why referrals were low at this stage. In some cases the office did not receive the necessary paperwork from the customer's previous employer, providing evidence of gross misconduct or that the customer had left their job voluntarily. However, managers also highlighted the fact that staff sometimes felt uncomfortable referring customers to a DMA and tried to avoid doing it:

'A lot of new claims advisers don't want confrontation; they will not challenge what the clients are saying. They just let it go. I know that happens. But then that should be picked up at restarts.'

(District B)

In the best performing area (District A) this seemed to be less of an issue and perhaps explains why this district had a better record in terms of the overall volume of DMA referrals across all interventions.

Granting of permitted periods

Permitted periods are a set amount of time, up to 13 weeks, during which a customer may restrict their job search to a particular occupation. These are intended for customers who have a 'usual occupation' or a very specialised set of skills. Overall, advisers preferred not to use permitted periods unless customers had a set of specialised skills in high demand and were likely to find work very quickly, although this varied according to the attitudes of individual advisers across the districts. When they did use permitted periods, advisers had the discretion to set a shorter period as appropriate and some advisers in District B always set six weeks, for example. This was often the case where customers had been made redundant from specialised manufacturing jobs for which there is no longer great demand. In these cases, where it was very unlikely that customers would find a new job in the same kind of work, the adviser might set a short permitted period to give the customer time to adjust to the idea that they would have to broaden their job search and think about alternatives. However, in the vast majority of offices, advisers reported that they set the permitted period at the maximum 13 weeks as this saved adviser time because customers did not need to have an interview to renew the JSAg at the end of the permitted period as well as a 13 week interview. Where shorter permitted periods were used, staff reported that the JSAg was always reviewed at the end of the period.

3.2 Fortnightly Jobseeker Reviews

JSA customers are required to attend Fortnightly Jobseeker Review (FJR) interviews at their local Jobcentre Plus office to sign on and present evidence that they are available and actively seeking work. These interventions are undertaken by an FJR officer, rather than a PA.

3.2.1 Key aspects of the prescribed model

The duration of the FJR varies according to the length of time an individual has been unemployed and their ability to look for work themselves. New job seekers and/or those who appear able to carry out an effective job search by themselves, as well as individuals who are already receiving additional help from a specialist adviser, have five-minute FJRs. New customers who need extra help/support and all customers who have been unemployed for 13 weeks or more have ten-minute FJR interviews.

At each FJR the FJR officer should:

- check the Labour Market System (LMS) to see what needs to be followed up from the last intervention, eg the outcome of any applications;
- identify any hotspots/markers and book/workflow necessary interviews with a PA;
- check the customer's jobseeker goals and agreed job search activities in the JSAg against the evidence provided by the customer showing what they have done to look for work over the past fortnight;
- make sure customers are using a range of alternative channels;
- match and submit customers directly to jobs where individuals are unwilling or unable to use self-help channels, or where they appear not to be genuinely seeking work;
- refer the case to a PA if revision of the JSAg is required, or a DMA if the customer is not fulfilling their responsibilities.

3.2.2 Variations from the prescribed model

There appeared to be more variation in the FJR than in any other intervention. It seems likely that this is because it is very intensive, and FJR officers, who are among the lowest grade staff in Jobcentre Plus, deal with a large number of customers every day.

The key variations, which were evident between offices and districts, were in the duration of the intervention, coverage of prescribed content, especially taking action on hotspots and undertaking job searches, and the volume and consistency of DMA referrals.

Duration of Fortnightly Jobseeker Reviews

The duration of the FJR varied between offices and districts from five to 15-plus minutes. In some offices, the duration was the same for all customers, whilst in others it varied according to whether customers were classified as 'harder to help'. For example, in some offices, in Districts B and C, all customers had five-minute interviews up until week 13, and ten minutes thereafter. For these offices, the 'harder to help' customers were defined as those who had been unemployed longer. In other offices, specifically those in the higher performing district (District A), the 'harder to help' customers were defined from the start (those with drug problems, lone parents, etc.) and had ten-minute interviews whereas all other customers had five-minute interviews throughout their claim. These offices also varied the frequency of the FJR and made all customers sign on weekly after week 13. At another office, in District C, FJR officers had been instructed to take as long as necessary on the FJR interviews to ensure that the intervention was rigorous and all the prescribed content was covered:

'I give staff as long as they need. That's why it's always busy out front. You can't do it in five minutes.'

(District C)

Other offices, in Districts B and C, had decreased all FJR interviews to five minutes in order to match caseloads with available resources.

The duration and frequency of FJRs is set by the Jobcentre Manager (JCM). Thus, their priorities, decisions about the management of caseloads and definition of 'harder to help' customers, are likely to account for a great deal of the variation in the timing and duration of FJRs. However, external factors might also influence the 'official' duration and frequency of FJRs and the effective time available. For example, unexpected short-term increases in the claimant count or staff sickness placed extra burdens on an already strained system, often resulting in shorter FJR interviews. It is also the case that interviews may vary in length because each customer has different requirements and not every part of the model may need to be covered at every FJR (eg DMA referral is unlikely to be necessary at every interview).

Content of Fortnightly Jobseeker Reviews: jobsearch and hotspots

When the duration of the FJR was short, staff often felt that quality suffered. FJR officers appeared to know what had to be covered in the FJR intervention and tried to do it within the time allocated. However, many thought that they did not have enough time to cover everything they were supposed to. Undertaking a job search and submitting customers to jobs were the most likely parts of the FJR to be missed out if time was short:

'I think the time issue has become quite important because you know the next person is waiting. We are supposed to offer to do a job search but often that doesn't happen. I feel that I couldn't fit in a proper job search.'

(District B)

'You have to sign them; you have to put the intervention in saying what they've done to look for work. So job search is the first to go.'

(District C)

There was also variation in the ability of individual FJR officers to correctly identify LMS hotspots and take the appropriate action (ie sending a workflow to the Diary/Administrative Support Officer (DASO) team or booking an interview). If hotspots were missed key interventions may not have happened on time, which impacted on a number of targets and potentially prolonged the length of time customers were unemployed. When the duration of the FJR intervention was squeezed, the likelihood of missing these 'hotspots' increased.

'They have a lot to cover – you are checking whether people have gone through three steps to find a job and whether they are available for work and if there is a hotspot there, and do they need to book an interview – it's a lot for them to do.'

(District C)

The experience of staff and the quality of training they received were also important factors affecting the ability of FJR officers to action hotspots. For example, a manager from District C reported that, in one office, temporary staff had to be used in order to cover high levels of sick leave and summer holidays. He felt that this impacted on their overall performance as temporary and new staff were inexperienced and unable to follow all procedures correctly.

'In some cases, we have temps for a period of time. So their expertise is not necessarily there or the understanding of the labour market. We therefore have a good percentage of inexperienced staff.'

(District C)

Another manager from District C mentioned concern that the more junior staff, such as the FJR officers, were not the same grade or as experienced as advisers but were undertaking quite a difficult role. She felt that they are considered the least important in the whole interventions process and as a consequence they can be demoralised.

'We have experienced advisers but we don't invest in the admin staff – the FJR's – and they are the ones who see the customers every day and make sure they are looking for work.'

(District C)

Referrals to decision makers

Staff reported that the volume of DMA referrals was higher in FJR's than in any other interventions. However, there was variation across the districts. FJR officers in District A appeared to be making referrals most consistently, which may have been because the duration of the FJR was generally longer in District A, giving staff more time to question customers fully about their job search, identify any problems and complete the necessary paperwork, or refer the case to a PA.

In offices in Districts B and C, where there were fewer referrals to DMAs, the complexity of the system, particularly the paperwork involved, appeared to be a key factor. In some offices, the FJR officers did all the paperwork for 'failure to attend an interview' (other DMA referrals such as 'actively seeking' and 'availability' were usually referred to PAs) and some staff found the process quite difficult because they did not know how to fill in the forms correctly, or how best to present cases to the DMAs. They also found the process time consuming. By contrast, in other offices, where there was a clerk who dealt with the paperwork; FJR officers were only required to identify cases for referral.

3.3 13 week interviews/end of permitted periods

Once customers have been unemployed for 13 weeks, they must attend an in-depth interview with a PA at which their JSAG is reviewed. Customers' job search activities are reviewed and they are required to widen their job search if their permitted period was set at 13 weeks.

3.3.1 Key aspects of the prescribed model

The FJR officer is responsible for either work flowing to the DASO team or booking 13 week interviews themselves when a marker appears on LMS. These interviews are undertaken by a PA.

At this interview the PA should:

- review and revise the JSAG if necessary, as after 13 weeks customers must search for a wider range of jobs and cannot unreasonably restrict the wages they will accept;
- check jobsearch evidence and ensure that the customer has been looking for work;
- undertake a job search and job submissions;
- ensure that customers are using a range of alternative channels such as jobseekers direct, agencies etc.;
- ensure customers understand what they need to do to remain entitled to JSA;
- take DMA action if necessary.

3.3.2 Variations from the prescribed model

The content of 13 week/end of permitted period interventions appeared to follow the prescribed model across all districts, and there was less variation in this intervention than the FJR. However, there appeared to be a degree of variation in the duration and timing of these interviews and the volumes of DMA referrals. There were also some differences in the way that 13 week interviews were booked.

Timing and duration of 13 week/end of permitted period interviews

There were some differences in the timing of the interviews, which had been a particular problem in District C. Managers there reported that unexpected increases in claimant count had led to delays in booking and conducting 13 week interviews. Staff also reported that claims were not always closed down properly in LMS, which resulted in hotspots being generated for customers who were no longer claiming JSA. These were sometimes booked to advisers, which wasted resources, and, if the mistake was not picked up, booking and conducting targets were sometimes missed for customers who were no longer in the system.

A new system for booking and conducting 13 week interviews had been introduced at one office in District C to combat these problems. Rather than being sent a letter by the DASO team, customers were taken to see an adviser for the 13 week interview by the FJR officer on the first signing day after a 13 week marker appeared on LMS. Adviser diaries were pooled and one adviser was kept available to take up these appointments. This system appeared to be an efficient way of meeting booking and conducting targets and reducing the number of missed appointments, and staff did not report any problems.

The duration of the 13 week/end of permitted period interventions also varied across districts, ranging from 15 to 30 minutes. District A had the longest duration, whereas Districts B and C had less time allocated for these interviews. Staff in District A reported that the longer interview was needed in order to undertake a suitably in-depth discussion; in fact, at one office in District A, they were considering lengthening this interview even further.

Referrals to decision makers

There were relatively few DMA referrals at the 13 week/end of permitted period interview across all districts. Where DMA referrals did happen they were mainly connected to customers refusing to extend their JSAg. Some advisers suggested that this was because issues around availability or actively seeking would have been picked up at the FJR stage:

'If we're seeing them and checking them out every fortnight then we'll get them as and when it's a problem because they'll refer them back to us. So by the time they hit 13 weeks, if there's been a problem with their job search or availability it's been flagged up to us before.'

(District C)

Staff in District A appeared to make more referrals than staff in other districts and the slightly longer duration of these interventions in District A, may have facilitated the process of DMA referral. However, the complexity of DMA paperwork, lack of knowledge and fear of confrontation were also important explanatory factors:

'We do lots of DMA now. Once you give it a go and do it three or four times you get used to the paperwork. Some advisers are still a bit reluctant. They worry about it, it's the conscience part of it, and the: "I'm not quite sure what I'm doing".'

(District B)

3.4 Restart interviews

Customers aged 25 and over are required to attend a Restart interview with a PA when they have been claiming JSA for six months. They must attend a second Restart interview if they are still unemployed at 12 months. Customers aged 18 to 24 do not attend Restart interviews as they move on to New Deal when they have been unemployed for six months (see Chapter 5).

3.4.1 Key aspects of the prescribed model

The Restart interview at six months lasts 50 minutes and the 12-month Restart interview, 40 minutes.

During the Restart interview the PA should:

- review and revise the JSAG as necessary, as after six months, customers must take any suitable job;
- examine job search evidence and check that customers are available and actively seeking work;
- ensure customers are using a range of alternative channels;
- identify and help customers overcome any barriers by referring them to available provision;
- match and submit customers to jobs;
- make referrals to a DMA where necessary.

3.4.2 Variations from the prescribed model

In general, Restart interviews followed the prescribed model across the districts although there were some variations in the duration and timing of the intervention, and the volume of DMA referrals. However, only a small number of staff involved in this intervention were interviewed and the reasons for these variations are unclear.

Timing and duration of Restart interviews

Some offices in District C had had problems booking Restart interviews on time. Staff suggested that this was due to staffing problems and an increase in the claimant count. At one office in District C, some claims had not been closed down properly and as a result targets had been adversely affected.

The duration of Restart interviews varied from 30 to 50 minutes. The length of these interviews was set by Advisory Service Managers (ASMs)/JCMs at individual offices and there did not appear to be any other reason for this variation.

Referrals to DMAs

There were relatively few DMA referrals made at Restart interviews, across all districts, although the volume of referrals appeared to be smaller in Districts B and C. Some advisers thought the FJR officers would have already made any necessary referrals on actively seeking/availability during FJRs. However, as discussed in Section 4.3.2, the reasons for a relative lack of DMA action in the later interventions were likely to be complex and included training, staff quality, and monitoring.

3.5 Cross-cutting themes

The following sections discuss, in greater depth, variations that affect delivery across all JSA interventions. These include: monitoring of staff; training; use of alternative channels; and provision.

3.5.1 Monitoring of staff

The process for monitoring staff was similar across the three districts, although advisers and FJR officers were monitored in slightly different ways, which are outlined below. The causes and consequences of infrequent, or inadequate, monitoring are also discussed.

Advisory staff

Since the introduction of the AS model (see Section 3.2) all advisory staff were monitored through the Adviser Achievement Tool (AAT) and Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) checks. QAFs were conducted by the ASM who would sit in on a certain number of interviews. In general, across all districts, ASMs aimed to sit in on one interview per adviser per month, and give feedback to staff afterwards. The ASM, and sometimes the CETL, used the AAT to monitor the number of interviews conducted by advisers, the number of job submissions and the number of referrals to training. They also checked the JSAs to make sure they were accurate and appropriate for individual customers. This monitoring was carried out on all advisers across the interventions.

This monitoring process was the same across all districts; however, the degree of involvement of the CETL in this process varied between offices, and so too did the frequency of the monitoring, particularly the QAFs. The CETL role was relatively new to offices but it was seen as a valuable addition, especially in aiding the ASM in monitoring advisers.

The frequency of monitoring checks was often dictated by external factors. When caseloads increased unexpectedly, CETLs had to undertake more advisory work and so had less time available for monitoring. Less monitoring also took place

where the ASM's job was split over a number of offices, which tends to be the case only in rural areas where offices are very small. Staff also reported that it was taking some time for staff to adjust to the new roles and that ASMs were very busy with other tasks in the office which further reduced the amount of time available for monitoring.

Frontline staff

FJR officers were monitored by QAFs. The frontline team leader sat in on interviews and gave feedback to staff afterwards. There was also a percentage check on FJR officers' Labour Market Units (LMUs), which assessed the quality of the paperwork. The monitoring of frontline staff was primarily the responsibility of the frontline team leader, although the CETL was sometimes involved in performance checks using LMS. The frequency of these monitoring checks, as for advisory staff, varied between offices and districts according to the time the frontline team leader had available to conduct monitoring checks.

District A had recently introduced the FLAT (Frontline Achievement Tool), which aims to support the development and monitoring of frontline staff, such as FJR officers. This initiative to take on best practice from another district appeared to have provided a formal framework for monitoring which staff found useful.

3.5.2 Training

The content of the training for advisers and frontline staff (which includes FJR officers) was similar across all districts, although there were some key variations. In particular, variations in DMA training appeared to be important.

Adviser and FJR officers' training mainly involved e-learning and on-the-job training. Some staff thought that on-the-job training was sometimes unhelpful as it could result in new staff learning bad habits from mentors. E-learning also appeared to be fairly unpopular across districts and offices:

'It depends very much on the individual. Not many of my staff are keen on e-learning because when it just says: "next, next, next", they're just concentrating on what's next rather than absorbing ...'

(District B)

'[e-learning] is not of the best quality.'

(District A)

Staff also found it difficult to find a quiet place away from distractions to complete e-learning modules.

In District A, training coaches were based in the district office and ran seminars/workshops, as and when Jobcentre Plus staff identified a need. These coaches were popular and seemed to be beneficial. This was mainly because staff found face-to-face training more engaging and valued the opportunity it provided to ask

questions and share good practice. Managers in this district thought that it was a more effective way of training staff than using e-learning.

DMA training varied widely between districts. Increased DMA training and awareness of DMA targets appeared to have a positive impact on DMA referral targets. The offices in District C, which had recently focused their attention on DMA referrals, noted marked improvement in the DMA referral rate. This refocusing had included DMA training and workshops as well as liaison between DMAs and staff:

'The DMAs here are very good; if I ever get stuff I can ring them up and ask them ... we have a nominated DMA for our office.'

(District A)

3.5.3 Alternative channels

In all JSA interventions, Jobcentre Plus staff should encourage customers to use alternative channels. Alternative channels enable customers to access information about jobs, training, benefits, etc. Examples include:

- Jobseeker Direct Contact Centre;
- First Contact Centre;
- Jobcentre Plus website;
- local employment agencies;
- job points in Jobcentre Plus offices;
- 'warm phones' in local offices;
- other advisers, such as skills coaches, Nextsteps advisers, etc.

For the most part, staff across the districts reported that they encouraged customers to use alternative channels. However, there is no direct monitoring of customers' use of alternative channels so it was not possible to determine the extent to which customers did actually use them. However, a statement that customers should use all available channels was usually included on customers' JSAs, and advisers reported that they sometimes did refer customers to alternative channels themselves. In most cases, advisers saw the use of alternative channels as part of general job seeking, ie looking in newspapers, using employment agencies, which were part of the JSAs anyway and should be followed up at every FJR. Staff reported that most direction of customers to alternative channels took place in the FJRs:

'I'd say to a customer: "can you be here ten minutes before your appointment with me so you can look through the job points? Then if you have any queries we can go over them together in our appointment", so in that sense I do throw the ball back in their court.'

(District C)

Where the length of FJRs varied, staff were more likely to encourage customers who had only five-minute interviews to use alternative channels and concentrated on giving more help to those who had ten-minute interviews.

There was no explicit training on alternative channels but there did seem to be some differences in the ways that knowledge about different channels was shared. In District A there was a more co-ordinated approach to raising staff awareness of alternative channels through regular meetings about the local labour market opportunities.

Although most customers were referred to alternative channels, staff also mentioned reasons why some customers might not be encouraged to use them. For example, there were concerns that directing customers to alternative channels could have a negative impact on job submission targets:

'Yes they are [encouraged to use alternative channels] but when you've got a job submission target and your frontline team are being measured on their job submissions we are doing too much job search for people who could help themselves; but we're doing it because of the perverse behaviour we're expected to do by having a job submission target. We thought when JOT came in we wouldn't have a job submission target.'

(District A)

Some staff were concerned that failure to submit customers to jobs meant they were not doing their job properly because, in the past, job submission was a much more important part of their role:

'There is also a bit of hankering for the past – staff still want to submit people to jobs because that's what they're used to. They should be getting customers to help themselves to use other channels, but staff still think their job is about helping people back into work and that's what they want to do.'

(District C)

Staff also suggested that low IT and literacy skills amongst some customers could prevent them from utilising alternative channels effectively.

3.5.4 Availability of provision

At every JSA intervention, Jobcentre Plus staff can signpost customers to mainstream contracted/non-contracted provision, although this is particularly encouraged in the later interventions, such as Restart interviews. However, there appeared to be a great deal of variation in the availability of provision between different offices, and in staff awareness of what was actually there.

Jobcentre Plus staff were often constrained by what provision was available locally. This was particularly the case in more rural locations where travel to provision was more difficult, although, in general, customers were reluctant to travel very far. Overall, there appeared to be a limited amount of contracted mainstream provision across the three districts. The availability of non-contracted mainstream

provision varied more widely, with some offices having lots on offer and others very little. Examples of non-contracted mainstream provision included:

- local authority-run Action Teams;
- New Deal for Communities;
- intermediaries, such as Nextsteps and Learndirect;
- Skills coaching;
- European Social Fund (ESF)-funded provision;
- Employment Retention and Advancement Demonstration project (ERA).

Where it was available, staff usually made good use of the available non-contracted provision, especially when contracted mainstream provision was very limited:

'Its difficult at the moment because we haven't got a lot of training; we tend to use people like Learndirect and Nextsteps – non-contracted provision – because they can do something for these people, whereas our own provision isn't really there.'

(District C)

'We've got more intermediaries than contracted provision, and they're better.'

(District C)

Provision available through pilot schemes was particularly valued because staff felt that it helped get customers into employment and training, as well as improving their own performance against targets:

'I refer a lot of people to the LA Action Team for training courses...If someone wants a construction course that's pretty hopeless round here so I'd refer them to the Action Team and see if they could dig out something.'

(District A)

'I'll just refer straight to the LA Action Team. I think it's in their [the customers] interest to do that.'

(District A)

'If there is additional support for when they go into work, the feeling is they may be more likely to make a leap of faith and go into work...this support seems to be mainly aimed at lone parents and people who are going to attract the higher job points so I suppose it can affect job performance in a positive way.'

(District A)

The provision of mainstream contracted and non-contracted provision was often dictated by factors outside the control of Jobcentre Plus or the district managers, such as historic contracts and the presence of pilot programmes.

In Districts B and C there seemed to be some variation in staff awareness of local mainstream provision within each office. Staff suggested that this might be due to inexperienced staff being unaware of the full range of provisions, a lack of information sharing or lack of time to research provision. In District A, the latter problem had been addressed through the creation of an 'Adviser Search Portal' where all the information on mainstream provision had been collated and centralised. All staff could access this from their computers and this tool seemed to be effective:

'We expect advisers to have everything in their heads and there is too much for that. So the portal has all of our contracted and non-contracted provision on there with details of the referral process etc. for all patches. It set off as a way of something to help guide them through the contracted and non-contracted provision and a route-finder into other stuff. We launched it and tweaked it a bit, and advisers use it a lot. It's quite effective. If we didn't have that they would spend no end of time wading through a lot of stuff.'

(District A)

3.6 Chapter summary

There were some key variations in the delivery of JSA interventions between districts and offices, which are outlined in this section. Key explanatory factors are also discussed.

3.6.1 Key variations in JSA delivery

Staff reported a number of variations between districts and offices in the delivery of JSA interventions. The key variations are discussed below.

Quality of interventions

The variation in the quality of the intervention was principally between advisers rather than districts or offices. The main variations were in the quality of JSAs produced in NJIs, and the coverage of prescribed content in FJRs. In particular, job searches and job submissions were likely to be missed out if time was short.

Timing of the intervention

The timing of the intervention seemed to vary between offices within districts as well as between districts. In some offices, there had been some problems booking the PA interventions (such as Restart interviews) because markers had been missed by frontline staff.

Duration of the intervention

The main variation in the duration of interviews was at FJRs. These differences were generally at an office level rather than a district level. However, it is likely that some variation existed between districts as a result of external factors, such as unexpected short-term increases in claimant count, which squeezed the duration of FJR interviews further. There was some variation in the duration of the 13 week and Restart interviews, although the reasons for this were not clear.

Alternative channels

Staff reported some use of alternative channels, although it is not possible to verify this as there is no monitoring of customer usage. Staff noted that referrals were more likely to take place in FJRs than other interventions.

Referrals to decision makers

DMA referrals varied in two ways: in overall volumes and in their distribution between interventions. Staff appeared to take DMA action most consistently in District A, whereas there was more variation in Districts B and C. Across the districts it appeared that DMA referrals were most likely to take place at the FJR. This may be partly explained by the fact that this intervention takes place most frequently, although staff also suggested other factors which might reduce the number of referrals at any intervention, such as training, fear of confrontation and lack of time.

Provision

There was also variation in the availability, and staff awareness of, contracted and non-contracted provision. District A had set up an Adviser Search Portal which enabled staff to search all locally available provision. Thus staff in this district were more aware of the range of provision available. Mainstream contracted provision was limited across all districts. Levels of non-contracted provision seemed to vary between offices, as well as across districts; for example, some offices could utilise Local Authority Action Teams or New Deal for Communities' provision.

3.6.2 Explanatory factors

There were a number of key factors which might explain the variations observed in the delivery of JSA interventions.

Complex nature of the system

The JSA regime is a complex system which places high demands on all staff. At certain stages, especially the FJR, this complexity, combined with the large numbers of customers who flow through the system, sometimes resulted in poor quality interventions. Staff also reported that the complexity of DMA paperwork, specifically impacted negatively on the levels of DMA referrals.

Staff

The availability, experience and overall quality of staff seems to be a crucial factor. Having a high turnover of staff and/or relying on temporary staff seemed to constrain the delivery of JSA interventions. However, other factors, such as training, also seem to be important. The quality of staff at the FJR stage seemed to be very important as this intervention is a pivotal part of the JSA process. However, FJR officers are lower grade staff, and therefore, theoretically, less skilled/experienced.

Training

The best performing district had an additional layer of training in the form of training coaches, which seemed to be popular amongst staff. This suggests that providing focused, well-regarded training, impacts positively on performance by increasing the quality of staff. Staff also reported that DMA referral training had a positive impact on DMA referral rates. This was demonstrated by the increase in DMA referral rates reported in offices in District C, which had recently focused on DMA referral training/workshops.

Time and resources

Factors such as short-term increases in the claimant count and staff turnover created problems for the delivery of JSA interventions, especially in terms of squeezing their duration. This was a particular problem for FJR because these interventions are already very short. The effective time available for adviser interventions might also be squeezed if earlier interventions were not rigorous enough (for example, JSAs had to be rewritten) or, in the case of FJR, had overrun.

Monitoring

Staff reported that a lack of monitoring impacted negatively on the quality of an intervention as well as the volume of DMA referrals. Staff were more likely to follow the prescribed model if they knew that their work was being checked. In District C, they had recently re-focused on DMA in order to increase their referral rate because it had previously been very poor. As a result of DMA referral training and increased monitoring, the DMA referral rate had improved.

When more than one of these factors worked together, variations from the prescribed model appeared more likely to occur. In addition, the interdependency of different parts of the JSA regime meant that poor performance in one intervention was likely to have a negative impact on others.

4 New Deal interventions

This chapter examines variations in the delivery of New Deal between the three districts. It outlines each stage of the New Deal in turn, and examines in detail any variations from the prescribed model. The causes and consequences of these variations are also discussed. Issues that are not specific to one part of New Deal, such as referrals to decision makers, the quality and availability of provision, and training and monitoring of advisers, are then considered separately.

4.1 New Deal initial interview

New Deal, which is a mandatory programme, offers intensive help with job search and aims to improve customer employability and help the long-term unemployed into paid work. Customers aged 18 to 24 must enter New Deal for Young People (NDYP) when they have been claiming JSA continuously for six months. Customers aged 25 and over must enter New Deal 25 Plus (ND25+) when they have been unemployed for 18 of the previous 21 months. Although customers can volunteer to enter the appropriate New Deal as an early entrant, there is no automatic right of entry. The following groups are eligible for early entry:

- ex-offenders;
- people with immigration status;
- homeless people;
- people with drug addictions;
- people who have been in residential care;
- ex-HM Armed Forces;
- benefit recipients with language problems;
- people with literacy or numeracy problems;
- lone parents;
- people with disabilities or carers on JSA.

Advisers may also allow entry in exceptional circumstances for an individual who does not fit into any of these categories.

Customers may be excluded from New Deal if their behaviour poses a significant risk to those around them. This is usually because they have a history of violence, or severe mental health problems, which would mean that they would not be aware of what is required of them or cause disruption to others.

New Deal begins with an initial interview with a New Deal Personal Adviser (NDPA).

4.1.1 Key aspects of the prescribed model

New Deal initial interviews should be booked and conducted within six weeks of the marker appearing on LMS. Customers have three chances to attend the initial interview before DMA action is taken. This initial interview should last approximately one hour, during which NDPAs should:

- give a brief explanation of New Deal and its aims;
- draw up the Action Plan, which provides information about the participant's job goals, education and qualifications, personal qualities and steps they will take in the New Deal;
- refer customers who need extra help to the relevant provision, eg Basic Employability Training (BET);
- inform participants of their rights and responsibilities while on New Deal;
- explain to those who are 50 and over how New Deal 25 Plus (ND25+) differs for them, and that they can choose to undertake an Intensive Activity Period (IAP) if they feel it would be beneficial;
- match customers to jobs and discuss the use of the Adviser Discretionary Fund (ADF).

4.1.2 Variations from the prescribed process

The content of the New Deal initial interview generally followed the prescribed model across all three districts. Exclusions and early entrants were also in line with DWP guidance. However, there were variations in the number of interviews booked and conducted within the target time.

Timing of interviews

There was some variation in the proportion of interviews booked and conducted within the six-week target. In District A they were taking place within four weeks of a marker appearing. However, in Districts B and C, some offices had had problems meeting this target, for reasons both internal and external to the New Deal/JSA system: Firstly, the New Deal process depends upon LMS markers or hotspots being set correctly and acted on promptly. In some offices, for a variety of reasons,

this was not happening as it should. Secondly, 'external' factors, such as adviser sickness, unexpected rises in claimants or organisational changes, impacted on the ability to book and conduct interviews within the target time. The impact of 'internal' and 'external' factors is discussed in more detail below.

Internal factors

Hotspots are markers that appear on screen at certain points of a JSA claim according to how long a customer has been unemployed. They signal that a customer should be booked to see an adviser or that they are taking part in a particular intervention. In all offices, the Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) team were supposed to check for hotspots on LMS every fortnightly signing and book (or send a workflow to the DASO team to book) any interviews that are required. There was usually a back-up system in place, which involved the Customer Engagement Team Leader (CETL) or Advisory Services Manager (ASM) printing out lists of outstanding hotspots every week from the Business Information System (BIS). However, in some offices, mainly in Districts B and C, some hotspots were slipping through. Hotspots that were set incorrectly or not acted upon, could have a significant impact on performance.

In the first instance, failure to take action on a hotspot sometimes meant that the booking and conducting target for the initial New Deal interview was missed. Reaching six and/or 18 months is a significant point in a customer's claim, after which they are entitled to more intensive help and/or are required to enter New Deal. However, as with the earlier interventions, it was the lowest grade staff, undertaking the high volume and high intensity fortnightly signings, who were required to action hotspots when they appeared on LMS. Their lack of experience, knowledge or time during these short interventions sometimes resulted in hotspots being missed. If adviser resource was tight then any delay in booking interviews made it more difficult to meet the six-week target, especially if a customer missed an appointment and it had to be rebooked. Lack of experience or training was usually more of a problem when temporary staff undertook FJR work, and frontline is the area in which casual/temporary staff were most likely to be deployed. As a member of staff in District B explained:

'Some people have never seen a New Deal marker before, but to us it's crucial. I don't even think the team leaders would know because they're new. They were social security team leaders: they're used to dealing with payments and customer service, not the labour market. The team leaders don't know what their staff don't know. Some people know; some people I never get a workflow from.'

(District B)

The broader issue of LMS 'housekeeping', ie making sure that that relevant information was entered accurately, that all markers were correct and acted upon promptly and that claims were shut down properly on all the computer systems, was crucial to meeting timing-related targets on New Deal. For example, markers

were sometimes incorrect because a claim had been closed down on the benefits screen but not on LMS. This meant that the qualifying period was wrong (ie the computer 'thought' that someone had been unemployed for six months when in fact they had signed off and were not an active claim). This could result in adviser appointments being booked to people who were not coming to the Jobcentre Plus office, thus, wasting adviser time, or that the office missed booking and conducting targets for people who had actually left the system.

LMS was an extremely complicated system, which many staff struggled to use. It was also updated frequently, which made it difficult for staff to keep up to date. Furthermore, there was very little formal training on how to use the system; the Adviser Routeway focuses on interviewing skills rather than processes. Thus, staff had to pick up knowledge as they go along and learn from each other. Staff reported that this lack of formal training could be problematic:

'We don't train anyone on LMS here and it's very important. You need to get it right to get the markers right. It's too complex to do the markers. Markers are hardly mentioned in e-learning.'

(District B)

External factors

The timing of initial interviews, and subsequently the rest of the New Deal process, was also affected by 'external' factors. For example, at one office in District C, the NDPA had been on long-term sick leave which had left the office with a lack of adviser resource. An FJR officer had taken over the post temporarily and had to learn on the job. This had not only resulted in a large backlog of customers who should have had an initial interview and started New Deal but then delayed their progress through the rest of the programme, increasing the number of overstayers in the Gateway. In District B, three offices had been merged in the previous year. During the period that the amalgamation and move to new premises took place, hotspots had not been actioned and in one office had been removed. One member of staff argued that under normal circumstances customers would be moved on to New Deal at the right time:

'Some of these people have been sitting around since June, July anyway, because we were given an excusal when we moved, but you can't take the marker off. But mostly when we're following the process properly we'd get them on within four or five weeks.'

(District B)

A related problem was that only one marker could show on LMS at a time. So, those customers aged 25 plus who missed Restart interviews over the move were being seen, but as soon as Restart interviews took place, a New Deal marker appeared because they had missed this intervention as well. Thus, in terms of meeting booking and conducting targets:

'They've failed before they've even got to us.'

(District B)

As with all other interventions, unexpected increases in claimant count, staff sickness, etc. exacerbated other problems. Thus, booking and conducting targets were more likely to be missed when:

'New Deal advisers are off for sickness leave, etc., when caseloads are quite high so we can't physically absorb any more.'

(District A)

Early entry and exclusions

There was no evidence that eligible customers were excluded from the New Deal. All the staff interviewed insisted that customers were only excluded if they meet the criteria set out in the DWP literature. This includes customers who have severe mental health issues, drug related problems or a history of violence. Most staff reported that they tried not to exclude customers:

'We keep the exclusions as low as possible.'

(District B)

There were also very few early entrants to New Deal across all the districts and the reasons for customers starting early were in line with the prescribed model. Most early entrants were ex-offenders and people with drug problems. In some offices, especially in Districts B and C, the sheer volume of normal entrants to New Deal meant that they were reluctant to offer early entry. However, in reality, there were very few customers who wanted to join early, particularly when they were told that once a customer starts New Deal, the whole programme is mandatory.

Duration and content of the initial interview

The duration of the initial New Deal interview varied from 30 minutes (Private Sector Led (PSL) area) to one hour, which is in line with the prescribed model. In the PSL areas (parts of Districts A and C), where the initial interviews were shorter (30 to 40 minutes), customers were referred from the NDPA to the provider adviser for a second interview and the content was divided between them. Essentially, the NDPA completed the paperwork and gave customers an overview of New Deal and their rights and responsibilities. They then referred them on to the provider adviser who completed the basic skills assessment and action plan, after which the provider delivered the whole of New Deal, including caseload interviews.

An hour was considered sufficient time to cover all the content in the initial interview, although this was dependent on other parts of the JSA regime being delivered properly and policed rigorously. For example, if the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) needed re-writing, this ate into the time available for the interview, and there were some examples of individual advisers complaining that this happened.

However, in general, the initial interview was completed in accordance with the prescribed model and there were few variations in content. Following the New Deal initial interview, customers are referred to Gateway provision.

4.2 The Gateway

During Gateway, customers undertake intensive job search, and those aged 18 to 25 must complete a mandatory two-week course. They continue to see an NDPA on a regular basis.

4.2.1 Key aspects of the prescribed model

Gateway lasts for a maximum of 16 weeks during which:

- customers should attend weekly work-targeted interviews with an NDPA, lasting approximately 30 minutes;
- all NDYP participants must attend 'Gateway to Work' (GtW), a full-time two-week course, which should take place before week five;
- people who leave JSA but return to claim it within 13 weeks must be identified and taken back into the Gateway at the point at which they left;
- there should be two case conferences, at months one and three, where NDPAs, their manager/senior adviser and providers can discuss the next best steps;
- participants reaching the end of Gateway must attend a pre-entry interview to discuss Option provision.

Customers are not required to start an Option/IAP (and may stay on Gateway) if:

- the customer is pregnant and shortly due to give birth;
- the customer has a firm offer of employment to begin shortly after the end of Gateway;
- the customer is shortly due to emigrate to a country outside Great Britain.

Entry to an Option/IAP may be delayed in exceptional cases, which must be separately authorised by the relevant Business Manager, for a maximum of three weeks. Circumstances under which a customer's exit from Gateway may be legitimately delayed include:

- bereavement of a close member of family;
- a customer being unable to take up a placement for an unforeseen reason, eg allergy;
- a customer suffering a short-term illness;
- provision becoming unexpectedly unavailable.

4.2.2 Variations from the prescribed model

The content of Gateway was generally in line with the prescribed model. However, the length of Gateway and proportion of customers who were moved on to an Option by 16 weeks varied between offices.

Gateway duration and content

In Districts B and C, Gateway usually lasted the full 16 weeks. In the best performing area, District A, customers were routinely moved on at 13 weeks. Those who needed more help or were going on to the self-employment option might be sent slightly earlier. However, NDPAs in District A usually started thinking about where a customer might go for their Option around weeks eight to ten, after which customers were also sent for a 'taster' day at their placement. In the other districts, Options were usually arranged at around weeks ten to 12. As described below, good management of customers' movement through Gateway, including organising an Option/IAP in good time, reduced the number of overstayers:

'Around week eight or week ten we should be making a referral to the IAP so we've got a fair bit of leeway and I think that's why we do so well with the Gateway overstayers.'

(District A)

The content of Gateway was generally in accordance with the prescribed model, across the districts. Those customers aged 18 to 24 all went on the GtW course within five weeks of starting Gateway and this included a basic skills assessment (after which customers could be referred to the BET option early), and modules on interview technique, CVs, job search, etc. The exception to this was one office in District C, where staff reported that GtW was not taking place at all. This was a PSL area and the provider had told staff that the course was not a mandatory part of New Deal. Since the PSL delivers the whole of New Deal, bar the initial interview, option pre-entry interview and any DMA action, some NDPAs did not have a very clear idea of what was supposed to happen during Gateway:

'I hand it to [PSL] and that's it. I don't want to see them during Gateway. It's only if they fail to attend.'

(District C)

Caseload interviews and case conferences

Caseload interviews took place weekly in most offices but where there were other pressures, such as lack of adviser resource, they sometimes took place fortnightly. For example, in one office in District B, each NDPA had a caseload of 70 customers. Staff reported that they had space for seven interviews a day in their diaries and could not fit in their entire caseload on a weekly basis. In District C, customers were seen by a provider adviser on a weekly basis.

Case conferences rarely took place in accordance with the prescribed model. District A followed the model most closely, with the ASM either checking the action plan of all customers at week four and/or making sure that customers still on the Gateway after week 12 were moved on. However, face-to-face meetings with the NDPA were rare in Districts B and C unless there was a particular problem. In general, staff reported that case conferencing happened as and when it was needed, according to the requirements of individual cases:

'What I was meaning by case conferencing was, the manager will say: "you've got a few customers who are approaching the end of their Gateway date, what's happening with these, why haven't they moved on?" He might suggest what else to do if they're a problem.'

(District C)

The lack of formal case conferences was universally attributed to a lack of time. For example:

'There is no time for meetings. We are swamped with ND clients. It takes 20 minutes to get there, a 30-minute conference and 20 minutes back. I don't have time.'

(District B)

However, staff generally thought that this did not impact on other targets or the quality of the New Deal because some cases did not require discussion and they were able to get advice and help from colleagues on an ad hoc basis. It should be noted that in interviews, staff sometimes conflated the idea of formal case conferences – which was often an unfamiliar term – with a more general monitoring of their caseloads by the ASM or CETL, which might result in a discussion about problem cases:

'Part of my role is monitoring. I'm always asking the advisers: "what's happening with the customers? Why haven't you done this?".'

(District B)

Gateway 'overstayers'

In the best performing district (District A) participants were usually moved on to their Option relatively early, having had a 'taster' day beforehand. However, in the other districts, Gateway overstayers, that is, customers who had completed 16 weeks of the Gateway but not moved on to an Option or IAP, had been a problem.

There were a number of reasons why a customer might become an overstayer. In most offices where there had been large numbers of overstayers, a combination of factors were usually contributing to the problem. In some cases, staff felt that customers were playing the system by claiming illness or domestic emergencies as justification for failure to attend provision:

'They come in on day one, nodding: "yes, will do that". Put a bit of pressure on and they say: "oh, I wasn't well". They're allowed two periods of sickness. Then their granny dies in Scotland. The adviser is on holiday for two weeks and then, before you know it, they reach 16 weeks. Or they might have been referred and don't start, or they go abroad for a week.'

(District B)

However, customers who fail to attend provision without good cause should be subject to DMA action, which most staff thought was effective:

'Youngsters don't want to know. They get their money stopped once and it brings them back down to earth.'

(District C)

However, in some offices, referrals to DMAs were not being made as frequently or consistently as they should, which meant that some customers were not moved on to Options at the right time. The issues around DMA action in New Deal are discussed in greater detail in Section 4.5.1.

The problems relating to LMS hotspots also impacted on Gateway overstayers. In particular, in some offices, customers failed to attend provision, returned to the Jobcentre Plus office to sign on but were not referred to an adviser for DMA action by the FJR officers (and this was not followed up by advisers, who should be informed by providers when customers fail to attend). Similarly, if customers signed off JSA whilst on Gateway but returned within 13 weeks they should have been referred back to start New Deal where they left off. As with the initial interview, if customers signed off whilst on Gateway but their claim was not closed down properly in LMS, the system would count them as overstayers after the 16 weeks they would have spent on Gateway, even if they were not claiming JSA any more. At one office, in District C, both of these situations had occurred. The NDPA was unable to give an estimate of the New Deal caseload as she was working back through the live claims boxes and overstayers lists to identify customers who had been missed by the FJR officers or had signed off. In the previous fortnight she had referred approximately 50 people. Thus, in the worst-case scenario, missed LMS hotspots could result in customers failing to access intensive help to find a job on New Deal and it is possible that, as a consequence, some remained unemployed for longer than they would otherwise have done.

At some offices, in Districts B and C, availability of option provision had been variable. If there was no option availability then customers simply stayed on Gateway and became overstayers. This might be due to an unexpected increase in the caseload; for example, in the office where missed cases were being identified and referred to the provider, there were simply not enough option placements for all the extra customers. However, availability problems were usually due to contracts being changed. For example, at one office in District B, the new provider did not have staff and premises in place at the start of the contract. Now provision was in place they were 'referring like mad' to clear the backlog.

Where New Deal was PSL, advisers thought that customers sometimes became overstayers because the provider was reluctant to move them on to options until the last possible moment. Advisers perceived this to be the result of private sector providers focusing almost exclusively on job entry rather than broader employability issues or barriers that customers might face:

'PSLs concentrate on job outcomes as that is what they are paid for. Not very good at addressing barriers and therefore they have a large amount of overstayers.'

(District A)

'New Deal is supposed to be about removing barriers and so work is not always the first option. They might need some training or confidence building. I don't think our customers shouldn't get those options because we're PSL. But they don't: it's either work or a mandatory placement at the end of Gateway.'

(District C)

Thus, having large numbers of overstayers might be the result of a variety of factors, and attempts to solve one problem, such as missed hotspots, might inadvertently exacerbate the problem – in the short-term at least. Increasing FJR officer awareness and providing training on LMS hotspots, increasing referrals to DMAs and liaising with providers to deal with placement availability, were all measures that had been adopted to tackle this issue. At the time of the interviews, most offices had identified the particular problems they faced and successfully reduced the number of overstayers.

4.3 Options/IAP

After a maximum of 16 weeks in the Gateway, customers must move on to an Option or IAP. This provision is mandatory, full-time provision that lasts for a minimum of 13 weeks.

4.3.1 Key aspects of the prescribed model

- The NDYP option is mandatory full-time activity for a minimum of 30 hours per week over five full days or a minimum of 20 hours per week for those in part-time work or study.
- The option will last for a minimum of 13 weeks unless employment is found earlier. The options available are:
 - Environment Task Force;
 - Voluntary Sector Option;
 - Full-time Education and Training (FTET);
 - Employment Option (a subsidised job with an employer);
 - Self-employment route;
 - New Deal for Musicians.
- On the ND25+, IAP is a mandatory full-time activity for a minimum of 30 hours a week and a minimum of 13 weeks. The available options are:

- Education and Training Opportunities (up to 52 weeks that lead to a recognisable qualification, usually up to and including NVQ Level 3);
 - Work Placements;
 - Work Experience;
 - Work-focused Training;
 - Self-employment Provision;
 - Basic Employability Training;
 - Subsidised Employment.
- There is no 'fifth option' on New Deal. At the end of the Gateway, all customers must move on to one of the Options. They cannot leave New Deal and continue to claim JSA. If customers sign off JSA whilst on an Option but make a new claim within 13 weeks, they must rejoin New Deal at the point where they left.
 - NDPAs should continue to support customers whilst they are on their placement. Customers should have regular reviews of progress and performance by appropriate people, eg the provider or NDPA.

4.3.2 Variations from the prescribed model

The full range of options was available at all offices; however there were variations in the extent to which they were actually taken up. There was also variation between districts and offices in the extent to which customers were monitored whilst on their Option. Where there were problems with LMS housekeeping customers might become 'fifth option' takers; however no customers were allowed to return to claiming JSA without the knowledge of advisers.

New Deal Options and IAP

At every office, in all districts, the New Deal and IAP options were all theoretically available to customers. However, in practice, the majority of customers attended a very limited range of options, especially in PSL areas. Very few went on to FTET, there were generally not enough places for the number of customers who wanted to do Environmental Task Force (ETF). Thus, the majority of customers ended up on the Voluntary Sector Option. In District C, which was mainly PSL, only one customer had gone into the Subsidised Employment Option and they had found their own placement. Whether PSL or not, the majority of advisers thought that there should be more FTET Options and placements that were directly related to customers' job goals. Although staff distinguished between the different New Deal Options that involved a placement (eg work experience and the Voluntary Sector Option), these were often undertaken at the same workplaces which meant that any problems were similar. The voluntary sector placements, in particular, were perceived to be of low quality:

'The quality of the placements is dodgy. There's one in the brickyards and all they do is move a pile of bricks from there to there all day long. That's demeaning for anybody.'

(District B)

Furthermore, work experience/voluntary sector placements were not closely related to the needs of the local economy:

'In general I think it is fairly generic; it's not tailored to the local economy.'

(District A)

'Some, like landscaping and the conservation project, they all want to do because it's outside. But they're not going to get jobs out of that. We haven't got the warehouse work here any more. It's retail and contact centre work; these are the placements we should be putting people on. Provision doesn't relate to what's available.'

(District B)

However, the available provision is also limited by what is provided in the local area and customers' willingness to travel often narrowed the range of Options open to them. Thus, even in District A, where advisers were happiest with the provision available, options could still be quite limited:

'To be honest our customers will not travel. They tend to go for the options available in [name of town] or to the college, which isn't that far.'

(District A)

Monitoring of customers

In District A, the best performing district, NDPAs made at least one monitoring visit to customers on an IAP/Option around week ten to conduct the Job Readiness Review. In this, they discussed with the customer what happened after the IAP/Option, any problems the customer had encountered and the need to extend the Option/IAP. However, in Districts B and C, there was little monitoring, especially in PSL areas. This was usually ascribed to lack of time:

'Those reviews are the one thing that gets put to the back of the list due to lack of time...but they are really productive ... I hate it when I haven't got to see them on their placement.'

(District C)

In two of the three offices visited in District C, staff reported that there were no monitoring visits at all. However, not all advisers thought they were necessary, arguing that customers were always encouraged to speak to them if they had any problems during their Option/IAP.

'Fifth option'

Staff insisted that there were no 'fifth option'; that is, there were no customers who should have moved on to an Option at the end of Gateway but went back to claiming JSA. As at earlier stages of New Deal, customers were usually only excluded if they were violent or had serious drug problems, and this happened rarely. However, as described above, if FJR officers missed hotspots then customers who failed to attend provision could return to an office and continue to sign on for JSA although they should be referred back to an adviser to rejoin an Option:

'I think there are a number of people who can sign off and sign on again and sometimes we will miss them. If [provider] don't tell us they've lost somebody then we don't know and the customer will come to us and tell us anything – I think that happens quite a lot because we have no control over them. We don't see the customer after the first interview.'

(District C)

Inconsistency in referrals back to an Option was not only unfair, as some customers were able to play the system whilst others faced sanctions, but also meant that some customers were claiming benefits without fulfilling their responsibilities and were also missing out on the potential opportunities provided by New Deal.

4.4 Follow Through

If customers are still unemployed at the end of the Option then they will enter Follow Through. This is a period of intensive job search and, for customers who need more help, extra provision to build on the progress they have made on their Option.

4.4.1 Key aspects of the prescribed model

Follow Through is broadly the same for both mandatory New Deals. However, for NDYP, the resource allocated is for at least 16 weeks' support whereas for ND25+, Follow Through will normally last up to six weeks. For those that require additional support, it can be extended for up to 13 weeks. Follow Through should consist of:

- a focus on intensive job search;
- regular interviews with an NDPA.

4.4.2 Variations from the prescribed model

In practice, the length and content of Follow Through varied between offices from six to 12 weeks. Some staff had a very hazy idea of what was required, again, especially when New Deal was PSL. It mainly consisted of intensive job search at the New Deal provider and customers were seen weekly or fortnightly by an adviser. Many advisers were not sure that Follow Through was a useful part of New Deal because it consisted mainly of job searching. They thought that if

customers were still unemployed after going through the New Deal programme they probably needed extra help or training to move into paid work.

4.5 Cross-cutting themes

The following sections discuss variations from the prescribed delivery of New Deal that affect performance but are not specific to one part of the programme.

4.5.1 Referrals to decision makers

In general, DMA was taken most consistently and successfully in District A. There appeared to be far more variability within Districts B and C. On the whole, New Deal advisers failed to refer customers for similar reasons to advisers undertaking other interviews. These were:

- fear of confrontation;
- lack of knowledge;
- lack of time.

As with other JSA interventions, this varied between individual advisers and offices. Some advisers did not like the confrontation with customers that referrals to DMAs involved and instead re-referred them to provision without taking the DMA action they should:

'Some advisers are not comfortable or not liking confrontation with DMA... They were saying: "well, we can't do anything with this person.".'

(District B)

Other advisers saw their role as trying to help customers, even if they were not fulfilling their obligations as New Deal participants, rather than punishing them by referring the case to a DMA:

'There are two sorts of adviser – some say: "this is what you have to do". Others see themselves more as counsellors. In particular, New Deal used to be caring, empathising, not taking the hard line.'

(District B)

Other ASMs reported that, when challenged about a lack of DMA action, advisers claimed that they did not know how to make referrals properly. It is true that there was very little training on how to actually make a referral and advisers learned on the job or from past experience (as they had usually been JSA advisers for some time before working with New Deal customers). If adviser resource was tight, then lack of time could also lead to advisers failing to make referrals. However, as described below, where the ASM was monitoring advisers closely, and making sure that they were aware of the need to make DMA referrals consistently, performance had improved.

With the exception of GtW and the Option/IAP, referral to provision is not mandatory. Thus, if customers failed to attend, advisers had to issue a Jobseeker's Direction. If customers failed to attend an appointment specified in a Direction they could then be referred to a DMA. The process of referral was quite cumbersome, especially where New Deal was PSL. The provider informed the NDPA that a customer had failed to attend provision and the customer was then called in for an interview, usually on their next signing day. They were issued with a Direction to attend their next appointment. If they missed the next appointment, a referral to a DMA was made on the Direction. Two offices in District C had tried to use Directions to make customers attend all appointments but had been told that this was not allowed as a Direction must have a date and time on it to be legitimate. This means that a customer could fail to attend every other appointment but not be referred to a DMA (if they attended the appointments for which a direction was issued but not the others). Both offices were trialling the use of ND6 cards, which were filled in by the provider every time they saw a customer and stated the date and time of the next appointment. The customer had to sign this to say they would attend and if they failed to do so then DMA action could be taken straight away.

Customers had three chances to attend the initial New Deal interview, which reduced the number of failure to attend referrals that were made. Staff reported that there was some activity around availability and actively seeking, but unless a customer refused point blank to start New Deal then referrals were very unlikely at this stage. This might be for any of the reasons described above but advisers also suggested that at the beginning of New Deal it was important to gain the trust and co-operation of customers. Thus, a culture of empathising with customers and attempting to remove genuine barriers might also help to explain relatively low levels of referrals by NDPAs. At this stage of a JSA claim, customers were long-term unemployed and therefore, more likely to face serious and/or multiple barriers to finding employment. There was some variation between individual managers in the extent to which they encouraged or discouraged this attitude. For example:

'Our purpose isn't to take DMA action; it's to get people into jobs. DMA is a step in that process. So, if someone isn't genuinely looking and isn't bothered and we've done everything we can to delve into that and have tried to find out if there are genuine problems, then we take action.'

(District B)

Whereas, at another office in District B, the adviser ASM had cracked down on referrals to DMAs:

'The ASM has come down quite hard on advisers and said you can no longer choose to do DMA. I'm reinforcing that. It's not your decision, you must send it.'

(District B)

The vast majority of referrals were made for failure to attend provision, for two main reasons: Firstly, it was at the Option/IAP stage (and for 18 to 24s, the GtW course) that New Deal was most intensive and customers are required to attend

every day. Secondly, failure to attend was the most straightforward type of referral for staff as it was usually very cut and dried. In PSL areas, advisers did not see customers during New Deal (except for the initial and pre-option interview) unless the provider referred them back to them so they could make a referral. In some offices, advisers (including NDPAs) who had tried to take DMA action on more complicated cases had been discouraged when sanctions had not been applied:

'A lot of the time, if they did the paperwork they didn't get the decision. They were putting time into making the referral and the customer was getting away with it. So they thought, what was the point?'

(District B)

Thus, the reasons behind advisers' failure to make referrals to DMAs were complex and may be due to a combination of factors, including: advisers' attitudes; office cultures; lack of knowledge or poor training; ineffective monitoring; or lack of time when resources are tight. However, at a district level variations in management priorities, backed up by monitoring, would appear to be the most likely explanation of differences in DMA performance.

4.5.2 Providers

In District A, staff were generally satisfied with the quality and availability of New Deal provision.

'Generally what they offer, according to the list is okay...it's doing it's job.'

(District A)

However, in Districts B and C, satisfaction levels were variable, especially in the PSL areas, where staff were often concerned about the lack of monitoring of the providers' delivery of Gateway and that PSL advisers focused exclusively on job entries rather than wider employability issues. PSLs were seen by managers as not overly concerned with addressing customer barriers; rather, it was felt that they concentrated more on those who are ready and able to get work. Managers reported that this had left many 'harder to help' customers floundering, unable to get the help they need and therefore, unable to move on through the Gateway and thus, they become overstayers.

'PSL are contracted to get job outcomes and that's what they concentrate on. They're not very good at addressing barriers and are terrible at overstayers. We are micro managing the process at the moment. PSLs are creaming – easy hits. They would rather let someone become an overstay and get them into work rather than address their barriers ... There is nothing in their contract about overstayers. And we're not allowed to change it. They are there to make money.'

(District A)

Some managers thought that PSLs tended to use the 'same old providers' who were not necessarily offering the right type of provision for all customers. They felt this had impacted on the customer experience of the programme and also, again,

on Gateway overstayers.

'The PSL sub-contract but they go to the same providers; they don't have a wide enough net. They narrow it down to well-trodden paths – work experience, job placements or straight into work. They are putting people on the mandatory provision who have other needs like basic skills. We are supposed to be hands off when they go to the PSL so it's hard for us to do anything about it.'

(District A)

One manager felt that PSLs tended to use the same providers as a way of saving money.

'In terms of Gateway overstayers, they are a bit limited on provision for them. They tend to send them to one provider for a certain course and that's it. They don't have many providers. I think it's because it would cost more money to have more providers. Because they are private sector whatever they spend comes off their profits. They are probably delivering what they can get away with delivering.'

(District C)

Another manager, from District C, also thought that PSL New Deal provision in their area had impacted negatively on their New Deal advisers. He reported that New Deal advisers felt that their job was not as involved as other New Deal advisers in other districts because their role involved only the initial interview with the customer. The customer goes to the PSL for the rest of the programme.

'Our PSL decide what is delivered during the Gateway. Our initial ND interview is just an interview explaining about ND and then the customer is referred to the PSL. From then on they belong to the PSL. They decide what to deliver, whether to do the Gateway to Work course, and the Options and IAP.'

(District C)

'Our advisers were disappointed when they first found out because they wanted to do all aspects of ND. If you're a ND adviser here it's a terrible job, you just interview people and then send them off to the PSL.'

(District C)

On a more positive note, however, managers from both districts reported that PSLs have had a positive impact on job outcomes and therefore helped with that particular performance target.

'PSLs do help in terms of job entries – our advisers got 100 per cent job entries because of the PSL they just don't help with overstayers.'

(District A)

In general, staff reported the processes involved in liaising with providers were perceived to be working well across the districts and the GtW course provision was satisfactory. However, some managers from those districts in the study that had PSL New Deal provision (ie most of District C and one area of District A) thought that PSLs had introduced an added complexity to the process of New Deal interventions. One manager, from District C, felt that PSLs added an extra layer to the whole process and this had led to problems with communication.

'When you are private-sector led it's like having another Jobcentre Plus in the district, another organisation delivering work that Jobcentre Plus delivers. It changes all the processes, but mainly what it changes is the level of communication that you have to have with that organisation. Getting the performance messages over to them, when they're not delivering what they are supposed to be delivering; the extra effort it takes to tell them that and try to sort it out.'

(District C)

In most offices, whether PSL or not, the Option/IAP stage was not well regarded. In some cases there was not enough provision available, which, as described above, impacted on overstayer targets. It also meant that some customers had a poor experience and did not get the help they might have needed:

'Provision is not good enough. They aren't doing what they are contracted to do. There are no placements, they are not managing behaviour. Some people are sat in the building for 30 hours a week. People then walk out and we have to take DMA action.'

(District B)

In particular, work experience/voluntary sector placements were perceived to be of poor quality. In District B, for example, most customers spent their time assembling flat pack furniture whilst on their placement – whatever their job goals were. Furthermore, these placements were generally perceived to have little relevance to the opportunities available in the local labour market:

'Provision is what's available. We try to match it but there's only so many placements. We need to get all the employers in [city] on board ... a lot of it is charity shops with no job at the end.'

(District B)

'The labour market is shifting. Whether providers have taken that into account, I don't know.'

(District B)

Advisers in general had very little idea how provision was contracted and felt that they generally had few choices in where to send customers:

'Contracts are negotiated by the district team; it's very much out of our control. We've just got what we've got.'

(District C)

It is beyond the scope of this report to explore the reasons for the poor quality and availability of New Deal provision in some places or the reported problems in PSL areas; however, good provision appeared to be critical to the effectiveness of the programme in helping the long-term unemployed into jobs.

4.5.3 Training and monitoring of advisers

The training and monitoring of New Deal advisers was the same as for all other interventions. Training consisted mainly of e-learning, mentoring and on-the-job learning. NDPAs were usually very experienced advisers and so this training was generally considered to be adequate, although the complexity of the New Deal programme posed problems for less experienced, or new, staff who moved into adviser roles.

Monitoring of staff took place via observation by the ASM as part of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) and the Adviser Achievement Tool (AAT), as for other interventions. However, where New Deal was PSL it was unclear whether or how provider advisers, who undertook all caseload interviews, were monitored. In some offices in Districts B and C, where the new AS model was still 'bedding down' and staff were in new posts, monitoring had not been taking place as frequently as it should. However, where this had been tightened up it was seen as an effective way of improving performance:

'Now we are a lot better. Now part of my role is monitoring. I'm always asking the advisers what's happening with the customers.'

(District B)

4.6 Chapter summary

There were some clear differences in the operation of New Deal across the districts. In this concluding section the significant variations, and their consequences for performance, are highlighted. Some key explanatory factors are then outlined.

4.6.1 Key variations in New Deal delivery

There were a number of key areas of the New Deal regime in which there were variations from the prescribed delivery model.

Timing of New Deal interventions

There was variation between districts and offices in the way that customers' movement through New Deal was managed. In some offices in Districts B and C, the initial New Deal interview was not booked and conducted within the specified time. Sometimes the New Deal hotspots were missed which resulted in some customers not being referred to New Deal initially, or not being re-referred if they signed off and made another claim within 13 weeks.

Gateway overstayers

In Districts B and C, certain offices had had problems moving customers from Gateway to an Option at the right time and as a result had significant numbers of Gateway overstayers. This was due to a variety of reasons including: failure to refer customers to DMAs if they failed to start an Option; lack of provision; and poor LMS housekeeping.

Frequency of interviews and case conferences

Caseload interviews usually took place weekly. In PSL areas, New Deal Advisers conducted fewer interviews and had little contact with customers once they moved into the Gateway. Whether this impacted on performance depended on the quality of communication between the provider and the Jobcentre Plus office. However, it did seem that in PSL areas it was more difficult for advisers to monitor customers' progress.

In Districts B and C, staff reported that formal case conferences rarely took place. However, a more general monitoring of New Deal advisers by ASMs and CETLs meant that advisers were able to discuss difficult cases on an ad hoc basis. There was no consensus on the effect this had on performance.

Quality and availability of provision

Provision was variable in quality and availability within and between districts. Gateway provision was generally perceived to be adequate, although at one office in District C, staff reported that the GtW course was not taking place. However, in general, advisers across the districts thought that there were a limited range of Options. In particular, they felt that work experience/voluntary sector placements were often of poor quality and rarely linked to customers' job goals or the needs of the local labour market. Analysis of the reasons for this variation is beyond the scope of this report.

Referrals to decision makers

The number and consistency of referrals to DMAs varied between and within districts and offices. DMA action appeared to be taken most consistently in District A. The volume of referrals also varied at different stages of New Deal. Staff reported that very little took place at the initial interview and the majority of referrals were for failure to attend mandatory provision; that is, either the GtW course or an Option. The volume of DMA referrals is both a performance target in itself and a factor influencing performance in other parts of New Deal. It particularly impacted on overstayer numbers, as some customers repeatedly failed to attend Option provision if they were not sanctioned.

4.6.2 Key explanatory factors

There are several key explanatory factors that appear to have caused variations from the prescribed delivery model.

Complexity of LMS

This is one of the most important factors affecting timing-related performance in New Deal. Meeting booking and conducting targets depends on hotspots being picked up by frontline staff and work flowed to the DASO team for interviews to be booked. General LMS housekeeping, especially when shutting down claims, was also crucial. If this was not done properly, dead claims continued to go through the LMS system. Thus, hotspots appeared for customers who were no longer claiming JSA, or they might appear as overstayers if they had signed off whilst on Gateway.

Staff

Given that LMS is not an easy system to use, the knowledge and experience of staff who deliver New Deal was critical. Where staff were inexperienced or temporary it was more likely that hotspots would be missed. The fact that it was the most junior staff, undertaking very intense, high volume interventions, who were responsible for work-flowing hotspots made this even more likely to happen. Although staff quality was not a factor that seems likely to operate at a district level, it is the case that in those districts which had been restructured, many experienced staff had left. Experience, knowledge and attitude of staff also clearly affected levels of referrals to DMAs and the management of New Deal caseloads by advisers. In particular, some New Deal advisers saw their role as counselling and guiding customers rather than policing the JSA regime.

Training

Staff performance appeared to be affected by the quality of training they received. In general staff felt that e-learning and on-the-job training was insufficient, especially with regards to the actual processes involved in New Deal delivery, for example, in taking DMA action. The lack of LMS training was a particular problem.

Monitoring

If effective monitoring was not taking place, staff appeared to be less likely to follow the prescribed model and be aware of their performance with regards to key targets. In particular, they appeared to make fewer referrals to DMAs.

Time and resources

All of these problems were exacerbated by the fact that time and staff resources are tight. There was very little capacity to deal with unexpected increases in the number of claimants, staff sickness or other disruptions.

Where more than one of these factors was present, performance was more likely to suffer. Furthermore, the interdependency of different parts of the JSA regime means that poor performance in other interventions (for example, FJR officers missing hotspots because of lack of time) was likely to have a negative impact on New Deal performance targets.

5 Conclusions

This chapter draws together evidence throughout the report to address each of the research objectives in turn.

5.1 Review apparent inter-district variation in the delivery of certain different aspects of the Jobseeker's Allowance/New Deal regime

This report has examined the causes and consequences of variation in the delivery of key aspects of the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)/New Deal regime across three Jobcentre Plus districts. Districts were selected on the basis of Key Management Indicators (KMI), and at the time these data were collected, District A was the best performing.

As documented in earlier chapters, offices in District A followed the prescribed model most closely. They generally delivered high quality interventions, at the correct time and maintained a high level of referrals to decision makers. Staff had a good awareness of available provision and made use of a range of alternative channels. The New Deal was usually delivered according to the prescribed model and customers were moved through the different stages in a timely fashion. There were very few problems with Gateway overstayers or customers taking the so-called 'fifth option'. There was less consistency in Districts B and C. Some offices within these districts followed the prescribed model to deliver parts of the JSA/New Deal regime; others did not. In particular, the timing, frequency, duration and content of interventions varied, as did the consistency of referrals to DMAs, the number of overstayers on New Deal, and availability and quality of provision.

Overall, variability between offices was greater than that between districts, and in the next section key variations in delivery of JSA/New Deal are described in greater depth.

5.2 Confirm the extent and character of differences in delivery

There were a number of key differences in delivery of the JSA/New Deal regime between Jobcentre Plus offices, which are outlined below.

5.2.1 Quality of interventions

The quality of Jobseeker's Agreements (JSAs) drawn up at the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) was variable between advisers. Many Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) officers felt that unrealistic JSAs were being drawn up in NJIs. A realistic and practical JSA helps to make sure that customers do everything possible to find a job; if JSAs are not fit for purpose, the FJR officers' job is made more difficult. Time may also be wasted at subsequent interventions if the JSA has to be rewritten.

The quality of FJR interventions was also variable. At some offices, where only five minutes were allowed to sign each customer, staff did not always undertake a job search, submit customers to jobs or take DMA action. The content of adviser interviews appeared to follow the prescribed model fairly consistently across districts.

The variation in the quality of particular interventions was usually between individual advisers rather than districts. However, there may also be district-level variations due to the quality of staff and availability of training.

5.2.2 Timing, frequency and duration of interventions

The timing of the interventions varied between offices as well as between districts. In some offices, particularly in the lower performing districts, there had been some problems booking the Personal Adviser (PA) interventions (such as Restart interviews) as frontline staff missed the hotspots. In other cases, claims were not closed down properly on the Labour Market System (LMS) and, consequently, customers who were no longer unemployed were booked for interviews. Restart interviews were particularly affected because more people are likely to have left JSA by six, 12 and 18 months.

Sometimes, New Deal markers were also missed which resulted in some customers not being referred to New Deal initially or not being re-referred if they signed off and made another claim within 13 weeks. In Districts B and C, formal case conferences were rare, although informal meetings were sometimes conducted on a more casual basis between the adviser and their manager.

The duration of FJR interventions varied the most, between five and 15-plus minutes, although there were also some slight differences observed in other interventions such as the 13 week interview. These differences were generally at an office level rather than a district level. In PSL areas, the initial New Deal interview was shorter as customers were then referred to a provider PA for a second interview.

5.2.3 Gateway overstayers

In Districts B and C, certain offices had had problems moving customers from Gateway to an Option at the right time and, as a result, had significant numbers of Gateway overstayers.

This might happen for a number of reasons: Some customers failed to start their Option provision but were not referred to Decision Makers (DMAs), whilst in other cases provision was unavailable, usually because contracts had been changed. Some problems with overstayers were the result of poor LMS housekeeping, whereby claims were not closed down properly if customers found a job whilst on Gateway. A customer might also become an overstayer if they were not referred back to New Deal by the frontline staff if they made a new claim within 13 weeks of having signed off whilst on the Gateway.

5.2.4 Quality, availability and staff awareness of provision

Contracted provision was variable in quality and availability within and between districts. Some offices were able to access European Social Fund (ESF)-funded provision, Local Authority Action Teams or New Deal for Communities' provision for some of their customers.

There was also variation in terms of the availability, and staff awareness, of provision. The best performing district had set up an Adviser Search Portal, which enabled staff to search all locally available provision. Staff in this district were more aware of provision in comparison to other districts.

New Deal Gateway provision was generally perceived to be adequate, although at one office in District C the Gateway to Work (GtW) course was not taking place. However, in general, advisers across the districts thought that there was a limited range of Options and that work experience/voluntary sector placements were usually of poor quality and rarely linked to customers' job goals or the needs of the local labour market. Although advisers distinguished between the different options that involved a placement with an employer, these were often undertaken at the same workplaces and staff often discussed problems which were common to them all.

Analysis of the reasons for variation in the quality and availability of provision is beyond the scope of this report; however, good provision is clearly a critical factor in the successful delivery of JSA and New Deal.

5.2.5 Referrals to decision makers

The number and consistency of referrals to DMAs varied between and within districts and offices. It was taken most consistently in District A.

The volume of referrals also varied between interventions. There were fewer referrals at the NJI and Restart interviews compared to the FJR, across the districts. There were very few referrals to DMAs at the New Deal initial interview and the majority of referrals during New Deal were for failure to attend mandatory provision.

A range of explanations was suggested for below average rates of DMA referrals. These included: lack of knowledge/poor training; fear of confrontation; lack of monitoring; lack of time; advisers empathising with the customer and trying to remove barriers before taking action.

5.2.6 Alternative channels

Staff across the districts reported that they encouraged customers to use alternative channels. However, there was no monitoring of customers' use of alternative channels so it was impossible to determine the extent to which customers actually used them. Staff reported that customers were most likely to be referred to alternative channels by FJR officers.

Although most customers were referred to alternative channels, staff also mentioned reasons why some customers may not be encouraged to use them. Some staff were unsure whether directing customers to alternative channels would have an adverse impact on other targets such as job submission targets. Other staff mentioned that customers with little or no IT skills or poor literacy, would find the channels hard to use.

5.3 Assess why districts deliver these aspects of JSA and New Deal differently, and identify perceived obstacles that districts face in delivering the full regime

There are several key factors that provide likely explanations for variations in the ability of offices to deliver the JSA/New Deal regime according to the prescribed model. These include those which are internal to the JSA regime, such as the complexity of the system, and external factors, such as claimant count, and the effects of management interventions and training.

5.3.1 Complexity of the system

The JSA and New Deal regime is complex, in terms of the number and interdependency of interventions and the rules by which they are regulated, as well as the procedures that Jobcentre Plus employees must follow. The demands this places on staff are increased by the large numbers of customers who pass through the system. In particular, LMS is difficult to use and this was one of the most important factors affecting timing-related performance. Meeting booking and conducting targets depends on hotspots being picked up by frontline staff and workflowed to the DASO team for interviews to be booked. General LMS housekeeping, especially when shutting down claims, was also critical. If 'dead' claims continued through the LMS system, hotspots appeared for customers who were no longer claiming JSA. Thus, staff needed a good grasp of the overall regime and the meaning and importance of hotspots. Staff also needed to be more aware of the interdependency of the different parts of the JSA regime, so they are aware of the importance of their particular role within it.

5.3.2 Staff

Given that the JSA regime is complex and that LMS is not an easy system to use, the quality of the staff who deliver JSA and New Deal is crucial. If staff were inexperienced or temporary, it was more likely that they would miss hotspots or fail to refer customers to DMAs. The fact that it is the most junior staff, undertaking the most intense, high volume interventions, who have primary responsibility for policing the regime and actioning hotspots, made this even more likely to happen.

The knowledge, experience and attitudes of advisers were probably the most important factors affecting the volume and consistency of referrals to DMAs at later stages of a JSA claim. Lack of time was more likely to be an issue for FJR officers, especially where they only had five minutes to sign every customer.

5.3.3 Training

High quality, focused training is likely to improve performance. Current training which focuses on adviser skills rather than processes, backed up by e-learning and mentoring was felt to be inadequate. District A, which was the best performing district, had training coaches, which suggests that this extra layer adds value. Furthermore, recent DMA training in one of the poorer performing districts seems to have had a positive impact on referral rates.

5.3.4 Time and resources

In offices where the JSA regime was already stretched, unexpected increases in claimant count or staff sickness could easily strain the system and result in missed performance targets. This was a particular problem for FJR interviews as these are already extremely short and a large number of customers must be processed every day.

The effective time available for adviser interventions might also be squeezed if earlier interventions were not rigorous enough – for example, if the frontline team had not made referrals to DMAs for availability or a JSAG had to be re-written.

5.3.5 Monitoring

Staff reported that a lack of monitoring impacted negatively on the quality of an intervention as well as the volume of DMA referrals. Staff were more likely to follow the prescribed model if they knew that their work was being checked. In District C they had recently refocused on DMA in order to increase their referral rate because it had previously been very poor. As a result of DMA referral training and increased monitoring, the DMA referral rate had improved.

5.3.6 Cumulative effects

When more than one of these factors were operating at the same time, variations from the prescribed model appeared more likely to occur. In addition, the interdependency of different parts of the JSA regime meant that poor performance in one intervention was likely to have a negative impact on others.

5.4 Consider the likely effects of variations from the model

Failure to follow the prescribed model is likely to have a number of consequences for office and district level performance, and the quality of service provided to customers.

5.4.1 Performance

Divergence from the prescribed delivery of JSA is likely to result in performance targets being missed. However, it must be stressed that this is not always the case. For example, District A performed well on all Key Management Indicators (KMI) but was still not getting good results under Job Outcome Target (JOT).

In a number of areas, adherence to the model is a target in itself, for example in the content of interviews or booking and conducting interviews within a particular timeframe. However, the interdependency of the different parts of the JSA regime means that failure to follow the model in one intervention may have a much wider impact on performance. For example, failure to refer customers to DMAs may make it more likely that customers will play the system, claim benefit to which they are not entitled and remain unemployed for longer than they might otherwise have done.

5.4.2 Quality of service

Customers may remain unemployed for longer if the JSA/New Deal regime is not delivered according to the prescribed model and policed rigorously. In particular, good JSAs and consistent referrals to DMAs for failure to attend, availability and actively seeking work, are crucial to ensuring that customers make every effort to find a job and that all customers are treated fairly. Making sure that LMS data is accurate, up to date and that hotspots are acted upon promptly is also critical. If customers are not referred to Restart interviews or the New Deal, they will miss out on the more intensive help to which they are entitled and may be unemployed for longer.

5.4.3 Staff morale

If JSA/New Deal was not delivered according to the prescribed model and performance is poor, staff seem more likely to find their work stressful and suffer from poor morale, which in turn may impact on performance.

5.5 Identify factors which might be addressed to improve the consistency of JSA/New Deal delivery and ascertain how districts would improve delivery of the regime

There are a number of factors that might be addressed to reduce variation in the delivery of JSA/New Deal and improve performance. Drawing on suggested improvements identified by staff from the three districts, the following would appear to be particularly helpful.

5.5.1 Training

Many staff wanted a return to classroom-based training, especially on the use of LMS and hotspots, and the process for making referrals to DMAs, in addition to the current training on adviser skills. E-learning was generally seen as unpopular and, whilst mentoring can be a good way of spreading good practice and learning through experience, it depends on the availability of well-trained, experienced mentors who deliver JSA/New Deal according to the prescribed model themselves.

It is important to get the foundations of JSA right, namely good JSAs and rigorous FJR interventions. Clarification of nationwide strategy and raising staff awareness of the interdependency of different parts of the JSA regime would help staff understand the importance of their particular job for the whole process.

5.5.2 Sharing good practice

Formal mechanisms, such as staff meetings, seminars or district level events, to share best practice between different staff and offices could help drive up performance. The collation of useful information, such as the very successful advisers' portal in District A, where advisers could easily find information about local provision in one place, would save time and improve customer service.

5.5.3 Time and resources

At present some offices are very stretched and staff felt that having longer with customers, especially at the FJR would improve the quality of the intervention and policing of the regime.

5.5.4 Quality and availability of provision

The quality and availability of provision is variable. New Deal placements, in particular, should be more closely related to the needs of the local labour market. Good provision improves the employability of customers and may increase the chances that they will find paid work and sign off JSA. Poor provision makes it more likely that customers will fail to attend or become demotivated.

More outreach to engage local businesses might help to secure placements that are likely to lead to a paid job in the local economy.

5.5.5 Better monitoring of individual performance

It is important that all staff are monitored on a regular basis and are aware of their performance in relation to key targets. Staff are more likely to follow the prescribed model if they know that their interventions are being checked and any problems with delivery can be picked up quickly.

5.6 Consider appropriate and suitable research or monitoring avenues which could produce a clearer and more insightful means of reviewing JSA delivery

Assessing the way in which the JSA and ND regime is delivered, and attempting to gain an understanding of how and why it may differ from the 'prescribed' model in order to identify possible performance improvements, is a lengthy and complex process.

This report is based on a very small-scale and qualitative piece of research. It must be emphasised that these findings are only indicative of probable variations in delivery and explanatory factors at a national level. A relatively small number of staff were interviewed in each district and the research provided no means through which their responses could be verified; for example, there were some inconsistencies in the information provided by different staff in the same office. Furthermore, the research objectives covered a very large set of issues, which made it difficult to get in-depth information on each topic as staff had a limited amount of time to spend in the interview.

Because of the reasons outlined above, it has been somewhat difficult to gain a complete insight into the scale of the variations identified. There appears to be a lot more to learn which, we feel, would be better founded by conducting research on a much larger scale. Essentially, larger-scale research offers the opportunity to gain a more robust and accurate insight into why these variations exist, the actual scale of the impact of the variations and what could be done to address them.

We, therefore, feel that the findings of this report may inform the design of a more larger-scale study and a number of recommendations for any future research are outlined opposite. In particular, it is suggested that any future study focuses on the key variations and explanatory factors identified in this report. These key issues could then be explored in greater depth to gain a fuller understanding of their operation and impact.

What might such research look like? In our view it ought properly to include the following attributes:

- **Extensive preliminary use of quantitative analysis** to provide a more robust empirical underpinning to both the sampling for the substantive research and for the hypotheses to be examined. For example, in both substantive chapters (ie on JSA interventions and the New Deal) we observed that variations in staffing levels and calibre were continually cited as underlying reasons why the quality of interventions tended to vary from office to office, and between districts. If this is so, it ought to be a reasonably straightforward task to collect and collate data on staffing levels and turnover rates in a way that could be related to inter-office/district variations in performance. Secondly, if it is true that inter-office variation is a strong contributory factor to inter-district variation, comparative analysis of performance between offices within districts could highlight those offices which vary consistently on either side of the average and a comparison between them should be revealing about the probable contributory factors to this variation. Thirdly, several respondents to this research took the view that their district's overall performance vis à vis others, varied considerably over time, and that as managers' priorities shifted from indicator to indicator (in line with their perceptions of shifting central priorities) so too did their relative performance on different, specific indicators. In addition, quantitative analysis could be used to assess whether or not there are consistently poorly performing districts/offices, and the extent to which such relative performance varies from one indicator to the next. Respondents to this research were often inclined to cite one-off external factors as important causes of performance variation, and it would seem sensible to use quantitative data, for example of variations in new customer flows, to inform the sampling and remove such exogenous factors from any future assessments. Such analyses would, in our view, provide a much more informed basis, both for sampling (ie of which districts/offices to focus on) and for substantive research questions (ie which seem consistently to underpin variations in performance).
- **A linked series of inquiries each separately focused on key axes of performance variation.** Our research has shown that there is a fairly consistent set of factors which have been identified by our respondents as contributing to below-average performance across the board (ie influencing performance across many/most indicators). However, the combination of general and particular factors makes for a potentially complex interaction and mix of factors influencing performance outcomes at any particular point. Consequently, we feel that narrowing the scope of subsequent inquiries is necessary to provide a fuller, deeper and more comprehensive assessment of performance variation and the factors causing it. Clearly, there is a good case to be made for separating out JSA and New Deal interventions, as we have tried to do in this report, but this logic might just as beneficially be extended to key points within both the JSA regime and New Deal delivery. At the same time, the prevalence of across-the-board factors and the probable influence of knock-on effects (ie shortcomings at one point in the system providing for difficulties at a later stage), would require a strategy to link together such separate inquiries. Our recommendation, therefore, would be to devise a linked series of research inquiries, each focused

on particular aspects of JSA or New Deal delivery but each informed by a common set of substantive concerns and methodological approaches.

- **Research teams which combine external research specialists and internal experience.** This research has shown how, in some measure, the very complexity of the systems used to manage the customer flow and the interventions directed at it has itself been a source of poor performance (particularly when combined with under-trained and/or under-complemented staff resources). This complexity has also been a problem for the current research team, not just in getting to grips with these systems within the context of a relatively brief immersion but, more seriously, in the difficulty of building a sound and reasonably reliable judgement about the credibility of respondents' assertions. To put it baldly, our interviewees have not been disinterested in the conclusions we have formed and we have faced considerable difficulty in evaluating their inputs in the absence of a deep familiarity with their environment. This has influenced the work at two levels; on the one hand, it has constrained the quality of interviews by restricting the use of reliably informed and directed follow-up questioning, and it has limited our ability to sort out and weigh evidence when collating the results. In effect, we have been largely constrained to treating all the respondents' statements at face value and commensurately restricted in our ability to recognise nuance and follow up potentially interesting avenues of discussion. Of course, these constraints would be less important in a larger-scale project, with the research team building up an enhanced familiarity with the complexities of the system. However, our recommendation for any future work of this kind is that it should be conducted by joint teams, with professional researchers contributing quality assurance in respect of proper research procedures and analytical rigour, etc., while staff from within Jobcentre Plus would provide a more sensitive sounding-board, both to prompt and encourage respondents and to weigh their responses more reliably. It would be important for the perceived independence of such work, of course, that such Jobcentre Plus inputs were not perceived by respondents as judgemental and were recognised as knowledgeable and sympathetic. It would, therefore, seem sensible that such inputs could be drawn from experienced staff from districts other than the ones under observation.

Appendix

Discussion guides

Discussion Guide: District Office

Thank for agreeing to talk to us. Introduce IES and explain details of project:

The Institute for Employment Studies has been commissioned by DWP to undertake a qualitative assessment of Jobcentre Plus delivery of the JSA and New Deal interventions. The research is intended to enhance understanding of delivery of the JSA and ND interventions and not to target participating districts. We are not evaluating districts or staff.

This is a small scale and exploratory study focusing on three districts. The research objectives are:

- to review apparent inter-district variation in the delivery of certain different aspects of the JSA/New Deal regime;
- to confirm the extent and character of such differences in delivery;
- to assess why districts deliver these aspects of JSA and New Deal differently, and to identify perceived obstacles which districts face in delivering the full regime;
- to consider the likely effects of such variations from the model;
- to identify factors which might be addressed to improve the consistency of JSA/New Deal delivery and ascertain how districts would improve delivery of the interventions regime.

Ask permission to record the interview.

Stress confidentiality of discussion, no-one will be identified when reporting back to DWP.

This guide covers a wide range of topics and it is not expected that every topic will be covered in depth in every interview. Judgement should be used in ensuring that the most appropriate questions are asked of each respondent.

Background

Can you tell me something about your own background and your experiences as a Jobcentre Plus district Manager/Operations Manager/district Performance Manager?

- What are your main (key) responsibilities?
- How long have you been in your current role? Previous roles?
- What is your role with regards to the JCPs in your district? How many JCPs are there in your district? Size of JCPs within district?
- Size of the area covered?
- Claimant count? Has this increased/decreased recently?
- Labour market context? Opportunities for employment?
- Any pilots running in your district? Advantages/disadvantages of these? Any impact on district/Jobcentre Plus performance?
- Any private sector leads for ND provision in your district? Which areas? Advantages/disadvantages of these? Any impact on district/Jobcentre Plus performance?

Is your district working to the new Standard Operating Model (organisational model – show example of model)? If not, why not? How is the new model working in practice? Any advantages/disadvantages?

In your opinion, how well do you think you are doing in terms of performance (explore between different districts and between different JCPs within the district)? Why? How is performance between districts/JCPs assessed? Any issues?

Strengthening and refocusing of JSA

Have you heard of the strengthening and refocusing of JSA? What does this mean to you? Why do you think the regime has been strengthened and refocused?

Have you tightened up on sanctioning and referring to Decision Makers? In your opinion, what are the things that account for low referrals?

Have there been any particular difficulties/constraints influencing the refocused regime?

- Do you have the resources available to offer what the refocused regime is wanting?
 - staff resources – competing priorities for staff, turnover, sickness;

- staff and management skills/experience/quality;
- staff targets;
- provider resources.

How successful has the refocused JSA regime been?

How do you define success?

What factors have been helpful/facilitators?

In your opinion, what factors constrain the delivery of JSA and ND interventions? Why do districts differ in their delivery of JSA/ND interventions? What are the key factors?

- staff resources – competing priorities for staff, turnover, sickness;
- staff and management skills/experience/quality – training issues;
- financial resources – how do DMAs prioritise their funding? What is the decision making process?
- time/caseload;
- New Deal strategy at district;
- availability of good quality Providers and provision;
- target system.

Are the messages about the refocusing of JSA and the messages about Job Outcome Targets (JOT) compatible? ie in relation to submitting people for jobs.

New Deal

What criteria do you, as a district, operate for accessing early entry to the New Deals? Approximately what proportion of New Deal starters are early entrants?

What do you, as a district, deliver at the Gateway stage? Why?

Does your district/office offer all Options/IAP for New Deal? If not, why not? Do you offer any exemptions? If so, why? Do you prioritise certain options?

What criteria do you use to decide the provision you make available for New Deal?

In your opinion, why do districts differ in their delivery of New Deal?

Do different groups get different ND provision?

Do districts consciously apply a New Deal delivery strategy?

What factors could be addressed to improve performance?

How much does local supply impact on New Deal provision and performance?

Providers

What consideration is given to ensuring provision (especially full-time training and education provision) relates to the needs of the local economy and job vacancies?

What consideration is given to ensuring provision (especially education and training opportunities) on ND25+ relates to the needs of the local economy and job vacancies?

Do advisers decide on which option is taken or is this an office or district decision?

Are there any other issues that determine customer referral to provision?

- Budgetary?
- Filling spare places?
- Local decision/preference to use a particular type of provision?

What is the availability of good quality providers across districts?

Alternative channels/JOT

How has the Job Outcome Target (JOT) impacted on your district/staff and their work? *On how they work with customers in directing them to jobs; on targets.*

Can you tell me what forms of alternative channels you have at JCPs in the district?

At what stage are customers encouraged to use the alternative channels? Are customers happy using them? Why? Why not?

What sort of training is provided for staff to educate them about the alternative channels available (internally and externally)?

In your opinion is training for staff on alternative channels sufficient?

What are the main constraints/barriers in encouraging your staff to refer customers to alternative channel provision (internal and external factors)?

How do you monitor/record the usage of alternative channels?

Has the introduction of alternative channels improved your efficiency? How?

Do you have any examples of best practice in your office in terms of encouraging use of alternative channels?

Further support required and suggestions for improvement

Do you have any ideas about which factors might be addressed to improve JSA/ New Deal delivery in general?

Is any further support required to enable/help districts/JCPs to improve JSA/New Deal interventions/delivery?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank and close

Discussion Guide: Jobcentre Plus staff

Thank for agreeing to talk to us. Introduce IES and explain details of project:

The Institute for Employment Studies has been commissioned by DWP to undertake a qualitative assessment of Jobcentre Plus delivery of the JSA and New Deal interventions. The research is intended to enhance understanding of delivery of the JSA and ND interventions and not to target participating districts. We are not evaluating districts or staff.

This is a small scale and exploratory study focusing on three districts. The research objectives are:

- To review apparent inter-district variation in the delivery of certain different aspects of the JSA/New Deal regime.
- To confirm the extent and character of such differences in delivery.
- To assess why districts deliver these aspects of JSA and New Deal differently, and to identify perceived obstacles which districts face in delivering the full regime.
- To consider the likely effects of such variations from the model.
- To identify factors which might be addressed to improve the consistency of JSA/New Deal delivery and ascertain how districts would improve delivery of the interventions regime.

Ask permission to record the interview.

Stress confidentiality of discussion, no one will be identified when reporting back to DWP.

This guide covers a wide range of topics and it is not expected that every topic will be covered in depth in every interview. Judgement should be used in ensuring that the most appropriate questions are asked of each respondent.

Background

Can you tell me something about your own background and your experiences as an Advisory Services Manager/Jobcentre Manager/Customer Engagement Team Leader/New Deal PA/PA/Fortnightly Jobsearch Review Officer?

- How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus?
- How long have you been in your current role? Has your role changed at all over the last year? Previous roles? What grade are you?
- What are your main (key) responsibilities?
- What previous experience/training have you had to prepare you for this role?

Is your Jobcentre Plus working to the new Standard Operating Model (organisational model – show example of model)? If not, why not? How is the new model working in practice? Any issues? Advantages/disadvantages?

Can you tell me something about the labour market which this Jobcentre Plus/district serves and the typical vacancy flow you are dealing with?

- Labour market context?
- Claimant count – has this increased/decreased recently?
- Size of the area covered?

Does your Jobcentre Plus undertake any outreach activities? *Ask for details including where they are located and the client groups they serve, advantages/disadvantages of outreach.*

Do you work closely with any local partners – any examples? *Ask for details including partner details, referral process, customer groups, advantages/disadvantages of partnership working.*

Are there any pilots running in the local area? *If yes, ask for details of the pilot including the referral process, customer groups and advantages/disadvantages of pilot(s).*

Explore whether there are any private sector leads for ND provision in the area.

In your opinion, how well do you think you are doing in terms of performance (explore between different JCPs within the district)? Why? How is performance between JCPs assessed? Any issues?

JSA interventions

Can you please describe for me, in general terms, how customers move through the JSA regime from when they first make a claim for benefits until they reach the New Deal? **At each point, we are particularly interested in any differences between what is supposed to happen, and what happens in practice, and why.** *Explore the following:*

New Jobseeker Interviews (NJIs)

Feature	Plan	Extent & character of any variance	Reason for & effect of variance
What happens before NJI, ie First Contact and Financial Assessor meeting – views on these?			
Duration of interviews			
Are Job Search Activity Logs issued? What guidance is given to the customer when issuing the log?			
Process of drawing up a Jobseeker's Agreement; how often it is reviewed and how is it monitored within your office/district?			
How is the NJI recorded or monitored?			
Any referrals to DMAs at this stage? Main reasons why? Is training provided on referrals to DMAs?			
How much training do staff members receive on NJIs?			

Weekly/fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews (FJR)

Feature	Plan	Extent & character of any variance	Reason for & effect of variance
Duration of interviews Individual appointments			
When would an FJR officer do weekly signing?			
What is the process for weekly signing after the 13 week review?			
What is covered in the FJR?			
Is the jobsearch evidence in the Job Search Activity Log reviewed during the FJR? If not, why not?			
Are customers encouraged to use alternative channels to look for work?			
Are submissions used appropriately, ie only when customer unable to use self-help channels?			
How are the FJR recorded or monitored?			
Any referrals to DMAs at this stage? Main reasons why? Is training provided on referrals to DMAs?			
How much training do staff members receive on FJR?			

End of permitted period/13 week interviews

Feature	Plan	Extent & character of any variance	Reason for & effect of variance
To what extent are Permitted Work periods used? To what extent is there variation in the length of the Permitted periods?			
Is the review undertaken at 13 weeks?			
Duration of interviews?			
What happens during the interview?			
How are the interviews recorded or monitored?			
Any referrals to DMAs at this stage? Main reasons why? Is training provided on referrals to DMAs?			
How much training do staff members receive on 13 week interviews?			

Restart interview at six and 12 months (people aged 25 and over)

Feature	Plan	Extent & character of any variance	Reason for & effect of variance
Are the interviews undertaken at the right time?			
Duration of interviews?			
What happens during the interview?			
How are the interviews recorded or monitored?			
Any referrals to DMAs at this stage? Main reasons why? Is training provided on referrals to DMAs?			
How much training do staff members receive on Restart interviews?			

New Deal interventions

New Deal initial interview

Feature	Plan	Extent & character of any variance	Reason for & effect of variance
How are eligible customers identified?			
For what reason would a customer not be eligible for ND and how often does it happen? (any indication that eligible claimants are excluded by staff)			
What criteria do you operate for accessing early entry to ND? What % of customers are early entries at this office/district			
How soon after the marker appears on LMS do advisers book the initial ND interview? How soon are they actually conducted?			
Duration of interviews?			
What happens during the initial interview – Action Plan			
How is the initial interview recorded or monitored?			
Any referrals to DMAs at this stage? Main reasons why? Is training provided on referrals to DMAs?			
How much training do staff members receive on ND?			

The Gateway

Feature	Plan	Extent & character of any variance	Reason for & effect of variance
How long does the Gateway period last? Is it the same for all customers?			
<p>What help do customers receive in the Gateway? Do different groups get different provision?</p> <p>help to find jobs? help to tackle other barriers to work? careers advice and guidance? access to Gateway to work course?</p>			
What is the frequency and length of caseloading interviews?			
What determines referral to Basic Skills (within Options/ IAP) during the Gateway? Is there a set procedure?			
Are case conference interviews conducted?			
How frequently?			
At what stage do customers get referred to GtW? How many customers? What type of customer?			
How is the Gateway and GtW course monitored?			
Any referrals to DMAs at this stage? Main reasons why? Is training provided on referrals to DMAs?			

Options/IAP

Feature	Plan	Extent & character of any variance	Reason for & effect of variance
What Options are available for NDYP? Full Time Education and Training Option (FTET) Environment Task Force Option (ETF) Voluntary Sector Option (VS) Employment Option			
What is available in IAP? Basic Employability Training (BET) Self-employment support Education and Training Opportunities (ETO) Work experience/placements Work-focused training Help with soft skills Subsidised employment			
Any fifth Optioners? How are 5th Optioners treated?			
Is the Job Readiness Review undertaken at week 10/11 of the Option/IAP?			
What happens at the Follow-through stage?			
How are Options/IAP recorded or monitored?			

Any referrals to DMAs at this stage? Main reasons why? Is training provided on referrals to DMAs?			
---	--	--	--

Providers

Why do you use the providers you use?

- Good working relationship?
- Good knowledge of customer group and issues?
- All that is available?

What feedback arrangements are there for judging the quality of provision available? Do clients influence PAs about who are good or bad providers?

Are you, as an adviser/manager, allowed to decide which Option is taken, or rather is this an office or district decision?

Is there a timing issue about availability of provision so that customers are asked to start early or late on Options?

Do client numbers limit what can be purchased?

What consideration is given to ensuring provision (especially full-time training and education provision) on NDYP relates to the needs of the local economy and job vacancies?

What consideration is given to ensuring provision (especially education and training opportunities) on ND25+ relates to the needs of the local economy and job vacancies?

Alternative channels/JOT

How has the Job Outcome Target (JOT) impacted on you/your staff and their work? *On how they work with customers in directing them to jobs.*

Can you tell me what forms of alternative channels you have at this Jobcentre Plus?

At what stage are customers encouraged to use the alternative channels? Are customers happy using them? Why? Why not?

What sort of training is provided for you/staff to educate them about the alternative channels available (internally and externally)?

In your opinion is training (for staff) on alternative channels sufficient?

What are the main constraints/barriers in encouraging your staff to refer customers to alternative channel provision (internal and external factors)?

How do you monitor/record the usage of alternative channels?

Has the introduction of alternative channels improved your efficiency? How?

Do you have any examples of best practice in your office in terms of encouraging use of alternative channels?

Strengthening and refocusing of JSA

Have you heard of the strengthening and refocusing of JSA? Why do you think the regime has been strengthened and refocused?

Have there been any particular difficulties/constraints influencing the refocused regime?

Do you have the resources available to offer what the refocused regime is wanting?

- staff resources – competing priorities for staff, turnover, sickness
- staff skills/experience
- staff targets
- provider resources.

Do you think the messages about the refocusing of JSA and the messages about Job Outcome Targets (JOT) are compatible? ie in relation to submitting people for jobs.

How successful has the refocused JSA regime been?

In your opinion, what factors constrain the delivery of JSA and ND interventions?

- Staff resources – competing priorities for staff, turnover, sickness.
- Staff and management skills/experience/quality – training issues.
- Financial resources.
- Time/caseload.
- Different management priorities.
- New Deal strategy at district.
- Availability of good quality providers and provision.
- Target system.

Further support required and suggestions for improvement

Do you have any ideas about which factors might be addressed to improve JSA/ New Deal delivery in general?

Is any further support required to enable/help districts/JCPs to improve JSA/New