The use of Jobcentre Plus telephony and face-to-face first contact services by customers with specific communication barriers

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

We would like to thank a number of people for their invaluable contributions to this research project:

• all the Jobcentre Plus customers who volunteered to contribute their experiences;

• all the Jobcentre Plus staff who participated in this research;

• the stakeholder organisations that made time to talk to us;

• our research team at ECOTEC – Paul Drake, Zoey Breuer, Kate McPhillips, Lucy Winder, Natasha Calvert, Vanessa Lee and Naomi Winchurch;

• Natalie Rhodes, Phil Smith and Clare Morley at the Department for Work and Pensions.
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## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BSL</td>
<td>British Sign Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAB</td>
<td>Citizens Advice Bureau</td>
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<td>CAF</td>
<td>Call Assessment Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMS</td>
<td>Customer Management System</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSA</td>
<td>Child Support Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>DDA</td>
<td>Disability Discrimination Act</td>
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<td>DEA</td>
<td>Disability Employment Adviser</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>Disability Rights Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>DWP</td>
<td>Department for Work and Pensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFD</td>
<td>Employers’ Forum on Disability</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>English as a second or other language</td>
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<tr>
<td>FA</td>
<td>Financial Assessor</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCO</td>
<td>First Contact Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>IB</td>
<td>Incapacity Benefit</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSA</td>
<td>Jobseeker’s Allowance</td>
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<tr>
<td>LMS</td>
<td>Labour Market System</td>
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<tr>
<td>NINO</td>
<td>National Insurance number</td>
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<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>Personal Adviser</td>
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<tr>
<td>PWD</td>
<td>Person with disability</td>
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<tr>
<td>RNID</td>
<td>Royal National Institute for the Deaf</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>Short Message Service</td>
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<td>SOM</td>
<td>Standard Operating Model</td>
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Summary

Telephone Contact Centres were introduced by Jobcentre Plus in 2001 as a first point of contact for all customers wishing to make a claim for benefits, or seeking job advice. Jobcentre Plus commissioned ECOTEC to explore the potential problems of Jobcentre Plus’ telephony systems for customers with specific communication barriers. The research included customers with hearing impairments, speech impairments, learning difficulties, mental health issues and non-English speakers along with disability organisations, representative groups and Jobcentre Plus staff (from both Contact Centres and Jobcentres).

The context for this research stems from the appearance of possible problems with the first contact systems used by Jobcentre Plus that came to light in late 2005. These were set out more clearly in March 2006, when the House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee published a report which suggested that the use of telephony systems in Jobcentre Plus may cause problems for the specific customer groups included in this study. This was supported by evidence from organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Royal National Institute for the Deaf, plus other negative customer feedback. Subsequently, Jobcentre Plus commissioned this study to investigate the barriers to accessing Jobcentre Plus caused by telephony.

The main aim of the research was to investigate the barriers faced by the above groups to accessing Jobcentre Plus via Contact Centres. The research also covered specific aspects of face-to-face services within Jobcentres, particularly where individuals with communication barriers made first contact through the Jobcentre. In addition, some customers in the study group stated that they used Jobcentres because of problems caused by the Contact Centre process.

This summary draws out the principle findings and associated recommendations from the study.

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Key findings

• Some customers included in the study actively preferred to use the telephone rather than make face-to-face contact, because their communication barriers were reduced by telephone interaction.

• The research supported the Select Committee’s finding that telephone contact remained a complete or partial barrier for some customers, while others were disempowered by telephony-based systems. Telephony caused stress or anxiety and, in some cases, technical problems and call routing exacerbated existing communication barriers.

• A range of services are already available to enable customers with specific communication barriers to access Jobcentre Plus. These include use of thebigword (introduced in August 2006), textphones and British Sign Language (BSL) interpreting.

• Staff interviewed for the research were often not clear about the options in place to help the customer groups included in the study to access Jobcentre Plus, for example the use of clerical claim forms or the use of a third party.

• Staff felt that there was a lack of training and guidance on how to support customers with specific communication barriers. Access to guidance is a problem. Issues staff raised included lack of time to view guidance, being unclear about the key messages, and lack of reinforcement of the guidance by their Managers and Team Leaders. At the time of the research, no staff had received training on dealing with customers with specific communication barriers. Existing training was seen as too generic.

• Staff in Contact Centres felt that the use of a formal script increased communication problems in some cases. This was because of a lack of flexibility to adapt the script for specific individuals, the consequent inability to encourage customers’ questions, and a need to keep customers’ calls to a specific length to reach benchmark targets.

• Some First Contact Officers (FCOs) who were interviewed altered the script to make the call easier for customers with communication barriers. Other staff in the study took as long as was necessary to deal with the claim of an individual with specific communication barriers. Staff were unclear if this was an acceptable course of action or not.

• Customers who were interviewed reported that waiting for a call back caused a number of problems. These included not knowing the exact time when the call was due, which caused difficulties arranging for support to be available during the call, or not knowing if they would be able to handle the call on the day of the call back.

• Information on customers’ communication barriers was recorded inconsistently, which led to customers having to make several disclosures regarding their barriers at different stages. Often, Jobcentre staff stated that case notes for customers...
did not refer to the customer’s communication barrier, or the support they would need for future interactions. Markers on a customer’s record indicating a specific disability were too broad, and did not allow for detailed information to be recorded about the customer’s specific communication barrier.

- Third-party advocates and interpreters played a key role in supporting customers’ communication with Jobcentre Plus staff, particularly in Contact Centres. Contact Centre staff were concerned about the lack of clear guidance as to when a third party could be involved in a call, particularly because they could not verify that the customer with the communication barrier had given their consent for a third party to represent them.

- ‘Warm phones’ may be suitable for some customers with communication barriers. Some in the study preferred to make telephone contact with Jobcentre Plus using the warm phone in the Jobcentre, with support from Floorwalkers or other members of staff. However, warm phones were often inappropriate for disclosing personal information, which heightened anxiety for some customers and exacerbated difficulties such as stammering. Warm phones were not compatible with hearing aids and were not surrounded by a loop system. The line quality was also reported to be poor, making warm phones unsuitable for people with deafness or hearing impairments.

- Staff interviewed felt that not being able to identify customers’ language when English was not their first language was a barrier to using telephone interpretation.

- BSL signing provision was not always used because of accessibility, availability and variable satisfaction issues. Staff and customers interviewed were not always prepared to use the available provision and sought alternative methods such as informal signing, lip-reading, using staff with basic signing ability, and note-writing.

- Contact Centres in the study provided some technical support options, such as textphones and videophones. However, usage was low because of lack of marketing and staff training.

Conclusions and recommendations

The research identified that some customers in the study preferred to use the telephone because it allowed them to avoid the stress of visiting a Jobcentre. However, the majority of customers in the study group felt that telephony either brought about or exacerbated their communication barriers, and preferred to use face-to-face methods of contact.
There are a number of specific conclusions and recommendations relating to individual aspects of the Jobcentre Plus service:

- Guidance on alternatives to telephony claims needs to be developed and disseminated, including guidance on using clerical claim forms, third parties, informal/formal interpretation services, advocacy and textphones, to ensure that all customers receive the same level of access to services. Staff need to be allowed time to access the relevant guidance, and Managers need to signpost and reinforce key guidance.

- Greater availability of practical training for staff is needed on providing solutions for customers, and to ensure that staff have an understanding of how to help customers with communication barriers. Also, all Contact Centre staff should receive some form of training specific to dealing with communication barriers in a call-centre environment.

- Clearer guidance is needed on how staff can appropriately adapt the Contact Centre script. An easy-read\(^2\) version needs to be developed so that customers with communication barriers have the opportunity to initiate calls through Contact Centres. The script needs to be adapted to incorporate an opening statement that helps to determine customers’ communication needs. Customers should also be invited to ask for things to be repeated; the FCO to speak more slowly; to take a pause if they are anxious; or for third-party assistance.

- Different options which would allow customers with communication barriers to access Jobcentre Plus services should be marketed to those unable to use the telephone, including clerical claims and the use of face-to-face FCOs.

- Information on customers’ communication barriers needs to be effectively logged and shared within and among Contact Centres and Jobcentres, so that staff can tailor services to accommodate such barriers. This includes recording communication barriers clearly on customers’ records, and ensuring that markers on customers’ records indicating a disability are relevant and current.

- A single call is too long for some individuals with specific communication barriers. When the single call policy is rolled out nationally, breaks should be offered during the call.

- Warm phones need many improvements, including volume controls and adaptations for use in conjunction with hearing aids and loop systems. Alternatively, Jobcentre staff need briefing on the appropriateness of, and alternatives to, directing people with communication barriers to warm phones.

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\(^2\) Easy-read is a technical term used to describe documents that are written using a mixture of pictures and simple language to make them easier to understand.
1 Introduction

1.1 Background/context

The use of forms of communication that are non-face to face, particularly telephony, is now a key component of the modernisation agenda of Jobcentre Plus. Telephone Contact Centres were introduced in 2001 as a first point of contact for all customers wishing to make a claim for benefits, or seeking job advice.

Some time after the introduction of Contact Centres, a House of Commons Select Committee reported that the use of telephony was creating problems for a number of customer groups.\(^3\) Disabled people and those with English as a second or other language (ESOL) were identified as groups who may have specific communication barriers when using telephony-based systems to contact Jobcentre Plus.

In July 2006, Jobcentre Plus commissioned ECOTEC Research and Consulting to investigate the experiences and perceptions of certain groups of people for whom the use of telephony may cause problems. The aim was to understand the scale of the barriers created and the impact on customers’ access to Jobcentre Plus services, and to identify how the problems might be overcome.

The study aimed to investigate these issues, with a particular focus on people with:

- hearing impairments;
- learning difficulties;
- mental health issues;
- speech impairments; and
- non-English speakers.

Hence the following customer groups were chosen as representative of those with specific communication barriers for whom telephony might cause the most problems when contacting Jobcentre Plus:

- people with a hearing impairment, including profoundly deaf people who cannot communicate using the phone at all, and people who need additional technology to use the phone;
- people with a speech impairment, from those who use British Sign Language as their primary means of communication, through to those with communication barriers potentially exacerbated by the phone, for example people who stammer;
- people with mental health conditions, which covers a range of conditions from temporary illness or debilitation, such as stress or agoraphobia, through to long-term conditions such as bipolar disorder (manic depression);
- people with a learning difficulty/disability, usually explained as a difficulty in processing information. This can lead to communication barriers, and is classified on a spectrum from mild to severe;
- non-English speakers, who have more severe communication barriers when using the phone and may need interpretation services to communicate by phone or face to face. This group covers people with some spoken English but lacking confidence to use it on the phone, and others who wish to speak English, but whose level of ability may cause problems of understanding for the staff member and customer alike.

These groups are referred to as the study group from this point on.

The study group was specifically chosen because of the issues identified in the Select Committee’s report. The barriers explored related to issues of communication on the telephone, rather than difficulties with using phones per se. So, for example, the study did not cover individuals with dexterity problems in using telephones, or people who cannot afford to use the phone.

1.2 Research aims and objectives

The overall aim of the research was to:

‘Investigate the experiences and perceptions of people who have specific communication barriers that may cause or exacerbate difficulties contacting Jobcentre Plus via the telephone.’
The objectives of the research were to:

- assess the general views of specific disability organisations\(^4\) and disability user groups (who represent individuals who have difficulties using the telephone) on the accessibility of Jobcentre Plus for their members, who have specific needs over and above the general population;
- examine how those for whom telephony causes problems initiate contact with Jobcentre Plus and whether the contact is continued;
- investigate the Jobcentre Plus experience for individuals for whom telephony causes problems that result in their being unable to use standard contact methods;
- assess whether Jobcentre Plus processes and services are or can be sufficiently attuned to the needs of those customers with special needs, and whether they empower individuals to help themselves;
- determine how Contact Centre and Jobcentre staff presently implement the processes in place for customers who cannot use standard channels, and what future tools, processes and practices would help them to enhance this role.

1.3 Methodology

The research was divided into distinct but associated strands that were designed to address the study's aims and objectives:

- Strand 1 – Qualitative research with stakeholder organisations (September-December 2006);
- Strand 2 – Research with current benefit claimants (October-December 2006);
- Strand 3 – Research with Jobcentre Plus staff (October-December 2006).

Importantly, interviews were undertaken with Jobcentre as well as Contact Centre staff, as customers may visit Jobcentres as an alternative to using Contact Centres. This allowed an examination of the alternative services available to customers in the study group.

Fuller details of the methodology and research tools used are given in Annexes A and B.

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\(^4\) Disability organisations are groups representing the views and needs of individuals with a specific disability, such as the Royal National Institute for the Deaf.
1.4 Customer sample

The sample of customers was drawn from Jobcentre Plus databases, and included customers with records indicating:

- loss of speech, hearing, eyesight;
- memory loss, inability to concentrate, learn or understand;
- ESOL;
- use of an advocate;
- multiple disabilities;
- a mental health condition.

A sample of just over 100 benefit claimants was chosen, although the final achieved sample was 82, as 26 of the scheduled interviews did not take place. The sample included both Jobseeker’s Allowance and Incapacity Benefit customers with specific information on their claim indicating that they may have communication barriers. Customers’ experiences covered both Jobcentre Plus Contact Centres and Jobcentres.

1.5 Informed consent and confidentiality

People with disabilities, especially mental health conditions and learning difficulties, can be particularly vulnerable. Hence we were very concerned to ensure that all who took part in the research did so willingly and gave their informed consent. We wrote to all customers in the sample and invited them to participate. We also sought additional consent to proceed, and made sure that the customer understood what was taking place, at the start of the interview. The researchers were briefed in advance, and knew that interviews would be terminated at the request of the customer. In some cases, customers exercised this option. Customers were also offered support with their communication needs, such as signers and interpreters, as well as being able to have a third party attending as an advocate or a friend.

1.6 Staff sample

For the staff sample, fieldwork was conducted in eight Jobcentre Plus districts representing a mix of rural and urban areas across England, Scotland and Wales. In each area, staff were interviewed at the relevant Contact Centre and in three Jobcentre Plus offices, comprising a sample of 88 staff in total.
1.7 Report structure

This report presents the detailed evidence from all aspects of the evaluation outlined above. The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 – Communication barriers, their manifestations and possible adaptations;
- Chapter 3 – The role of Contact Centres;
- Chapter 4 – The role of Jobcentres;
- Chapter 5 – Staff training and guidance;
- Chapter 6 – Use of interpreters, signers and advocates;
- Chapter 7 – Conclusions;
- Chapter 8 – Recommendations.
2 Communication barriers and their manifestations: stakeholders’ views

This chapter details the most common communication barriers experienced by customers when dealing with Jobcentre Plus services, and how these are manifested within a telephony environment. It must be stressed that the research focused specifically on telephony issues, and did not look at more general issues.

2.1 Summary of barriers

When analysed together, the three strands of research identified the following types of communication barrier for the study group:

• **Customers with a complete barrier to telephony.** For these customers, such as those with hearing impairment or no English language, telephones were not an option, and customers could not make primary contact themselves.

• **Customers with a partial barrier to telephony.** The telephone exacerbated the communication barriers of these customers. This included people with difficulties in understanding which were increased by a lack of non-verbal clues, and by accents.

• **Customers who were disempowered by the telephone.** This barrier included situations where an advocate or family member had to intervene for customers who would have preferred to act on their own behalf, but were only able to do so in face-to-face interactions.

• **Customers for whom the telephone caused additional stress, paranoia or anxiety.** For some customers, telephony affected or triggered their mental health condition and made their communication barrier worse.
• **Customers for whom the telephone highlighted technical problems with Jobcentre Plus services.** These included customers who struggled with the poor sound quality on ‘warm phones’ in Jobcentres, the lack of loop systems and volume controls, and background noise in the Contact Centres and Jobcentres (when using the warm phone).

• **Customers for whom Contact Centre operational models and systems created barriers.** This included use of the formal script, which customers found difficult to follow or understand.

• **Customers for whom barriers were caused by staff’s lack of understanding of disability.** Staff’s inability to judge the nature of a ‘presenting’ problem often led to inappropriate interventions. Some staff reacted in ways that customers considered offensive.

• **Customers for whom the telephone system caused or increased confusion.** For customers with number dyslexia, for example, call routing was problematic. For people with short-term memory difficulties, remembering elements of previous conversations was a problem in longer telephone conversations and for call backs.

• **Customers for whom the telephone system increased the likelihood of misunderstanding by Contact Centre staff.** There was the potential to enter incorrect information about customers, as a result of customers’ poor communication and staff misunderstanding or mishearing elements of the conversation.

2.2 Determining the views of stakeholders

The first strand of research focused on exploring the views of disability organisations, organisations representing non-English speakers, and the Citizens’ Advice Bureau. *These groups are referred to as stakeholders from here on.* The aim of this strand was to assess the relative scale and nature of the problems from the perspective of stakeholders, and to explore:

• the extent of the problems caused to individuals by telephony;

• how reliant individuals are on carers and/or disability groups for support when contacting Jobcentre Plus;

• solutions that individuals have been known to use.

This strand was designed to enable the second and third phases of the research to focus on specific issues for people with different types of communication barrier.

The research initially focused on interviewing representatives of national organisations to gain a broad view of the issues and communication barriers faced by customers with each of the different types of disability/communication needs covered by the study. However, at the time of the research it was not possible to source a national organisation that could adequately represent non-English
speakers. This chapter therefore deals with communication barriers stemming from disabilities rather than language barriers. We were also unable to secure the involvement of any disability user groups in the study. All of those sourced and contacted did not feel able to participate in the study. More detail on this can be found in Annex A.

Each of the organisations involved in Strand 1 represented and promoted the interests of a distinct client group. They all worked at national level, through campaigning and policy advocacy for their client group, or at a local delivery centre. The nature of each of the organisations and their respective client groups are detailed in Annex A.

2.3 What communication needs did stakeholders describe?

The stakeholders interviewed outlined the wide-ranging needs and circumstances of their service users. Some outlined specific problems for customers in using Jobcentre Plus, while others discussed wider issues of disadvantage, communication, empowerment and adaptations to services required for their user groups. Stakeholders provided information mainly on the manifestations of some of the more common forms of disability and the adaptations needed and used in each case. These are drawn out in the recommendations section.

Stakeholders described the range of barriers that disabled people (including those with disabilities not included in the study group) experience as being complex and diverse, with numerous differences in how disabilities are manifested.

‘We’ve got so many vast, different needs across the board that you will find different people, what works for each one will work differently for the other.’

(Carers UK)

Stakeholders that were interviewed emphasised that Jobcentre Plus staff need a very sensitive approach in order to recognise the barriers within a telephony-based system, and then promote appropriate alternatives to enable individuals to access their services. The nature of the task that staff must undertake on behalf of Jobcentre Plus is to pick up on the communication barriers experienced by each customer, then be flexible enough to offer a range of potential adaptations depending on the customer’s needs.

‘Everybody’s experience of a condition is going to be different really and so it’s about just there being some options and not having a “one size fits all” approach.’

(ReThink)

The stakeholder organisations interviewed suggested that telephony causes a number of barriers to effective communication, and that the lack of non-verbal
cues is central to the disadvantage that some people with communication barriers face when using the telephone. Communication barriers caused by a disability can manifest themselves in many different ways. Identifying the cause of presenting problems, such as hesitancy, aggression, confusion or speech slurring, is difficult.

Hence stakeholders thought that people with disabilities would frequently struggle to communicate or understand the claims process without being able to see Jobcentre staff or have any non-verbal modes of expression to support communication.

‘For some people I think it is quite difficult because they cannot really see what is happening on the other end [of the telephone].’

(Carers UK)

The length of phone calls required to make an initial claim and then complete the call back was another concern. Stakeholders regarded 45 minutes as too long for the majority of customers with communication barriers to cope with comfortably.

‘Forty-five minutes is far too long so they may not remember at all what was said at the beginning. After forty-five minutes of concentrating they’re really, really tired.’

(Speakability)

2.3.3  **Telephony issues for customers with a hearing impairment**

Profoundly deaf people clearly cannot communicate using the telephone, but stakeholders suggested that other hearing-impaired people also need additional technology to use the phone.

2.3.3.1  **Relaying information through interpreters**

Profoundly deaf customers might require British Sign Language (BSL) signers, who can act as relay interpreters in a telephone conversation. However, stakeholders suggested that face-to-face meetings would often be more appropriate for anyone with a need for an interpreter, since three-way telephone conversations are long and tiring. Relay interpretation for telephone conversations also disempowers customers by excluding them from direct contact with Jobcentre Plus staff. To enable direct interpretation, customer and signer would always require a face-to-face service.

2.3.3.2  **Reliance on third parties**

The Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) stated that an estimated one in seven people suffer from a hearing impairment, ranging from mild hearing loss through to total deafness. As this client group is highly likely to be unable to use the telephone independently to communicate, many people with hearing impairments rely on third-party intervention to use the phone. Stakeholders that were interviewed reported variable attitudes to the authority of the third party.
'The deaf person might actually have to use a third person, whether that's a relay interpreter or an interpreter that they've got in front of them. One of the bigger issues actually has been the attitude of the person on the other end of the phone.'

(RNID)

2.3.3.3 Lack of use of available technologies

Alternatives such as textphones, which would represent a preferred solution for some people, were described by stakeholders that were interviewed as theoretically available but rarely appropriate or accessible in practice. This view was supported by research conducted with Jobcentre Plus staff.

‘The telephone service is not actually that accessible at all with people not understanding that this is a Type Talk call and how it works, or that the text machine for example is constantly on answer phone rather than being picked up and with direct responses.’

(RNID)

2.3.3.4 More ability to communicate face to face

Face-to-face meetings represent a more ‘natural’ option for first contact for customers with a hearing impairment. Stakeholders in the study stated that this was the most preferable and common alternative for people with hearing impairments to adopt. Face-to-face meetings offer the option of some written communication as well as visual clues to help the customer to understand the process.

‘The walk-in service [is preferred] because at least then the client [customer] would say that they could do a little bit of note-swapping. There may even be somebody there that’s deaf aware and has some sign language skills.’

(RNID)

2.3.4 Issues for customers with a speech impairment

This section covers people who sign because they cannot verbalise at all, through to people with communication barriers that are made worse by the telephone (e.g. stammering).

2.3.4.1 Language barriers and use of technology

People with a profound speech impairment do not use the spoken word at all, and may well not know English as a language. In this sense they face similar barriers to non-English-speaking customers who need an interpreter. However, as with hearing impairment, telephone interpretation services rely on a relay system, where the person without speech communicates with the interpreter, who then speaks to Jobcentre Plus staff. Minicom services are generally unhelpful because they require a grasp of written English, which again is something that customers in many cases do not possess. People who have no articulation of speech may well also be deaf, doubling the barrier.
2.3.4.2 Stress during phone calls

The British Stammering Association representative stated that the telephone is one of the most stressful of communication tools for people who stammer. A person who stammers may not do so in face-to-face communication, but the stress of the telephone adversely affects their ability to speak. Using the telephone would thus disadvantage them over someone who did not stammer.

2.3.4.3 Misinterpretation by Jobcentre Plus staff

Some speech impairments are not necessarily obvious when speaking over the telephone and can result in misinterpretation:

‘They may be slurring their speech, they may be missing words…and people automatically think they’re drunk or on drugs or stupid.’

(Speakability)

Many people with speech impediments struggle to use the telephone, as they find the prospect of communicating without any non-verbal signs a daunting experience. It is also very difficult for staff to understand the customer.

‘Trying to have a conversation with somebody over the phone when you haven’t got any visual clues. They know what they want, they’re ringing up for something, but it’s very difficult if you’re not trained to actually get that information and very time consuming.’

(Speakability)

2.3.5 Issues for customers with mental health problems

2.3.5.1 Barriers varying in time

Mental health difficulties cover a whole range of conditions from temporary through to longer term, and take many forms. Many conditions are both temporary and fluctuating in severity, which means that individuals may have barriers at one point in time but not at another. For example, people with paranoia may find the telephone very problematic, but perhaps only on a spasmodic basis.

2.3.5.2 Individuals not knowing how much of a barrier they face

MIND suggested that some of the more common and often short-term expressions of mental distress, such as anxiety and depression, allow familiarity with the terms to lead tounderestimating how severe and incapacitating these conditions can be.

Psychological barriers preventing individuals from using the phone

For some people with mental health problems, using the telephone was described as a terrifying experience that can cause confusion and stress, especially for those who have had specific experiences of hearing delusional voices.
'Especially [for those] who...have heard voices, telephones can be extremely difficult for people and there’s a couple of issues. If somebody is currently hearing voices obviously it’s then difficult to speak on the phone with somebody else, but also if they have done so in the past then that could be a very scary experience to hear a voice that seems to be coming out of nowhere, that can sort of just bring back memories that people don’t really want.’

(ReThink)

However, it is important to remember that conditions like schizophrenia may only occur at certain times, meaning that individuals’ psychological barriers also vary in time. This is supported by the following finding.

2.3.5.3  Telephony being helpful for some conditions

There are a number of more severe and longer-term mental health conditions, including bipolar disorder (manic depression). The symptoms of these conditions vary considerably, and stakeholders suggested that at certain times some people with such conditions actually prefer to use the telephone rather than have face-to-face contact. The important point is that use of the telephone can reduce or increase anxiety, depending on the circumstances of each individual at a given time.

2.3.6  Issues for customers with learning disabilities and difficulties

People with a learning disability have certain limitations on their ability to think, or an impairment of intellectual ability. This can range in severity from hardly noticeable through to severe. Some learning disabilities are well known and easily recognised, such as Down’s syndrome. Others are more difficult to diagnose or recognise for untrained people.

Learning difficulties affect different people in different ways. For example, dysphraxia and dyslexia are communication disabilities affecting speaking, understanding and/or reading and writing.

2.3.6.1  Communication needs not always being clear

The communication needs of people with learning difficulties are not always outwardly perceptible, and Jobcentre staff may not be able to identify the cause or extent of their communication barriers. This can cause problems and further stress for both customers and Jobcentre Plus staff.

‘They [customers with learning difficulties] find it difficult to take on board and then when they need to relay it it’s all mixed up. They would pick out bits and a lot of the time it’s not times and places, it’ll be what’s happening... they’ve remembered a small section of the information and it’s retaining that information and relaying it back.’

(Home Farm Trust)
2.3.6.2 Concentration and understanding possibly being limited

Customers in this group would be likely to find long scripts and questions difficult to manage. Long conversations are particularly difficult, as intense and extensive periods of concentration leave them tired and confused. Stakeholders that were interviewed reported that face-to-face meetings were therefore a preferred solution, as customers could take advocates and be able to have information written down to help them process it.

2.3.7 Issues for non-English speakers

Although no organisations in this strand of research solely represented non-English speakers, the majority of stakeholders had direct experience of supporting this target group within their own user group. Telephony clearly exacerbated communication barriers for non-English speakers.

2.3.7.1 Three-way interpretation

It was suggested that face-to-face meetings were more appropriate for people who required an interpreter, as a three-way conversation on the telephone was felt to be long and tiring.

‘There’s quite a lot of people with mental illness who also have English as their second language and trying to get an interpreter on the phone is getting far harder…it’s far harder to have that three-way conversation by telephone than it would be in the office.’

(ReThink)

2.4 Self-identity of disabled people

Stakeholders interviewed pointed out that service providers such as Jobcentre Plus should be aware that the identification of communication barriers touches on a very sensitive area, namely self-identity. Customers have to decide whether to discuss their communication barrier and its cause with someone – a stranger – on the phone. Choosing to self-identify as disabled, and in what way, relates to personal choice, and approaches to this can be quite subjective.

Stakeholders suggested that many people have difficulty in openly expressing and vocalising their disability, because of their fear of the consequences of self-identification as disabled, disquiet with labelling, or because their personal choice is to see the aspects of themselves that are able. Therefore, it could potentially be very challenging for Jobcentre Plus staff to try to determine, identify and work around a customer’s disability from the outset without offending or interfering with the customer’s personal choices and feelings on this matter.

‘Jobcentre Plus expect people to pick up the phone and say, “hello, my name is blah, blah, blah and I’ve got a mental health problem, I need some adjustments, help me”. And for the most part people with mental health problems are very unlikely to do that.’

(ReThink)
This central issue of identity has helped in the framing of this report’s recommendations. It should be kept in mind throughout the remainder of the report, alongside the other barriers associated with the various disabilities and language difficulties outlined above.

2.5 Stakeholders’ experience of local initiatives on aids and adaptations

Some stakeholders outlined a number of interventions that Jobcentres were already using for alternative communication methods at local level. Examples of these were:

- links with local interpretation/translation organisations;
- Disability Employment Advisers’ (DEAs) use of text messages and/or e-mail to communicate with deaf customers.

These locally developed interventions tended to rely on individual members of staff taking the initiative rather than being championed by national Jobcentre Plus policy. It was not clear whether they would be robust enough to withstand a change of personnel, or the system going virtual.

The role of DEAs was central to the implementation of a number of alternatives such as local networking. Making the most of these local initiatives centred on Jobcentres rather than Contact Centres.

Citizens Advice had a great deal of knowledge and expertise on customers’ communication barriers and solutions that could help to overcome these barriers. Some Jobcentres had developed mutually beneficial relationships with Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABs) at local level. CABs in the study reported the following advantages of initiatives like those listed above – for themselves, Jobcentres and customers:

- Citizens Advice being informed about the barriers faced by different groups;
- Jobcentres being better able to inform CABs about procedural solutions and the design of services;
- established links to local translation and interpretation service providers enabling Jobcentres to put adjustments in place efficiently;
- Jobcentre staff being better able to refer customers to the most suitable support provider for their requirements;
- customers receiving a more accessible service.

However, the CABs interviewed were also clear that since the introduction of telephony-based services, their role in relation to representing people with communication barriers has increased. They wanted their contribution to be more clearly recognised at national level.
At the same time, while it is important to commend local initiatives that have been developed to address communication barriers, there are instances when local initiatives have not been accepted at national level. One such example was a CAB that gained the cooperation of the local Jobcentre in offering clerical claim forms to customers who could not use the phone. However, the benefit processing element of the system would not accept the clerically completed forms. This example demonstrates the importance for Jobcentres to consider the best way to share the learning from locally developed initiatives and ensure that a systemic approach to accessibility is taken.

2.4.1 Video interpretation

One Jobcentre visited as part of the research had a unit that was able to provide a video link to BSL interpreters for deaf customers using the Jobcentre. The service took limited time to arrange and could avoid having to wait for a face-to-face sign language interpreter. However, it had not been used for a couple of years and the staff interviewed had no current knowledge or awareness of how the service or the equipment worked. The video service was not marketed or promoted to customers.
3 The role of Contact Centres

This chapter outlines the impact of using the Contact Centre telephony-based system with customers who have communication barriers. The advantages and disadvantages of the Standard Operating Model (SOM), management systems and current adaptations are described from a staff and a customer perspective. The chapter also indicates the interventions used to help facilitate communication between Contact Centres and customers for whom telephony creates a barrier. The findings are based on qualitative research conducted with Contact Centre staff and customers in the eight fieldwork areas.

It must be stressed that some of the views on telephony systems in general are likely to be shared by Jobcentre Plus customers who do not experience the same barriers as the study group. However, stakeholders, and in some cases interviewees from the study group, felt that problems with the telephony systems were exacerbated because of the communication barriers they faced.

Key findings

- **The script** – staff stated that they had to adhere to the script and did not encourage customers’ questions. However, some First Contact Officers (FCOs) who were interviewed altered the script to make the call easier for customers with communication barriers. In general, where staff adjusted the structure of calls to accommodate communication barriers, customers felt that their barriers were accepted and the call made as easy as possible by staff.

- **Quality assurance** – staff in the study felt that they had to keep to a specific call length because of the way their performance is measured. When dealing with a call from a customer with a communication barrier, they felt that this was inappropriate because they could not spend enough time dealing with the customer.

- **Passing on and recording information on customers’ barriers** – it was important for both staff and customers to pass on information on barriers to
other Contact Centre or Jobcentre staff who would interact with the same customer. No consistent method for recording such information was mentioned in any of the Contact Centres involved in this research.

3.1 The Contact Centre operational model and systems

3.1.1 The Contact Centre’s role in the claiming process

The Contact Centre is intended to be a customer’s first point of call when making a new or repeat claim for benefit. FCOs are the telephone operators who deal with calls from and to the general public, gather data in relation to individuals’ claims, and enter information onto the Jobcentre Plus database, the Customer Management System (CMS). At the time of the research, customer information was collected over two telephone calls:

- An ‘inbound’ call, made by a customer. During this call, the FCO would collect basic information on the customer’s name, address, National Insurance number and brief details to allow the FCO to identify the benefit to be claimed.

- At the end of the inbound call, the FCO would book a second, ‘outbound’ call or ‘call back’ at a mutually convenient time within 24 hours. The outbound call would generally be made by another FCO in the same Contact Centre. During this call, detailed information pertaining to the claim would be collected.

Since the research took place, the nationwide introduction of an adjusted SOM has changed how Contact Centres deliver their telephony-based services. Under the new model, customers have a freephone number to use to call the Contact Centre. This enables FCOs to complete all the necessary data-gathering in a single phone call without any cost implications for the customer. There is provision for mini-breaks to assist customers who need to locate the required documentation and/or are unable to concentrate for that length of time. Call backs will continue for those customers who request them. Although this process had not been introduced at the time of the fieldwork, we have borne these changes in mind as we make recommendations. The findings therefore reflect views and experiences that occurred using the inbound/outbound system, not the single call system.

3.1.2 Role of the First Contact Officer

The FCOs interviewed for this study were assigned to either the inbound or outbound team each day, but worked on both teams over time. None of the FCOs specialised in handling specific types of call, such as those with customers experiencing communication barriers, and those with customers needing third-party representation (e.g. interpreters, formal/informal advocates). FCOs thus needed to be able to deal with diverse communication barriers and the various ways in which these were manifested. The research explored the extent to which FCOs were able to adapt their style and manner to accommodate customers’ different communication barriers.
3.1.3 The script

The script was at the centre of the First Contact operational model. The script provided a structure for the interaction with the customer through both inbound and outbound calls, ensured that all necessary claim information was recorded, and made sure that Contact Centres provided consistency of service. Contact Centre management and FCOs clearly and routinely reinforced the need to adhere to the script.

The Call Assessment Framework (CAF), used by Team Leaders to assess quality assurance, put additional pressure on staff to adhere to the script. FCOs were monitored on their level of adherence to the script, among other things. FCO and customer interviewees consistently perceived that the script caused problems for the customer groups in this study.

Staff and customers’ main points regarding the script and its effect on communication barriers were as follows:

• **The formality of the script made it difficult to understand the questions.**

  Some of the staff interviewed described the script as ‘impersonal’ and ‘badly worded’. Customers in the study group reported that they found the questions difficult to understand, creating a barrier throughout the call.

• **Individual adaptations to the script enabled staff to provide better customer service.**

  Adaptations to the script made the interaction more personal and helped staff to build rapport and answer any customer queries. Staff also felt that adaptations enabled them to explain the need for certain questions, and put the telephone call into context.

• **The script led the content of the interview, causing confusion for customers in the study group.**

  Customers interviewed routinely indicated that the content of the script led the interview, rather than their level of understanding and ability. Some customers were confused and anxious because they did not understand what would be discussed during the call, what would happen next, and where they were in the process as a whole.

• **The script led the timing of the interview, not the customer being able to answer questions.**

  Customers participating in the research typically thought that the pace at which FCOs spoke and worked through the script was too fast and did not allow for any interaction or questions, and that the telephone call was driven by the need to complete the claim form as quickly as possible. Some customers who were interviewed said that they felt that the FCO was not listening to their responses, and was just ticking boxes and reading the next question. These customers cited
examples of FCOs talking over them to ask the next question. Typically, where customers were pre-occupied with their unanswered questions, they reported being less able to concentrate on the questions that followed.

3.1.4 Transfer of customer information

Once a customer’s communication needs were identified by an FCO, it was important for both staff and customer to pass this information on to other Contact Centre or Jobcentre staff who would interact with the same customer. No consistent method for recording such information was mentioned in any of the Contact Centres involved in this research, leading to complaints from some Jobcentres about poor communication by Contact Centres.

Staff described using a variety of means to record information, including:

- case notes on the Labour Market System (LMS);
- call logs;
- CMS;
- updating person with disability markers following the disability question in the script;
- e-mails and informal conversations.

The FCOs interviewed had a number of concerns about the usefulness of LMS case notes (where used), including that:

- the information provided could be too brief;
- information on communication barriers was not ‘upfront’;
- some FCOs purposely recorded as little information as possible because of apprehension about the Freedom of Information and Data Protection Acts – this links to the points made in Chapter 5 (Section 5.2) about the need for clear guidance for staff when dealing with customers in the study group;
- the notes area has limited space available, leading to information on communication barriers being automatically removed during the claim process.

Other FCOs highlighted shortfalls with other LMS marker categories:

- Disability categories are too general and wide-ranging; one marker covers three disabilities with manifestations that need to be accommodated through quite different communication methods.
- The learning disability marker does not include any method for recording severity.
- There are no specific markers for recording customers’ communication barriers (such as anxiety or nervousness) that affect telephone communication, other than their English language needs.
3.1.5 Quality assurance – implementation and effects

Team Leaders are responsible for ensuring the quality of the contact between a customer and an FCO. They use the CAF to ensure that FCOs follow the correct procedures, adhere to the script, deliver a service of a sufficiently high standard, and reach their benchmark for calls.

The main issue raised by the Contact Centre delivery staff that were interviewed was the effect on the study group of the quality assurance focus on call lengths and adherence to the script.

‘Managers think that customer service is just how quick you can answer that phone and how many calls you drop. Not the service you’re actually giving to that customer.’

(Team Leader)

‘I’d rather them understand what I’m saying than have full marks on my CAF, to be honest. I would rather adapt it for the customer than score 100 per cent.’

(FCO)

3.1.6 Benchmarks

Benchmarks are the ideal number of calls and call lengths that Contact Centre Managers ask FCOs to aim for each day. Benchmarks for expected call lengths and numbers of successful calls completed per day differed across the Contact Centres visited.

Benchmarks had the potential to increase barriers because staff that were interviewed felt unable to give the extra time needed to customers from the study group who needed it. Staff considered that calls with customers from the study group could take up to twice the time of an average call.

The differences in Contact Centres’ attitudes to expected call lengths and benchmarks were clearly evident in delivery staff’s attitudes to benchmarks and quality assurance in each of the Contact Centres visited. Staff – both management and FCOs – had two differing viewpoints on benchmarks, which affected how they dealt with customers from the study group:

• **Stipulated benchmarks for calls per FCO must be kept in mind but were not imperative.** Staff in these offices relied on the nature of office-wide call patterns and the variety of call lengths to enable the office as a whole to reach the benchmarks. They were not overly concerned with any personal or office-wide consequences of not reaching their benchmarks.

• **It was imperative to reach the stated benchmark number of calls each day.** Staff in these offices reported being told that failure to achieve their benchmarks would result in FCOs not receiving a good report at the end of the year, and the Contact Centre Manager being made to answer for the comparatively poor performance of their office. Staff in these offices were concerned with both personal and office-wide consequences of not reaching their benchmarks.
3.2 Staff and customer perceptions of the telephone claims process

The following sections review the study group’s perceptions of the phone-based services of Jobcentre Plus.

3.2.1 The telephone as preferred communication method

For some customers within the sample – such as those suffering from agoraphobia or multiple disabilities, or some of those with mental health problems – the telephone was their preferred method of communication. They welcomed the introduction of telephony-based services by Jobcentre Plus. These customers valued the fact that they could deal with their benefit claim from their own home and did not have to make a personal visit to a Jobcentre, a trip which they found particularly stressful. Being in their own homes was particularly important for the longer or second call. These customers mentioned that they felt more relaxed, could sit in comfort, could spread all their documents around them, and in some cases felt less pressured and more in control of the situation.

‘I think it’s easier than sitting in a place for 45 minutes and doing it. I’d rather be in my own home dealing with it.’

(Male customer)

There were also customers who became nervous around other people, especially in formal and sometimes busy or noisy environments like a Jobcentre. These customers too found that calling from home was a positive way of avoiding this stress trigger, which was greatly appreciated.

‘I find it easier by telephone to talk to them than go in there because I’ve got learning difficulties and you see, when you walk in there, I get really frightened.’

(Female customer)

‘I didn’t like the old system. The old system used to really scare me a lot having to walk in there every time and see all these people and that.’

(Female customer)

3.2.2 Communication barriers highlighted by customer interviews

Customers interviewed described the communication difficulties that telephony systems caused them (both in general and specifically with Jobcentre Plus), and how their disabilities manifested themselves on the telephone. These difficulties are summarised below.

3.2.2.1 Customers not being able to articulate their communication needs

While customers’ communication barriers looked to be clearly defined in our original objectives and sample data, customers in the study group would often describe their condition rather than name a specific barrier. This issue of articulation could
be exacerbated over the telephone. Customers taking part in the research reported, or were observed during the research interview, being unable to articulate the nature of their specific communication barrier, its manifestations or what would help them to communicate better. Disability organisations also highlighted this lack of ability to articulate communication needs as increasing communication barriers.

3.2.2.2 Poor communicators

For some customers interviewed, the actual pressure of making the call and the accompanying build-up of anxiety worsened the presentation of their communication difficulty (such as a stammer or poor memory, concentration, listening or processing skills), which would otherwise be much less apparent. This affected their tone of voice and delivery, which could seem quite sharp, nervous or uncommunicative.

Customers in the study who reported that they could become silent or withdrawn were aware that there was no visual or verbal indication to show that they were struggling. These customers were often aware that their responses could be misconstrued as being deliberately evasive, and that this may have led to a cycle of poor communication on a number of occasions. Some of these customers were aware that their own difficulties made the FCO’s job harder. This awareness increased their unease and they felt less able to request support, for example by asking the FCO to slow down.

3.2.2.3 Call routing

Call routing via numbered options caused confusion for some customers in the study group, especially those with learning difficulties or number dyslexia. The difficulty of concentrating on and understanding the options, remembering each of them, and then making a decision within the time allowed caused problems for some customers in the study group. In some cases, customers reported calling repeatedly in order to hear the options and be sure about which one to choose. Customers sometimes abandoned the call.

Some of these customers also highlighted that although they initially experienced real problems in navigating the system, they became used to it and were able to operate it without any problems as a result of increased experience and confidence. This increased confidence suggests that for some customers repeated use of the system would not continue to exacerbate their communication barriers.

3.2.2.4 Timing of the call

Customers interviewed for this study described how they would choose a ‘good’ time to call, and how they needed this level of control about when the call took place. This need for control was part of the reason why some callers did not ask for or accept the offer of a call back to reduce the cost of the call. To some extent, the introduction of the revised SOM will make the telephony-based service a simpler process for these customers.
3.2.2.5 Waiting for the call to be answered

For some customers interviewed, waiting for the phone to be answered increased their tension and anxiety. These callers were more likely to abandon their call during this waiting period, so by the time they spoke to an FCO they might have made several call attempts. In some cases, customers chose to wait until another day to make any further call attempts, because of their anxiety levels. Although the waiting would be the same for the general population, it was evident that it exacerbated the communication barriers for customers in the study group.

3.2.2.6 Concentration, confusion and memory loss

Various factors, including call length and the need to take medication, could lead some customers in the study group to feel confused, struggle to remember things or concentrate during an extended phone call.

For some customers, the length of the call was the main barrier leading to poor concentration. They reported being unable to listen as intently or provide well-thought-out answers. Third-party supporters who were interviewed provided examples of customers who were easily led or had mistakenly provided incorrect information as a result of the length of the call.

Medication affected the concentration of other customers. They reported needing to take their medication in order to feel able to make the call. This then affected their ability to concentrate, take in information and process answers at the speed required. Some of these customers had felt so confused and/or anxious that they abandoned the call and phoned back at another time. In these instances, the interview started from the beginning again rather than continuing from the point at which it was terminated.

Some customers with memory difficulties reported that they took notes during all conversations. This was essential for them to remember appointments or evidence required, and also served as a personal record of the information given. Within this group, some found it difficult to take notes during the call with the FCO, as the interview and note-taking were competing for their attention. The need to multi-task at the required pace resulted in these customers becoming confused, not understanding questions, or forgetting items that should have been mentioned.

3.2.2.7 Potential to cut the call

Customers in the study group reported that they had routinely viewed abandoning the call to the Contact Centre as the easy option. They described their feelings during the telephone call with the FCO as distressed, frustrated, confused and, for some, angry. There were also instances where customers reported that their questioning or tone of voice had been misinterpreted as aggression or being too persistent in trying to ask questions, and that the FCO had threatened to terminate the call, doing so in one case. These customers generally believed that this would not happen in a face-to-face situation.
Customers’ apparent short temper was reported as impacting poorly on the conversation and was met with negativity from the FCO. Customers from this study readily acknowledged that their communication needs could easily be perceived as rudeness, because there was no personal connection and no visual cues. Some customers explained that they were angry that they could not understand the questions, not at the individual FCO, but many appreciated that it was difficult for FCOs to make this distinction.

3.2.2.8 Language ability

There were customers in the study who did not speak English as their first language who did not recognise their difficulties in communicating in English and refused the interpreter support offered by Jobcentre Plus.

Equally, some customers with learning difficulties and mental health problems stated that they were able to provide information, articulate or keep up with the interview. However, during the research interview it was clear that some of them struggled to express themselves and to respond to the questions.

3.2.2.9 Confidentiality

Customers reported sometimes being able to hear other FCOs repeating customers’ responses in the background while they were on the phone. This increased some customers’ paranoia and anxiety, reduced the likelihood of disclosure and made the caller more inhibited.

3.2.2.10 Automated voice

A recurrent customer view was that the automated voice at the beginning of the call set the tone for the interaction with the FCO. Customers reported finding the automated voice impersonal. For some, it increased their apprehension and anxiety that the call would be intimidating.

3.2.3 Staff awareness of customers’ communication barriers

Partway through the telephone call, the script asks customers about any disabilities they may have that impede on their daily activities. First Contact Officers reported that this was the point at which they learned of any communication barriers, other than English not being the customer’s first language. Customers interviewed for this research described a variety of responses to this disclosure and how it made them feel:

- If the FCO acknowledged and accommodated their disclosure, customers were appreciative.
- If there was no change in the way the call was handled, customers felt that the FCO was insensitive to their needs.
- If a customer directly requested more sensitive communication and the FCO did not respond, this created a barrier in the discussion as the customer’s needs were left unacknowledged.
3.2.3.1 Timing of disclosure exacerbating communication barriers

A big issue in the study was the point at which the disclosure of barriers took place during the phone call. At present, unless the customer volunteers this information, the question about communication barriers does not appear until a long way through the script. A consistent theme among customers taking part in the study was that they struggled through interviews if the FCO did not ask if they needed any help or had any communication difficulties.

Contact Centre staff and customers in the study described how proactive questioning of callers about their communication needs happened only in exceptional circumstances. Customers routinely stated that they would respond positively and find it reassuring if the FCO asked them if they required any additional communication support, or checked that they were able to keep up with the pace of the interview.

3.2.3.2 Issues with levels of self-disclosure of communication barriers

Self-disclosure of barriers is an issue that individuals treat with differing degrees of acceptance or willingness, as discussed in Chapter 2.

If customers disclosed their communication barriers, then staff often adjusted their behaviours during the call. However, some customers in the study group saw self-disclosure as being disempowering, and it was not something they were willing to do, especially over the phone.

Customers’ views on the level of disclosure they were comfortable with varied:

- Customers routinely assumed that FCOs knew that the script was difficult for them to follow, or thought that FCOs would notice that they were struggling.

- Some customers were uncomfortable with naming their disability or describing the symptoms and effects of it or their communication barrier. They tended to provide minimal information, in the belief that this was sufficient for the FCO to act on.

- There were examples of customers who believed that FCOs would perceive disclosure as seeking sympathy, and so did not volunteer any information.

- For some customers who could hear other FCOs’ discussions with customers, this increased their reluctance to disclose personal information.

- Some customers preferred the increased privacy of the phone and would only disclose information over the telephone.
3.2.4 Staff accommodation of customers’ communication needs

The following communication support is available to customers within the existing system:

- language interpretation – thebigword, informal interpretation by third parties;
- mini-breaks during the outbound call;
- third-party support/advocacy;
- availability of textphones/minicomms;
- referral to face-to-face FCOs in Jobcentres;
- sending clerical claim forms in the post.

Provision of these official support options varied across the fieldwork areas. Attitudes and approaches to accommodating customers’ communication needs also varied, usually because of different call volumes within Contact Centres creating different time pressures on each call. Contact Centres with lower call volumes generally reported placing greater emphasis on customer service. They appeared to be more accommodating of communication needs and had various locally devised solutions to assist customers with their telephone calls. The busier Contact Centres, with higher call volumes, were seemingly more concerned with benchmark call lengths and call waiting times.

In one Contact Centre, the Manager was aware that the Jobcentre Plus focus on a telephony-based system caused communication barriers for some customers, and sympathised with them. However, this Manager also recognised that Jobcentre Plus policy encouraged staff to promote the use of the telephone to communicate with customers wherever possible:

‘I don’t think there’s a will personally to promote alternative means of contact because the business case is that the majority of our customers will come through the telephony routes and it should be the exception rather than the rule.’

(Contact Centre Manager)

3.2.4.1 Recent policy changes to communication support

Before this research started, policy changes on the availability of different types of communication support had been made, and had been the subject of intranet guidance that had been disseminated. However, interviews with Contact Centre staff highlighted that Managers had not promoted the use of such support to their staff.

The most recent guidance highlighted the policy of referring customers to face-to-face FCOs in Jobcentres and the supply of clerical claim forms in the post. The lack of promotion of these changes by Managers was reflected in the fact that FCOs reported using these support options the least.
Some FCOs stated that they did not use face-to-face referrals because they believed that Jobcentres did not like them. They did not mention this support option to customers, who were unaware that it existed. In one office, one FCO was particularly unsympathetic to customers’ communication needs and evidently did not offer clerical claim forms or face-to-face FCO referrals:

“Well if the customer comes through and informs me they’re not very good on the phone, they say they have anxiety problems, [I] just inform them of the process we’re going to have to follow, [and] there are strict guidelines. So you tell them this is what’s going to happen, there’s no leeway to it, you’re doing this or you’re not going to be able to claim your benefit.”

(FCO)

In another office, an FCO stated that they only issued clerical claim forms when customers or third parties demanded them:

‘Not very often…only if for instance the support worker [is] quite forceful and adamant they want the clerical forms would we issue clerical forms.’

(FCO)

These were isolated cases, but they demonstrate that knowledge of the correct processes was, at the time of the research, not universal among staff.

3.2.5 Good practice in communication support

Although in some instances the correct processes were not being followed, there was also evidence that the Contact Centres visited had developed various means of providing communication support to those who needed it.

In addition to the support provision within the system highlighted above, staff awareness and/or assistance included the following:

- customers with speech impediments – not completing customers’ sentences;
- customers with hearing impairments – speaking louder;
- customers with learning difficulties – taking longer to explain questions to them;
- adaptation of the script – in some Contact Centres, FCOs routinely rephrased the script and used easier language;
- staggered, ‘bite-sized’ interviews – completed in one day or over a period of time;
- a member of the team arranging specific times for calls – to advocates, warm phones, for customers doing school runs, and for customers with health problems and many appointments to keep;
- staff holding case files and completing both the inbound and outbound calls, to assist in continuity of case handling when time had been taken to build a rapport with the customer;
• completion of the whole interview in one session – especially where an advocacy agent was involved or when the customer was anxious;

• use of staff with additional language skills to undertake the inbound and outbound calls;

• use of an online form for the inbound part of the call;

• arrangement of home visits by a Disability Employment Adviser;

• use of Type Talk/Text Direct.

Staff interviewees who had used these solutions were confident that they were generally effective in meeting customers’ communication needs. In addition, where FCOs showed good practice, customers were generally appreciative. The changes that FCOs made enabled them to communicate much more effectively, even if only by giving them the confidence to overcome their anxieties.
4 The role of Jobcentres

Many customers in the study group who had specific communication barriers went into Jobcentres to make contact with Jobcentre Plus, because of problems caused by Contact Centres. This chapter therefore outlines the impact of communication barriers on Jobcentres and the interventions used to help facilitate communication between Jobcentres and customers for whom telephony creates a barrier.

The findings are based on qualitative research conducted with Jobcentre staff and customers in eight Jobcentre Plus districts.

Key findings

• **Information on communication barriers needs to be easily accessible and clear for all staff in the claims process.** Jobcentre staff often stated that case notes for customers did not mention customers’ communication barriers, or the support they would need for future interactions with Jobcentre Plus. This exacerbated communication barriers by forcing repeat disclosures by customers.

• **The Jobcentre environment and lack of privacy can exacerbate communication barriers.** Customers reported that the open-plan nature of Jobcentres and the lack of private areas exacerbated their communication barriers, as they were unable to hear staff in the office or on the warm phone, or were unwilling to disclose their communication barriers in a public environment. Warm phones also made disclosure more difficult because of their proximity to other customers who could hear personal information. This exacerbated psychological barriers such as anxiety.

• **Once communication barriers are identified, staff can put a range of different solutions into place to facilitate the start of a claim.** Jobcentre staff reported that they used third-party support, referrals to other organisations, clerical claim forms and face-to-face appointments to reduce communication barriers. Staff believed that these were all effective ways of engaging customers from the study group.
4.1 The Jobcentre’s role in the claiming process

For customers who faced barriers when they used the phone, the Jobcentre provided an alternative point of first contact to gather the information usually collected by the Contact Centre.

For some individuals in the study group (those with mental health problems, learning difficulties, communication difficulties, hardness of hearing or deafness and those who did not speak English), the telephone presented barriers which meant that they were unable or found it difficult to speak to the Contact Centre to start their claim. These barriers to using the telephone varied in severity, and included a complete barrier to telephony (customers who were hard of hearing/speech impaired), a feeling of disempowerment because of the need to use a third party and not participate in the telephone call at all, and increased confusion. These barriers are detailed more fully in Chapter 2.

Throughout this chapter, it is important to remember that although Jobcentres provided customers with a useful alternative to Contact Centres, the face-to-face service was not a preference for all customers interviewed. Within our sample, some customers – such as those suffering from agoraphobia or some with multiple disabilities, including both physical and mental health problems – who reported barriers in using the telephone still preferred it to face-to-face communication.

There were customers who were able to and preferred to use the warm phone, and felt that receiving assistance from a Floorwalker was preferable to calling from home. They felt distressed when using the telephone from home and needed support, guidance and encouragement when making the call to the Contact Centre, which could be obtained from the Jobcentre.

‘I got it across but it was so much easier with someone physically there to help you sort it out.’

(Male customer)

Other customers interviewed who had experienced face-to-face methods of communication within the Jobcentre reported that these had made the claiming process easier. Customers who were unaware of the possible options commonly stated that they would want to use them to facilitate their future communication with Jobcentre Plus.

4.2 Common solutions to accommodate communication barriers

Once customers’ communication barriers were identified, Jobcentre staff put a range of different solutions in place to facilitate the start of a claim. All Jobcentres participating in the research used a number of interventions, covering:

- third-party support;
- referrals to other organisations;
The role of Jobcentres

- clerical claim forms;
- face-to-face appointments.

### 4.2.1 Third-party support

Third-party intervention took several different forms:

- informal advocacy and interpretation, usually provided by a friend or family member;
- formal advocacy provided internally or externally, for example by support workers, social services and voluntary sector support groups such as Citizens Advice;
- formal interpretation, provided by local charities, professionals and thebigword.

Jobcentre staff interviewees believed that third-party support was particularly beneficial in a face-to-face setting because it was easier to obtain consent from the customer, who was also involved in the process.

Staff in the research consistently referred to the importance of the third party’s role in assisting customers through the claiming process. Despite some concerns about the overbearing nature of some informal advocates, such as family members, staff generally recognised the value of these advocates.

Customers’ ability to provide an advocate (formal or informal) was highly valued, and appeared to be the preferred solution for both staff and customers in the research. Customers routinely stated that they preferred to use their own support. Staff also preferred customers to find their own support, as it did not draw on staff time or incur a cost for the Jobcentre.

However, the dependence on customers to source their own third-party support sometimes resulted in people being turned away and asked to return to the Jobcentre with a friend or family member who could support them. The assumption that all customers had a support network available to them could result in some customers who lacked such support missing out on the help needed. Also, some customers in the research stated that the time commitment required of friends and family to support them placed a strain on their relationship.

### 4.2.2 Referrals to other organisations

Jobcentre staff interviewed for the research encouraged customers to access the services of external agencies (such as Citizens Advice) to complete claim forms rather than provide interventions through, for example, face-to-face appointments with First Contact Officers (FCOs).

Referrals worked particularly well in a face-to-face situation when they were made by a member of staff who was aware of local advocacy/support services and what they offered customers.
To promote staff and customers’ awareness of support services, one Jobcentre had compiled a leaflet detailing local advice centres, many of which supported people with communication barriers. As the leaflet was primarily targeted at customers, it was originally made available in a range of languages, Braille, large print and on tape in different languages.

### 4.2.3 Clerical claim forms

Typically, Jobcentre staff in the research were aware of clerical claim forms. This contrasted with Contact Centre staff, whose knowledge was generally low. Jobcentre staff knew that paper-based claim forms could be issued to customers who were unable to use the telephone and were happy to complete the form at home. There was no clear definition of customers’ eligibility for receiving these forms, so staff made judgements about the severity of customers’ barriers.

‘The policy that I myself take is, I explain to the customer that the preferred method is by telephone, and that I would actively encourage them to telephone. And that they would need to give me real, real sound reasons as to why they had to make their claim by clerical claim form.’

(Floorwalker, Jobcentre staff)

Customers that were interviewed reported that clerical claim forms used in isolation were not always a solution. Some customers used support from advocates (usually informal) to help them complete the forms. This was particularly the case for customers who could not read or write English, had learning difficulties and/or were not confident about completing official documents. No robust information was available to the research team to show how accurate the completed clerical claim forms were compared with those received via the Contact Centre.

### 4.2.4 Face-to-face appointments

Face-to-face interviews were available to customers who could neither go through the Contact Centre process nor complete a clerical claim form.

Customers interviewed for this study generally confirmed that they would have liked this option. Those who had had a face-to-face interview found it beneficial in helping them to make a claim.

Findings from staff interviews suggested that such interventions were only used in exceptional circumstances because of their more time-intensive nature. Many offices visited as part of the study did not market the service to customers or other Jobcentre Plus staff. One Disability Employment Adviser (DEA) was unaware that the face-to-face FCO role existed within their own office.
4.3 Different staff roles within the Jobcentre process and their effect on communication barriers

Customers in the study group came into contact with a range of staff within the Jobcentre, including:

- face-to-face FCOs;
- Personal Advisers (PAs);
- Financial Assessors (FAs);
- DEAs;
- Floorwalkers.

There were differences in how staff in the Jobcentres visited for the research interpreted the policy on when face-to-face interviews (as opposed to Contact Centre telephone calls) could be used. Staff interviewed were generally aware that Jobcentre Plus had invested significant resources in developing remote Contact Centres. They reported that there was an emphasis on dealing with as many customers as possible via this telephony-based route. In some instances, staff perceived that this had resulted in management not encouraging the use of face-to-face interviews.

The broad details of each of the above staff roles and the effect they can have on customers in the study group is detailed in the following sections.

4.3.1 Face-to-face First Contact Officers

Despite the policy guidance in this area, face-to-face FCOs thought that the face-to-face interview was not available to all customers. They commonly pointed to ex-offenders as being eligible, while fewer face-to-face FCOs thought that this service was available to those unable to claim using the telephone.

Some face-to-face FCOs in the study encouraged the use of their service for customers who experienced communication barriers in using Jobcentre Plus telephony services. They did this by liaising with other Jobcentre staff and community-based organisations to promote the service. This is in line with Jobcentre Plus policy in this area.

4.3.2 Financial Assessors and Personal Advisers

While FAs and PAs were not responsible for facilitating initial contact between the customer and the Jobcentre, the way in which other staff responded to customers’ communication barriers earlier in the process impacted on their work. FAs and PAs interviewed for the study reported that when customers’ communication needs were not appropriately handled at the initial claim stage, their customer statement was more likely to be incomplete and inaccurate. When this occurred, FAs needed to spend more time amending the customer statement and preparing it for benefit processing.
PAs in the study also highlighted the importance of identifying and capturing customers’ communication requirements at the start of the claiming process. When PAs did not have notice of such needs, it restricted their ability to communicate with customers and provide them with the help and support required to facilitate the meeting.

Interviews with both staff and customers identified that some FAs and PAs worked beyond the ‘strict’ remit of their role. On occasion, FAs and PAs offered, and also received customer requests for, ongoing communication support when dealing with Jobcentre issues other than initiating a claim (for example, contact with benefit processing because of delayed benefit payment). This enabled customers to receive the support they needed from a trusted source without having to explain their communication barrier to a different member of staff. However, it could mean that PAs and FAs were taken away from their core duties, although the interviews did not reveal the degree to which this happened.

4.3.3 Disability Employment Advisers

DEAs participating in the study had variations in their caseloads, as each adviser interpreted the scope of their role differently. The majority said that a DEA’s remit was to work specifically with disabled people who wanted to move into employment, and did not see it as their job to support disabled customers through the claiming process. One stated that when a customer they had been working with needed to move back onto benefits, they took no active part in supporting that customer – despite the customer having a relationship with the DEA, including the disclosure of a communication barrier. In such instances, the process may benefit from being more joined up so that DEAs are encouraged to share their knowledge about customers’ needs with the Contact Centre or Jobcentre FCO.

Other DEAs interviewed saw a broader remit to their role, including:

- developing extensive links with other local organisations that support disabled people. This could go beyond organisations that prepare people for work or conduct job brokerage, and included organisations that help people to claim their benefits. Some DEAs disseminated this information to other staff, including Floorwalkers;
- allowing customers who were experiencing difficulties in communicating with the Contact Centre to be referred to them immediately for support;
- communicating with the Contact Centre on behalf of the customer;
- acting as a reference point of disability expertise for other staff who were unsure about how to deal with customers with communication barriers.

‘If there is an issue highlighted, we’ll always explore other avenues. For example, if somebody’s making a new claim and they’re unable to hear what’s being said to them, they’ll get referred to me, and we will sort things out that way.’

(DEA, Jobcentre staff)
The caseloads of DEAs also covered a broad range of disabilities. DEAs interviewed for the study reported that significant numbers of the people they supported faced communication barriers in using the telephone. One stated that up to 75 per cent of the customers in their caseload had a disability that would affect their ability to communicate with the Contact Centre.

Despite their awareness of the manifestations of disability and the communication barriers faced, not all DEAs who participated in the research were aware of the front-end of the claiming process and how adjustments to it were implemented. This meant that DEAs were not always familiar with the claims process and their expertise was not used to support staff responsible for helping customers who faced communication barriers when starting their claim. The interviews demonstrated that DEAs had a wealth of knowledge about providing adjustments to Jobcentre services. The majority had received disability-specific training that could be used to develop the skills of less knowledgeable members of staff regarding the best way to respond to customers facing communication barriers.

4.3.4 Floorwalkers

Floorwalkers that were interviewed outlined a number of ways in which they supported people in their initial contact with Jobcentre Plus and helped them to start their claim. These included:

- explaining the claiming process to customers;
- directing some customers to the office warm phones to telephone the Contact Centre;
- directing customers to the appropriate person to process their claim.

Some Floorwalkers mentioned that in addition to the above they:

- identified people who faced communication barriers where it was reasonable to do so;
- responded to customers who visited the Jobcentre and told the Floorwalker that they were unable to use the telephone;
- informed customers about the different options available to them if they could not telephone the Contact Centre.

Floorwalkers across the Jobcentres visited were generally aware of the various methods available to facilitate the claim process for customers with barriers to communication, though there were differences in the level of support they provided. Some Floorwalkers in the study viewed their role very much as signposting and referring customers to internal contacts, such as face-to-face FCOs, or to external organisations, including Citizens Advice and disability and community organisations. In general, Floorwalkers who reported that they routinely interacted with customers experiencing communication barriers were more confident in handling the situation appropriately.
Floorwalkers did not always have a consistent approach when dealing with customers with communication barriers. They revealed the following reasons for this differing level of service, including:

- messages passed on to Floorwalkers from Managers reinforcing that first contact was now a telephony-based process and the Jobcentre was no longer resourced to support customers face to face;
- Floorwalkers’ understanding of the remit of their role and whether they viewed the provision of face-to-face interventions as part of it;
- Floorwalkers’ confidence and experience in dealing with different types of customers, which was affected by their length of service and the types of customers who used the Jobcentre;
- the time available to the Floorwalker at any particular point.

‘It’s quite difficult sometimes, like I say, down at the front if you get stuck with somebody who, you know, has got a communication problem and you have got a queue of people waiting for you.’

(Floorwalker, Jobcentre staff)

Customer interviewees reported that they appreciated the support of Floorwalkers who offered a tailored service, and felt that this approach helped to avoid distress.

‘When I came in and spoke to the guys at the front desk they sorted me out with talking to someone almost immediately, and they were really fantastic.’

(Male customer)

4.4 Warm phones and their effect on communication barriers

‘Warm phones’ are the telephones that are usually located on the ground floor of Jobcentres. Customers can use them to phone other sections of Jobcentre Plus, such as the Contact Centre, free of charge.

Staff and customers interviewed for the study reported that while warm phones may be suitable for some customers, they were not always appropriate for those with a communication barrier. Problems that prevented customers in the study group from using warm phones were as follows:

- Warm phones were not compatible with hearing aids and were not surrounded by a loop system, which made them difficult or impossible to use for some customers.
- The phones were situated in busy areas of the office, which made customers feel uncomfortable if they were asked to disclose personal information, including information about their disability/communication needs.
• The busy/communal location of the phones heightened the feeling of anxiety for some customers, or exacerbated difficulties such as stammering.

• The quality of the line was reported to be poor, which made understanding difficult for those who did not speak English, people with learning difficulties and people who were deaf or hard of hearing.

Customers and Jobcentre staff interviewees reported that in some instances Floorwalkers inappropriately directed customers to the warm phones. Customers in the study group who were directed to warm phones despite facing a communication barrier were not able to start their claim. In a small number of cases, they felt embarrassed by the compromised position that trying to use the warm phone put them in.

However, there were also examples where a member of staff in the Jobcentre offered support that allowed the customer to use the warm phone, enabling a benefit claim to be started.

‘…I would actually go on the warm phone myself and say, listen, this person has got a bad stutter, and they’re going to find it hard speaking to you: if you can put down that he’s made a claim, and I will take the clerical forms, and do them, and give him a hand filling them in there and then…’

(Floorwalker, Jobcentre staff)

4.5 The Standard Operating Model and its impact on communication barriers

4.5.1 Issues of inflexibility in dealing with customers facing communication barriers

Some Jobcentre staff in the study felt that the Standard Operating Model (SOM) which is used to define set processes within Jobcentre Plus was inflexible and did not allow them to respond to different customer needs, including overcoming communication barriers. In these cases, staff believed that a more flexible system would enable them to step outside their usual role in exceptional circumstances to provide a better service.

Some staff in the study, particularly Floorwalkers and DEAs, reported that they only deviated from the SOM in exceptional cases. In contrast, other staff stated that they did not deviate from the SOM, yet they contacted the Contact Centre on customers’ behalf and/or helped customers to complete their claim statement when it was not their responsibility to do so. This is actually deviation from the SOM; some staff were evidently confused as to what is and is not included in the SOM.

Floorwalkers and PAs that were interviewed acknowledged that while working outside the stated remit of their role offered good customer service, it could also
leave them in a vulnerable position. As a result, they tended to conduct their role to a strict interpretation of the SOM.

‘A lot of times, it’s backfired on us, that we have filled the form in for the customer. Something’s gone wrong, and they’ve then said, I never filled that form in: it’s a member of staff.’

(Floorwalker, Jobcentre Staff)

‘We’re told as advisers we can’t get involved, we can’t phone up for them and stuff like that, but to tell you the truth I’ve done it. I get them to sit at my desk.’

(PA, Jobcentre staff)

4.5.2 Communicating correct processes and procedures to staff

Regardless of the above comments on inflexibility, national guidance has been issued outlining the policy for helping customers who would benefit from a face-to-face interview in a Jobcentre.

A number of different methods have been used to communicate this guidance and procedures to staff, including team briefings, e-mails and the intranet. Despite these different methods, staff in the study interpreted the processes available for customers with communication barriers in a variety of ways.

It was not always clear why staff interpreted these messages differently. Staff reported that they received a high number of e-mails about procedural changes and therefore filtered their e-mails. They prioritised e-mails relating to the majority of their day-to-day tasks, which was not the case for those that concerned responding to a minority of customers with communication barriers.

Although the facility for face-to-face new claims is available and guidance and communications on this policy have been distributed, some staff interviewed still reported that face-to-face new claims were not available, for the following reasons:

- The move to a more telephony-based claiming process meant that the Jobcentre was no longer resourced to support customers during the new and repeat claim process.
- It was no longer the role of the Jobcentre to complete forms on behalf of customers with learning difficulties and literacy problems.
- Face-to-face interviews were only available to ex-offenders and not people with communication barriers.

‘I think that, that might not be the official line from high up but that’s what’s filtered down, is that you know, we don’t want people hanging around the Jobcentres, we want them to use the phones, it goes against the grain.’

(Floorwalker, Jobcentre staff)
Staff interviewees reported that such ‘messages’ about reduced interaction with customers in the Jobcentre resulted in alternatives to telephone contact being poorly marketed to customers.

‘I’m not sure we let them know that we have the loop system, I’m not sure we let them know that we will provide an interpreter, if English is not your first language. I think there’s room for improvement.’

(Floorwalker, Jobcentre staff)

‘I just think that promoting that they don’t have to use the telephone would help these people a lot but, it’s not what the department wants us to do.’

(Floorwalker, Jobcentre staff)

Staff interviewees who knew the processes and procedures for responding to customers facing communication barriers typically reported that face-to-face meetings, discussions and training for staff were the best way to raise awareness.

4.6 Customer perceptions of the communication support offered by Jobcentre staff

Among the study group, customers’ confidence that their communication barriers would be/were appropriately supported varied. In some instances, customers reported that Jobcentre staff were helpful and sensitive to their needs. Others only had confidence in individual members of staff, and others still were disappointed by the support offered and received. The reasons for such perceptions have been highlighted earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 3.

Customers also reported differences in the service and support offered from one member of staff to another, which meant that they purposely returned to supportive staff members. Often, customers with communication barriers such as learning disabilities and mental health problems wanted to return to a member of staff who had previously assisted them to claim benefits, as they benefited from the familiarity and continuity.

‘Some do [help], but it’s not uniform. When somebody does something to help me, I know that they’ve stepped outside of their general code of practice; they’re doing it because they’re an individual and that individual wants to help me. They’re not doing it because office policy or government policy allows them to do it.’

(Male customer)

On occasion, customers reported that Jobcentres were reluctant to implement necessary interventions and tried to use inappropriate ones. A customer who did not speak English reported that staff were reluctant to offer him formal interpretation support:
‘Sometimes when I asking if there is any translator or something they said “forget about it, no way”. They were looking at the people who sign and they were checking if someone from my country so they can translate... Well, I didn’t want someone who claimed benefits to know my case, my problems; I didn’t want. It was actually bad for me but what I have to do? That’s the only way so, I was ok with it.’

(Male customer)

A small number of customers in the study felt angry about the level of customer service they received as a consequence of such inappropriate interventions, and were reluctant to engage with the Jobcentre in future.

Finally, in the study, the diversity of staff characteristics within individual Jobcentres influenced customers’ perceptions of the service they received in relation to their communication barriers. For example, if a particular Jobcentre employed a workforce that was representative of the local population, then the staff were perceived to possess the language skills that customers required. In other offices, particularly smaller ones with a stable customer base, customers reported that staff knew their communication requirements and how to respond to their individual needs, which reduced the anxiety of communicating with the Jobcentre.

4.7 Jobcentre staff perceptions of the manifestations of communication barriers

4.7.1 Staff’s understanding and identification of communication barriers

As in Contact Centres, Jobcentre staff reported continued difficulty in identifying communication barriers, as individual staff’s understanding of such barriers varied according to their job role, length of service, the training they had undertaken, and their personal experience of disability and non-English speakers. With the exception of DEAs, staff interviewed generally focused on communication barriers brought about by physical disabilities and language, rather than hidden disabilities such as mental health and learning difficulties.

This suggests that for Jobcentres in the study to implement the most appropriate interventions, it was important that their staff were aware of how barriers could manifest themselves, and that they understood how customers’ disability/language affected their ability to start the claim.

4.7.2 Identifying customers’ needs

The issues of self-identification were the same in Jobcentres as in Contact Centres, although staff felt that face-to-face identification of barriers was easier than over the telephone. They also found it easier to build rapport and make necessary adaptations with customers face to face.
Identifying communication barriers was particularly important for the Floorwalkers in the study, as they were the ‘gatekeepers’ for many of the interventions available. They were responsible for identifying customers who genuinely needed help to process their claims, rather than those who ‘couldn’t be bothered’ or were unable to communicate because of substance abuse, for example. Some Floorwalkers interviewed found that their ability to identify ‘genuine need’ only came with experience; others stated that training would help.

The importance of identifying and responding to people who faced communication barriers was not confined to the initial stage of the claiming process. Some customers interviewed for the study felt that they were not appropriately handled throughout their continued relationship with the Jobcentre.

4.7.3 Capturing and recording relevant information

As with Contact Centres, Jobcentre staff interviewees reported that it was essential to capture information about a customer’s communication needs once these were identified or disclosed, so that different staff throughout the claiming process and beyond could deliver an appropriate service with the necessary interventions in place. Staff interviewees routinely appreciated the information when it was captured early and they were able to use it later in the process.

‘They are pretty good at the Contact Centre of putting in such information so it is easy for us when we pick up the claim, especially with the Language Line.’

(FA, Jobcentre staff)

Across the Jobcentre offices visited, there was no consistent process or staff role for capturing information on customers’ communication needs.

Staff in the study reported that informal oral processes (such as internal telephone calls) rather than computer systems such as the Labour Market System were routinely used to pass on details about a customer’s communication needs. Contact Centre staff would call a Jobcentre representative, for example, or a Floorwalker would talk to the member of staff who was due to see the customer. In general, staff felt that this system worked well. However, details transferred in this way did not promote sustainable service delivery, as information about a customer stayed with individuals rather than within the overall process. Consequently, when a different member of staff met the customer they had no record of the individual’s communication barrier or the need to use a different method of communication.

Staff that were interviewed also stated that information on databases could be misleading, as it reflected a doctor’s diagnosis but not the required adjustments. Mental health and learning disabilities, for example, affected people in very different ways. Staff interviewed said that it was therefore important for information to focus on the intervention required rather than the condition.
5 Staff training and guidance

The previous chapters highlighted that communication barriers are currently exacerbated by both Contact Centre and Jobcentre staff not being fully aware of the processes to use in individual cases, and also not being fully aware of the problems caused by an individual’s communication barriers.

This chapter highlights the training and guidance available to staff, and its take-up and effectiveness. It is based on qualitative research with Jobcentre and Contact Centre staff in eight Jobcentre Plus districts.

Key findings

• **Disability awareness training for staff is not specifically related to communication barriers.** A specific course on communication barriers would benefit staff whose role means that they will potentially deal with customers with communication barriers.

• **Staff felt that electronic distribution of policy guidance and training is ineffective.** This was in terms of both the opportunity to read the material during work time and absorbing what it actually means they should do in a given situation.

• **Only a few staff in both Contact Centres and Jobcentres were aware of guidance on the clerical claims process.** This supports the notion that current dissemination methods are ineffective.

5.1 Staff training

5.1.1 **Generic training for a customer service environment**

The research showed that a distinct set of skills were thought to be needed for working over the telephone. Stakeholder organisations, staff and customers pointed out a number of these skills that are arguably generic in a telephone service environment, but particularly pertinent for customers with communication barriers.
The main skills highlighted as being necessary when dealing with customers were:

- patience;
- a supportive attitude for customers experiencing difficulties;
- good listening skills.

It was suggested that these skills can be obtained through experience, training or simply through well-developed interpersonal skills.

In terms of disability awareness training, Jobcentre Plus staff members – including Personal Advisers (PAs), Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs), Floorwalkers and First Contact Officers (FCOs), across all fieldwork areas – had attended a variety of training courses.

In general, these courses were not specifically about disability in the Jobcentre/Contact Centre environment. Instead, they tended to be awareness-raising courses such as briefings on the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and issues when working with various types of disability.

Staff across all fieldwork locations had attended courses from the following list:

- disability awareness;
- DDA training;
- working with sick and/or disabled people;
- dealing with vulnerable customers;
- handling difficult situations;
- dealing with customers in an open-plan area;
- dealing with aggressive/difficult situations;
- deafness awareness;
- drug and alcohol abuse workshops;
- in-depth interviewing and communication skills.

5.1.2 Specific training related to communication barriers

5.1.2.1 Lack of training on communication barriers

There was no mention of any course specifically on dealing with customers with communication barriers. In a small number of areas, training courses were available on working with customers who are sick and/or disabled, and handling difficult situations.

Staff interviewed also felt that the training was rather ‘broad brush’ in its approach, and provided a lot of general or superficial information. They reported that more detailed knowledge and solutions would help them in their daily work – for
example, courses specifically on communication barriers and how to deal with them in a telephone conversation.

5.1.2.2 Technical training

In some instances staff had received training on the communication support systems available, for example minicom, thebigword interpretation and textphones. In the main, technical training (for example, on textphones) was restricted to a small number of staff within Jobcentres and Contact Centres, whereas thebigword training was typically provided for a greater range of staff, especially FCOs and PAs.

5.1.2.3 Exposure to the situation/experience as training

A range of Jobcentre staff in the study believed that practical experience of dealing with customers facing communication barriers was the most relevant and useful training available; a number of Incapacity Benefit PAs reinforced this opinion. Although in many cases they had received the most up-to-date training in their conversion training, Incapacity Benefit PAs felt that since this was not always reinforced through other training, experience was the best way of putting things into practice.

In addition, some staff interviewees believed that receiving comprehensive information on different disabilities and conditions would lead to Jobcentre Plus personnel having preconceived notions about individuals with these disabilities or conditions. Such preconceptions would not be based on actually meeting or working with these customers, and direct experience would prove more beneficial for staff.

5.1.2.4 Local training solutions: confidence-building experience

In addition to the training courses listed above, one area had developed a local initiative called ‘The Performance Improvement Team’. Staff in the study who were still unsure about how to deal with certain situations or wanted to develop their confidence after completing their initial training could join this team for two weeks. Within this team, they received fewer calls, giving them the opportunity to gain confidence in dealing with particular issues without the restraints of reaching targets. Experienced FCOs in the study who consistently reached their benchmarks staffed the team and provided advice to the less-experienced FCOs. While there was no robust evidence to demonstrate that this intervention improved an FCO’s ability to deal with customers with communication barriers, staff regarded it as an appropriate and successful mentoring approach that could be developed further.

5.1.2.5 Role-specific training

Typically, because of their specific role, DEAs in the study received the most initial training on disability issues and dealing with customers with communication difficulties. Their training appeared to be more formal, in that the majority of DEAs across the fieldwork locations reported receiving training over the course of a number of weeks, including disability awareness training.
5.1.2.6 DEAs as focal points for information

In a number of cases, other members of Jobcentre staff in the study relied heavily on their local DEAs to provide disability training or act as a point of reference. This arrangement appeared to work well in terms of disseminating information, training, guidance and local knowledge. Jobcentre Plus staff who were interviewed valued having a central contact who could assist with up-to-date disability-related information if and when it were needed.

5.1.3 Format and effectiveness of types of training delivery

The training that Jobcentre and Contact Centre staff interviewed for the study had undertaken was delivered in a range of formats. A summary of the perceived effectiveness of each type of training is given below.

5.1.3.1 E-learning

Staff interviewees routinely felt that delivering training through e-learning tools was not the best method. They particularly questioned the appropriateness of such tools or methods for developing skills to handle sensitive issues, such as communication barriers and disability. These staff believed that being in a group setting helps to stimulate discussion and allows participants to share their own experiences.

5.1.3.2 Face-to-face and practical exercises

Staff in the study typically viewed face-to-face group training as the most appropriate way of transferring information. This applied especially to subjects such as communication barriers, disability and illness, and where practical exercises such as role play were used. Face-to-face discussions allowed staff to share their own experiences of working with customers and learn from others, and then implement what they had learned in real life situations.

5.1.3.3 Visits

Some staff in the study, particularly DEAs, believed that for them the training time available was more effectively spent researching and visiting local providers to gain awareness of what was available in the local community, and also of different disabilities. They considered visits such as these to be invaluable, as they then had a sound knowledge of exactly what provision was on offer in their local areas.

5.1.3.4 Mentoring

The use of more experienced staff as mentors or trainers was well received by those who had been mentored, and DEAs cited being used as mentors. Mentoring allowed more experienced staff to pass on their knowledge of working with customers with different needs, including techniques, approaches, appropriate behaviour and language to use, and the availability of provision and further support.
5.1.3.5 **Mini-training sessions**

There were examples of mini-training sessions delivered in Contact Centres, which were valued highly by Contact Centre staff. These sessions provided staff with first-hand experiences of different disabilities and conditions, were relatively easy to organise and deliver, and could be a possible training and information-sharing format for other Contact Centres. One example was a learning day to promote disability awareness, including mini-training sessions delivered by a member of staff with sight impairment and another with epilepsy. At another Contact Centre, at staff’s request, guest speakers were invited to speak about disability issues during team meetings and other training situations.

5.1.4 **Recall and implementation of skills learnt in training**

Staff participating in the research typically believed that they used a combination of training, guidance and experience on a daily basis when dealing with customers, especially in the case of those with communication barriers. Particular examples provided were:

- the use of correct etiquette and greetings for customers with specific barriers, for example customers with hearing and sight impairments;

- guidance from the Work Psychologist helping DEAs to understand how different conditions can affect people, so that they could effectively prepare for interviews with customers who have communication barriers.

Across all Jobcentre Plus staff roles in the study, staff’s recall of the detail of the content of training courses was poor, although recall was better for courses with practical, ‘hands-on’ delivery methods. Examples of the latter included courses that involved role plays or guest speakers rather than e-learning modules, which were unpopular in comparison.

Typically, staff in the study could remember course names and modules undertaken, but not necessarily the topics or issues covered. Where staff did not then consolidate this with immediate experience, recall was poor, and the benefit of the training potentially lost.

5.1.5 **Alternatives to training**

Staff interviewees offered some alternative suggestions to traditional training delivery that would be relevant to studying and identifying the existence of communication barriers. One such suggestion was that new staff should listen to recorded calls. This would enable FCOs to gain practical awareness and understanding of the various solutions or ideas they could implement in different situations.

DEAs in particular believed that sending staff on visits to other organisations or charities raised their awareness and understanding of communication barriers and how these can be manifested, especially with mental health and learning difficulties.
5.2 Staff guidance on Jobcentre Plus policies

5.2.1 Distribution of guidance

The study found that Jobcentres and Contact Centres communicated new guidance and procedures in various ways. The most favoured way was electronic distribution, via e-mail or the intranet. E-mail was used extensively to distribute guidance to both Jobcentre and Contact Centre staff. Staff interviewees also routinely reported that their Managers or Team Leaders signposted them to the intranet to seek out guidance and procedural changes for themselves.

Jobcentre and Contact Centre staff who were interviewed consistently complained about lack of time to access their e-mails or the intranet and read guidance because of the number of interviews they needed to conduct each day. Staff in the Jobcentres visited stated that their preference was for new guidance and procedures to be communicated at face-to-face meetings, although they also recognised the benefits of having a reference copy.

Across different roles, however, many staff in the study preferred e-mail communication as it enabled them to read guidance in their own time. One DEA commented that e-mail acted as proof of receiving or sending communications.

5.2.2 Staff take-up of guidance

Although guidance and new procedural changes were routinely disseminated to staff in the study, it was not clear how Jobcentre Managers and/or Team Leaders monitored whether the guidance was read and implemented. Within the Jobcentres visited, staff reported that there was no way of knowing whether guidance had been read. The only monitoring that one Floorwalker was aware of was on completion of e-learning packages; at the end of each module a report was generated to inform Managers of its completion.

In the Contact Centres visited, Team Leaders and Managers used various methods to try to ensure that staff took on board the guidance issued. These included:

- the Call Assessment Framework;
- staff signing a declaration that they had read documents or guidance issued;
- monitoring customer complaints as an indication of the correct use of procedures and guidance.

Although most staff in the study regarded the intranet as a reliable source of guidance, as noted above they did not feel that they had sufficient time to access and read the guidance it contained. In some cases, staff felt that this lack of time meant that they were not up to date with new legislation and the correct information to give to customers, such that they were not always providing the right information or service to their customers.

This was an issue for Floorwalkers in particular, who did not have the time or facilities to access the intranet to read guidance. One Jobcentre had overcome
this problem by prioritising the guidance and collating it into a ‘pick of the week’ document which was then discussed during weekly meetings.

Importantly, whilst guidance on what constitutes a significant difficulty when using the telephone exists, none of the staff interviewed reported receiving it. The majority of staff wanted more specific and clear guidelines on:

- customers’ eligibility criteria for using a clerical claim form (see Section 5.2.3);
- using third-party support;
- alternatives to the warm phone;
- eligibility for a face-to-face appointment to complete the claim form.

5.2.3 Guidance on clerical claim forms

Only in very few instances did staff state that they had received guidance on issuing clerical claim forms, although guidance was issued on 27 July 2006.

While FCOs in a number of Jobcentres visited were aware that clerical claim forms were an option, only in exceptional cases had all Floorwalkers working within the same Jobcentre office received this guidance. Distribution of guidance on this procedure has been limited, and staff’s understanding of when and how clerical claim forms can be issued was mixed.

Recommendations on guidance are detailed in Chapter 8. They cover an issue that could be dealt with quickly and with little extra resource input from Jobcentre Plus.
6 Use of interpreters, signers and advocates

Third-party support is a general term describing the use of a person other than the customer and the Jobcentre Plus staff member to facilitate communication. It can include interpretation, signing or advocacy support. This chapter explores third-party communication support, including:

- formal and informal language interpretation, including language interpretation for non-English speakers and British Sign Language (BSL) signing;
- telephone-based interpretation services;
- formal and informal advocacy.

Formal interpretation is when Jobcentre Plus uses a language support agency to provide interpretation services over the telephone or face to face. Informal interpretation can include interpretation over the phone or face to face by a friend, family member or associate of the customer. Where a Jobcentre Plus staff member provides the interpretation, this is also defined as informal interpretation. BSL interpretation (sometimes referred to as signing) tends to be a more specialist service, often provided by professional interpretation services (both local and national) and deaf people’s user groups.

Advocacy describes the support provided to a customer to participate in discussions with Jobcentre Plus. It can be provided formally by an agency, for example social services, Citizens Advice, a Member of Parliament, MIND, or informally by friends or family of the customer.

The evidence for this chapter stems mostly from interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff, because the volumes and diversity of customers they dealt with meant that they were able to describe the processes, compare and contrast methods of third-party support, and explain their preferred options in detail. It is supplemented by examples from customers’ experiences.
Key findings

- **Staff reluctance to use formal interpretation and advocacy.** Stakeholders and customers interviewed suggested that formal advocates and interpreters are better than informal ones. However, staff were more reluctant to use formal processes because they perceived that the extra time required affected their personal performance.

- **Inability to identify language needs.** The most common barrier to using formal telephone interpretation was identifying the language spoken by the customer. Failure to identify the language spoken usually meant abandoning the call.

- **thebigword issues.** Some problems were specific to thebigword, which was introduced in August 2006, including complaints about line quality, the lack of ‘added-value’ services such as maps to aid identification of the language spoken, and the lack of a recorded message during the waiting period for matching with an interpreter.

- **Mixed availability of BSL signers.** Hearing-impaired customers tended not to use Contact Centre services; they used Jobcentres instead. BSL signers could be hard to access, but Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) had good links with local agencies in some areas. Strong links in the deaf community provide accessible, high-quality and familiar support to customers, and need to be cultivated.

6.1 Formal and informal interpretation by phone and face to face

The following sections describe the use of language interpretation in the Contact Centre and Jobcentre environments. They discuss the decision processes used to determine the formality of the interpretation required, and the issues arising in each scenario. There is also an overview of the use of BSL signers and interpreters provided both informally and formally.

6.1.1 Common patterns in using formal or informal language interpretation

In the Contact Centres and Jobcentres visited, most language support was provided informally. The initial call was usually made by an informal third-party interpreter, or the customer was accompanied by an informal third party. If customers in the study group did not have informal support at their first contact, the Contact Centre or Jobcentre typically asked the customer if informal interpretation was available to them. This was achieved by asking the customer directly, accessing support from another staff member, or using thebigword telephony interpretation service to ask the question. If the member of staff could not be understood or no informal support was available, the following options applied.
For the Contact Centre:

- The interview would be conducted using formal interpretation through thebigword, where the language was known.
- Another, bilingual member of staff would carry out the interview in the language spoken by the customer.
- An interview would be arranged at the Jobcentre, mainly when the language could not be identified.

For the Jobcentre:

- A member of staff would suggest that the customer contact a local cultural support organisation.
- A telephone appointment would be booked (or re-booked) using formal interpretation by thebigword.
- A face-to-face appointment would be booked (or re-booked) using a face-to-face interpreter.

6.1.2 Use of other staff members to provide interpretation

Where staff were able to provide interpretation support, staff and customers appreciated this option. The level of involvement of the member of staff depended on the person’s proficiency in the language, time constraints and the availability of a third party.

‘Sometimes if I need, this person [Portuguese speaking Jobcentre Plus staff member] will help me, no problem.’

(Customer using the Jobcentre)

‘If there is an Urdu speaker or something like that I will go and find out if there is an Urdu speaker available and then pass it on them.’

(First Contact Officer (FCO))

Staff with these skills and abilities commonly received no formal recognition for providing these services, and reported that it increased time pressures and impacted negatively on their other duties.

6.1.3 Gaining consent for an informal/third-party interpreter

On the whole, staff in the study welcomed the use of informal interpreters. Staff and customers who were interviewed generally viewed gaining consent or granting permission for informal interpretation as a straightforward process. The view that staff in the study commonly took was that as long as the call was for data-collection purposes, the FCO would continue even if the customer could not grant permission formally. Staff interviewees were generally positive about being able to use discretion for this purpose.
‘They [FCO] said they wanted to hear my voice, I said “I’m this person and I can’t speak English that is why my friend is ringing” and she went on the line.’

(Female customer with English as a second or other language (ESOL))

6.2 Using formal telephone interpretation

This section examines the use of formal telephone-based interpretation services. The research covered experience related to both the currently used thebigword provision and its predecessor, Language Line, but staff did not always distinguish between the two. Although thebigword provides a number of forms of communication support, including telephone language interpretation, face-to-face language interpretation and BSL signers, this section focuses purely on telephone-based interpretation services. It discusses the occasions when customers and staff in the sample chose to use formal telephone interpretation; access and quality issues affecting the service’s effectiveness; and barriers to using formal telephone interpretation.

6.2.1 Uses of formal telephone-based interpretation

Staff in the study accessed thebigword telephony support for a variety of reasons, including where no informal interpreter was available or the customer specifically requested it. In some cases, the FCO considered it to be a quicker and more efficient service.

In the Jobcentres visited, formal telephony-based interpretation was used to set up calls to the Contact Centre, arrange face-to-face appointments, and ask the customer to come back with an informal interpreter.

Face-to-face FCOs reported occasionally using the telephony service to complete the claim form. This was usually at a rearranged appointment, because of the need to match and book an interpreter. If the FCO accessed telephony interpretation on first meeting the customer, this was usually to try to access face-to-face interpretation (formal or informal) for a rearranged meeting.

6.2.2 Customers’ use of formal telephone interpretation support

By and large, formal telephone interpretation was only used by Contact Centre customers who specifically asked for an interpreter. At the point of requesting interpretation, not all customers reported that they were offered access to thebigword to support their call. Instead, they received a clerical claim form or a face-to-face appointment with an FCO in the Jobcentre. This supports the perception (noted in previous chapters) that staff were unaware of the correct procedures/policies to use in individual cases where communication barriers existed.

Formal telephone-based interpretation was more consistently accessed by customers who were experienced in calling the Contact Centre and knew to ask directly for this type of support. Where customers were experienced in using the service, in some
instances they or a third party would initiate the call to the Contact Centre and ask for the interpretation service to support their communication with the FCO.

6.2.3 Staff use of formal telephone-based interpretation

Staff reported using thebigword for both inbound and outbound calls. There was selected use of the service for:

- inbound and outbound calls, when no informal or staff third party was available;
- inbound calls, to set up a face-to-face interview conducted at the Jobcentre;
- inbound calls, to ask customers to use an informal third-party interpreter for the outbound call;
- outbound calls only, where staff wanted to be sure of collecting accurate information rather than using a third-party interpreter.

Staff interviewees in both Contact Centres and Jobcentres reported that customers occasionally refused the offer of language support and preferred to continue the call without an interpreter. If possible, FCOs in the study would continue the call without support from thebigword or a third party, though this placed more pressure on them. However, in some instances the call was abandoned and/or a face-to-face meeting organised, as staff perceived that this would make it easier to complete the claim form.

6.2.4 Staff experience of using telephone interpretation

Lack of experience in using telephone interpretation services was commonly reported by staff in rural areas and DEAs, but in exceptional cases this was also an issue for Contact Centre staff in the study. Staff interviewees acknowledged that unfamiliarity with the process of setting up and using this type of interpretation led to reluctance to use formal, telephone-based services. Staff in the study who were unfamiliar with using interpretation services also reported that, in particular, they found using telephone interpretation for a face-to-face interview quite disconcerting. In the Jobcentres visited, the confidence and familiarity issue meant that, in reality, there were those staff who would choose to use thebigword and those who would not.

‘I know they’re there but I don’t know that much about them because I’ve never had to use them or deal with them so I don’t know.’

(FCO)

6.2.5 Availability of telephone interpretation

A recurrent view across the Contact Centres and Jobcentres visited was that setting up telephone interpretation was a long and difficult process for all parties. Issues that exacerbated the difficulties were the need to identify the language spoken and the availability of interpreters once this had been done. Waiting for an interpreter within a call meant ‘dead’ time for staff, affecting benchmarks.
6.2.6 Quality of interpretation

Staff and customers in the study both raised questions about the scholastic level of spoken English or the interpreted language. This had also caused difficulties for customers who felt that they could not explain to the FCO that the quality or suitability of the interpretation was poor.

‘Sometimes it can be quite frustrating when the customer still doesn’t understand what the interpreter’s asking, and I think we have come across that quite often. So that then becomes very frustrating and lengthens the call even more.’

(Contact Centre Team Leader)

Jobcentre staff were able to ask customers for basic feedback after the call. Staff reported that in these instances customers were positive about the service – as were many of the customers involved in the research.

‘They speak to me slowly and I understand enough.’

(Female customer with ESOL)

Across the board, staff cited the most common barrier to using telephony interpretation as identifying the language spoken by the customer. Contact Centre staff reported that failure to identify the language spoken usually meant abandoning the call.

6.3 Use of BSL signers

This section provides details about the use of language support specific to customers who were hearing impaired and able to use BSL signing. It should be noted that not all hearing-impaired customers reported that they used or wanted to use BSL signing in their day-to-day life and/or to communicate with Jobcentre Plus. Some customers in the study preferred other options, such as lip-reading or using a minicom. The preference was specific to the individual.

6.3.1 Customers calling or attending with a BSL signer

On the whole, staff and customers in the study reported that hearing-impaired customers tended not to use Contact Centre services. Typically, when customers initiated their claim with the support of a BSL signer, the customer organised this support (a personal contact or from a support organisation) and the signer attended the Jobcentre with the customer. The interpreter would assist the customer in completing a clerical claim form, or would support completion of a clerical claim form with a face-to-face FCO.

In some instances, the interpreter had conducted the call to the Contact Centre (through a warm phone or on an external line). However, this was relay interpretation, which was generally a less preferred form of interpretation according to stakeholder organisations, because the customer was not interacting directly with Jobcentre Plus staff.
6.3.2 Consent for inclusion of signers

Contact Centre staff and customers using the Contact Centre reported issues around consent to use a signer. This stemmed from customers often not being able to formally grant permission on the telephone for the signer to speak on their behalf. A solution reported by one FCO was to require customers with speech and hearing impairments to send faxed consent forms. One customer reported that an FCO had refused to speak to the signer, saying that this was not within the procedural guidelines (Standard Operating Model). The customer reported being told that:

‘They’re not allowed to take information from someone else, they have to speak to me in person.’

(Male customer)

But in a later phone call to the Contact Centre, a different FCO agreed to speak to the signer without formal consent procedures. Clearly, in this instance there were different interpretations of the relevant protocols within the same office. This supports previous findings that individual staff interpret their roles and procedures in different ways.

Where customers were able to access support from contacts in the deaf community and deaf support organisations, this worked well. While not common practice, in some offices in the study sample the office or individual staff members had established links with BSL interpretation services and deaf support groups; DEAs were particularly active in this. Such links overcame many of the consent issues, as signers were known to most of the Jobcentre staff. Staff and customers both cited strong links in the deaf community as providing accessible, high-quality and familiar support to customers.

6.3.3 Customers attending the Jobcentre unsupported by a signer

There were deaf customers in the study who preferred not to use interpreters at the initial contact stage, opting instead for the expediency of note-writing or lip-reading. This meant that customers often attended the Jobcentre unsupported by a formal interpreter. Frontline staff and DEAs in the Jobcentres visited often reported that they used informal communication methods with deaf customers to enable booking of a BSL interpreter. Such methods included informal signing, lip-reading, use of staff with basic signing ability and, commonly, using note-writing to communicate with hearing-impaired customers.

In some cases, Jobcentre staff who were able to use BSL had provided ‘on call’ interpretation. This was usually to explain to customers that they needed to complete a clerical claim form, or to book another appointment where they could be supported by an informal or formal signer. There were also examples where Floorwalkers used hand-written notes to jot down a customer’s needs and then made the initial call to log the claim with the Contact Centre on behalf of
the individual. Following this, they either provided the customer with a clerical claim form or booked a face-to-face appointment, noting the need for a formal interpreter.

6.3.4 Booking a signer

Primarily, it was DEAs in the study who expressed confidence and had experience in booking and using signers, unless there was an established relationship with a local agency. DEAs also held the view that formal signers provided a higher level of signing. Other staff interviewees in Jobcentres (and sometimes including DEAs in smaller or rural offices) reported that they had no experience of booking or working with a formal signer, so did not know how easy or difficult this would be.

Where staff rarely booked signers and had no real networks established, the lead-in time to book a signer could be anything up to six to eight weeks. This was especially the case in the rural offices visited. Where Jobcentres or individual staff had established relationships with a number of sources of signing support, this worked well and meant that the signers were often known to the staff and vice versa. One positive example of this was an office that had an arrangement with a chain of local freelance signers.

6.4 Use of informal and formal third-party advocates

This section covers the use of third-party advocates, both informally provided and those who performed this role in a professional capacity. It sets out information on:

- when this type of support was accessed;
- access and availability issues, and the benefits of using advocacy;
- the process of gaining consent and granting permission;
- issues arising from the use of advocates.

For the greater part, the section refers to the views of customers and Jobcentre staff in the study; information about the Contact Centre perspective on this issue was limited.

6.4.1 When were advocates used?

This type of support was accessed primarily by people with learning difficulties, mental health, memory and concentration issues, verbal and auditory impairments and those who were generally very nervous about making a claim. The level of support reported spanned from moral support to completing the interview on behalf of the customer.

Customers that were interviewed preferred and/or needed advocacy to varying degrees. Some customers reported that they had wanted the support of an
advocate, but also wanted to retain some involvement or lead the communication themselves. These customers preferred face-to-face communication because they were actively involved in the process. They could hear the conversation and had their own record of and insight into what had been said.

Customers in the study accessed informal third-party support for both phone and face-to-face contact. Some had accessed support from family and friends when making the claim over the phone, but had then felt able to carry out ongoing face-to-face contact independently. The most common reason for using informal third-party support was the convenience and flexibility it offered over formal advocates.

Formal third-party advocacy was used where customers received established and ongoing support with this and other parts of their life. For example, customers sometimes accessed the support of a formal carer such as an occupational therapist or Barnardo’s support worker to provide communication support or when they needed to make initial calls themselves. Additionally, formal advocacy from an agency such as Citizens Advice was more likely where a problem had occurred when making or changing a claim.

Typically, formal third-party advocacy included ‘hand holding’ and ‘troubleshooting’ if there was miscommunication or frustration that exacerbated communication barriers. Where this occurred, customers reported the following:

‘I’d say it gives me more confidence. If I say something wrong, my Support Worker’s going to step in.’

(Female customer)

‘I prefer doing it myself, but then if it gets too intense, then I just hand the phone over. Because I just can’t take it. It makes me really angry.’

(Female customer)

6.4.2 Pros and cons of using formal advocacy

Customers and staff reported that support workers, key workers and specialist advocates had a good level of understanding of the claims process, and had provided advocacy for initial claim calls on many occasions. In these cases, the formal advocates had a lot of experience of providing support to individuals accessing Jobcentre Plus services, and in face-to-face situations were often known to staff in the office.

By and large, Jobcentre staff in the study reported that the main benefit of formal advocates over informal ones was that they shared the same goal as staff – enabling customers to do and say as much for themselves as possible. This said, there were reports of some difficulties in managing the contributions of formal advocates who took on the role of gatekeeper rather than facilitator.

Contact Centre staff in the study consistently identified the main advantage of formal advocacy over informal was the ease of checking which organisation the
advocate was from by calling a central office. This meant that there were no problems of achieving consent to continue the call.

6.4.3 Staff views on the use of third-party advocates

Views on the use of third-party advocacy differed among individual staff. There were examples of proactive frontline staff providing contact details for various support organisations. There were also DEAs in the study who actively encouraged customers to bring third-party support with them, praising highly and valuing the support provided.

However, staff in some instances were doubtful about whether the person ‘needed’ the support or was choosing to let someone else conduct the interview for them. This latter perspective and doubt about the need for advocates stemmed in the main from Contact Centre staff. In no instances had Contact Centre staff actively invited a customer to seek or include the support of a third party to facilitate either the initial call or the call back.

6.4.4 Consent/permission for use of an advocate

The process of gaining/granting consent for a third-party advocate was more complicated than for an interpreter. Staff in the study had a consistent view that if the customer had a legally established appointee on the system, then that was an automatic green light to go ahead. The general view was that it was easier to verify someone as a third party if they were from an organisation (e.g. a hospital, Citizens Advice), as the FCO could call the organisation and speak to that person as a way of checking who they were. Some Contact Centre staff labelled this as ‘implicit consent’.

‘You occasionally get third parties phoning up without the customer with them, a lot of people here have got the idea that you can’t speak to a third party without the customer’s agreement but of course you can, you can speak to the Citizens Advice or their representative from hospital, you can speak to them without the customer’s agreement if they’ve got implicit consent.’

(Contact Centre Team Leader)

On the whole, staff in the Jobcentres visited reported that granting permission for an informal or formal advocate was a smooth process. Where they were unhappy about the use of informal advocates, they would always agree to the use of an official appointee or formal advocate.

Reports varied on how the use of a third-party advocate was initiated. There were examples of:

• customers being asked to verify who the advocate was and verbally agree to the third person speaking on their behalf;

• a doctor verifying the person’s need for an advocate;
• the customer and advocate attending the Jobcentre to gain agreement for the advocate to be an appointee;

• the phone being passed over to the advocate to provide basic details, including their National Insurance number, for checking identity or permission to be an advocate.

Within Contact Centres, if FCOs did not accept an informal advocate, customers’ communication barriers were exacerbated. Customers were unable to complete the call or provided wrong answers, which led to complications later in the claim process. Some people abandoned the call and tried a different FCO later in the day. Customers reported this as a positive solution which often resulted in accessing an FCO who would agree to work with an advocate.
7 Conclusions

This chapter presents conclusions from the findings presented in the previous chapters. The recommendations are presented in the final chapter (Chapter 8).

7.1 Overview of key findings

Jobcentre Plus has already made adjustments to enable access to its services – for example, use of thebigword, textphones and British Sign Language interpreting. Local adjustments included linking with local agencies to provide advocacy and interpretation.

Many staff have already made appropriate adjustments for customers with communication barriers, and were comfortable with providing services in a ‘customer orientated’ way. The adjustments made led to a number of interviewees stating that they were pleased with Contact Centre services, or alternatives offered through Jobcentres. In addition, some customers actively preferred to use the phone as it reduced their communication barriers, which were exacerbated by face-to-face situations, or the low-stress environment of calling from home suited them.

Jobcentre Plus has clearly been making important adjustments to enable people with communication barriers to access its services. The most significant example is the contract with thebigword telephone translation service, which has enabled non-English-speaking customers to communicate effectively. Another example of an adjustment already in place is textphones. Although unpopular with many staff and customers, they remain an important communication medium, and are available in all offices. Currently, textphones are not being promoted or fully utilised. Until a viable alternative is in place, this service needs to be improved.

Local areas have also been making adjustments to services such as links with local interpretation agencies; these initiatives need to be further developed. In the virtual environment, effective local initiatives may be lost. This should be guarded against by promoting dissemination of good practice among Contact Centres.
However, there will continue to be customers for whom telephony-based services will never be appropriate. For these customers, further adjustments and adaptations need to be made. At present, Jobcentres are taking some of these customers on, and will continue to be required to do so. There was evidence from this study that Jobcentres may need to improve and expand the role of first contact for the customer groups in question, especially in the virtual environment. More detail on the types of barriers that customers experience is given below.

### 7.2 Communication barriers for customers using Jobcentre Plus telephony services

The research identified the following areas where barriers remained:

- **Customers with a complete barrier to telephony.** For these customers, such as those with hearing impairment or no English language, telephones were not an option, and customers could not make primary contact themselves.

- **Customers with a partial barrier to telephony.** The telephone exacerbated the communication barriers of these customers. This included people with difficulties in understanding which were increased by a lack of non-verbal cues, and by accents.

- **Customers who were disempowered by the telephone.** This barrier included situations where an advocate or family member had to intervene for customers who would have preferred to act on their own behalf, but were only able to do so in face-to-face interactions.

- **Customers for whom the telephone caused additional stress, paranoia or anxiety.** For some customers, telephony affected or triggered their mental health condition and made their communication barrier worse.

- **Customers for whom the telephone highlighted technical problems with Jobcentre Plus services.** These included customers who struggled with the poor sound quality on warm phones, the lack of loop systems and volume controls, and background noise in the Contact Centres and Jobcentres (when using the warm phones).

- **Customers for whom Contact Centre operational models and systems created barriers.** This included use of the formal script, which customers found difficult to follow or understand.

- **Customers for whom barriers were caused by staff’s lack of understanding of disability.** Staff’s inability to judge the nature of a ‘presenting’ problem often led to inappropriate interventions. Some staff reacted in ways that customers considered offensive.

- **Customers for whom the telephone system caused or increased confusion.** For customers with number dyslexia, for example, call routing was problematic. For people with short-term memory problems, remembering elements of
previous conversations was a problem in longer telephone conversations and for call backs.

- **Customers for whom the telephone system increased the likelihood of misunderstanding by Contact Centre staff.** There was the potential to enter incorrect information on customers, as a result of customers’ poor communication and staff misunderstanding or mishearing elements of the conversation.

### 7.3 Staff attitudes and skills

Many Jobcentre Plus staff in the study were well aware of the onus on them to provide high-quality customer services. This customer orientation was sufficient for them to make appropriate adjustments to the services they offered to customers with communication barriers.

Similarly, Floorwalkers in particular had the important task of making immediate assessments of communication needs when customers entered the Jobcentre. Again, Floorwalkers often went out of their way to support customers who experienced difficulty in communicating with First Contact Officers (FCOs) and in using the warm phones.

In some Jobcentres visited, Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) were proactive in briefing and training staff, making contact with a network of local agencies, and sometimes taking on first contact with disabled customers. The DEA role was only available in Jobcentres, but clearly made an active contribution to the services available to people with communication barriers.

Even so, the study found that diverse practices were in operation across and even within the same Contact Centres and Jobcentres. A key message coming out from the research is that services need to be more consistent, so that these examples of good practice are provided to all customers as standard.

Staff in both Contact Centres and Jobcentres pointed to the lack of guidance they had received on enabling customers with communication barriers to access services, and how reliant they were on their own judgement. Where guidance had been issued, it had not necessarily filtered down to frontline delivery staff. This makes the issuing and, importantly, the dissemination of key guidance on adjusting and adapting communication to address customers’ barriers central.

Where staff had adjusted services, they were not always confident that they were acting within the Standard Operating Model. ‘Messages’ regarding benchmarks and quality assurance also tended to make staff unsure of permissions to adjust services.
7.4 Identification of communication barriers

For staff, making judgements for people with communication barriers was problematic, as it could be hard to identify presentation issues, especially in the Contact Centre environment without any visual clues. There were also issues in Jobcentres because some disabilities are hidden. Customers in the study group were not always ready or willing to disclose their communication barriers, and staff were often working under difficulties without this information. Stakeholders have advised against the overt questioning of customers to ascertain their communication barriers/needs. However, without knowledge of communication barriers, adjustments were not always made. Staff and customers reported that the service was adapted more readily if they disclosed their barriers (although in some instances staff asked customers to prove in some way that their barrier was real and serious). Where customers disclosed communication barriers, there were issues regarding how such information was recorded and communicated within the Jobcentre Plus information systems.

7.5 Customer case notes and records

The lack of a clear record of the communication barriers experienced by customers leads to customers having to make several disclosures, to the FCO and on call back, and in subsequent follow-up calls or visits to the Jobcentre. Jobcentres raised the issue of the lack of good information from Contact Centres on customers’ needs, which would help them to accommodate customers’ support requirements.

7.5.1 Labour Market System and Customer Management System markers

There was a lack of consistency in how FCOs recorded information on customers’ communication barriers, and where they documented this information on the Labour Market System (LMS) and Customer Management System. LMS marker categories are, however, too broad to clearly identify and accommodate customers’ communication barriers. Although FCOs frequently used case notes to record customers’ communication difficulties, some were wary of including any detail because of the Freedom of Information Act and the Data Protection Act.

7.6 Interpretation/advocacy issues

7.6.1 Use of formal and informal advocates and interpreters

Third-party advocates and interpreters (both formal and informal) played a key role in supporting customers and Jobcentre Plus staff to reach satisfactory levels of communication. Gaining consent/granting permission for the use of informal third-party support, whether language or advocacy, emerged as a difficulty predominantly (but not exclusively) for customers accessing Contact Centres and for Contact Centre staff. The ease of gaining consent depended on whether the
customer could formally give consent and/or whether the staff member was willing to continue without formal consent. Staff commonly felt that they could proceed without consent for information-collection purposes only. Staff’s approaches also differed – some took a ‘by-the-book’ approach, while others were more flexible.

### 7.6.2 Interpretation services

Identifying customers’ spoken language was a barrier to using formal telephone interpretation. Some customers struggled to communicate even basic information in English that would enable them to access interpretation support. Customers did not always receive the help they needed from Jobcentre staff. Floorwalkers did not systematically support FCOs in identifying the customer’s language and FCOs did not always pass the information back to the Jobcentre, though there were exceptions to this.

Staff were concerned about the time taken to complete a call using formal interpretation, or in some cases lacked the confidence to use thebigword. There were also some problems specific to thebigword, including complaints about the line quality, the lack of ‘added-value’ services such as maps to aid identification of the language spoken, and the lack of a recorded message during the waiting period for matching with an interpreter.

### 7.6.3 BSL signing services

While BSL signing provision was sometimes used and was highly regarded, it was not consistently accessible because of lack of availability. DEAs had developed good relationships with local signing agencies, and these worked well. Staff and customers readily sought alternative methods of communication, for example informal signing, lip-reading, using staff with basic signing ability and, commonly, the use of note-writing to communicate with hearing-impaired customers. These methods were generally accepted, but there were cases where either staff or customers found them to be inappropriate or uncomfortable alternatives.

### 7.7 Training for staff

The training courses available to staff on disability and communication barriers were generically based – for example, training on the Disability Discrimination Act. Some training was very well received, such as the more ‘hands-on’ awareness-raising courses. However, these courses had not been delivered in all areas, so some staff were more aware than others about disability and communication barriers. Staff did not report attending any courses specifically about working with customers who have communication barriers. Staff believed that face-to-face training would be a more effective format to learn about sensitive issues such as communication, as opposed to e-learning.
7.8 Staff guidance

There was little staff awareness of the recently introduced guidance on issuing clerical claim forms to customers experiencing communication difficulties. Access to guidance generally was a specific problem for staff, through lack of time, lack of signposting to the most important aspects of the guidance, and lack of reinforcement by Managers and Team Leaders. For this reason, over-reliance on guidance issued through the intranet will not provide sufficient input to staff on meeting the needs of customers with communication barriers.

7.9 Conclusions on Contact Centres

7.9.1 Specialisation routes

FCOs in the study dealt with all customers’ calls and hence a diverse range of customers with disabilities, communication barriers and the various manifestations of these. There is currently no scope for specialisation within the Contact Centre environment. Contact Centres therefore lacked some key aspects of Jobcentre services, especially some of the added-value aspects of the specialist DEA’s role, such as liaison with local support and advocacy organisations.

7.9.2 The script

The script is at the centre of the first contact operational model, setting the content and pace of the interview and stipulating the language to be used. Adherence to the model does not allow for deviations from the script, nor does it encourage customers’ questions. However, some FCOs altered the script and tried to make the interaction more personal and easier for customers to understand, in an attempt to provide a better service to those with communication barriers.

7.9.3 Quality assurance process

Delivery staff believed that the quality assurance focus on call lengths and script adherence alone was inappropriate and exacerbated problems for those with communication barriers, as staff felt unable to offer appropriate levels of service. They believed that the Call Assessment Framework (CAF) should include achieving customer service, helping callers to feel comfortable and reassured to successfully complete their claim form. The CAF should be revised with a greater emphasis on customer service.

7.9.4 Technical solutions

The Contact Centre systems provide some communication support options, including some technical solutions such as textphones, and some local solutions such as videophones. Usage of these technical solutions was low, however. This was linked to the lack of marketing of the alternatives, but also lack of staff confidence or training in using the systems.
7.10 Conclusions on Jobcentres

For customers for whom the telephone caused communication barriers, Jobcentres provided a range of alternative methods that enabled them to start their claim. These included: third-party support, referrals to other organisations, clerical claim forms and face-to-face appointments.

7.10.1 Third party/referrals to other organisations

Of the enabling interventions that helped customers to communicate with Jobcentre Plus, third-party support was the one that staff and customers referred to most frequently. In some Jobcentres, staff encouraged customers to access the services of external agencies (such as Citizens Advice) to complete claim forms rather than providing interventions through, for example, face-to-face FCO appointments. Staff particularly valued third-party support provided by external support organisations, or more commonly by a friend/family member of the customer, as it did not draw on Jobcentre resources. Importantly, reliance on informal third-party support could result in some customers who did not have strong support networks not getting the help that they required. For this reason, formal relationships with advocacy organisations are preferable.

7.10.2 Clerical claims

Some Jobcentre staff in the study knew that paper-based claim forms could be issued to customers who were unable to use the telephone and were happy to complete the form at home. There was no clear definition of customers’ eligibility for receiving these forms, however, so staff had to make judgements about where they were needed. There were also mixed messages from management on when and to whom clerical forms should be issued.

Customers did not always find clerical claim forms used in isolation a solution. Some needed support from an advocate (usually informal) to help them to complete the forms. This was particularly the case for customers who could not read or write English, had learning difficulties, and/or were not confident about completing official documents.

7.10.3 Face-to-face appointments

Face-to-face interviews were also available to customers who could neither go through the Contact Centre nor complete a clerical claim form. As a result of Jobcentres’ limited capacity to accommodate face-to-face interviews, staff only made such appointments available in exceptional circumstances for customers they believed to be in ‘real’ need of one-to-one support. Many offices did not market the service to customers or other Jobcentre Plus staff.
7.10.4 Warm phones

While warm phones may be suitable for some customers, they were not always appropriate for those with a communication barrier. Customers reported several problems with using warm phones, which exacerbated communication barriers. They included the following:

- Warm phones tended to be situated in busy areas of the office, which made customers feel uncomfortable if they were asked to disclose personal information, including information about their disability/communication needs.

- Warm phones were not compatible with hearing aids and were not surrounded by a loop system, which made them difficult or impossible to use for some customers.

- The quality of the line was reported to be poor, which made understanding difficult for those who did not speak English, people with learning difficulties and people who were deaf or hard of hearing.

- Floorwalkers tended to view warm phones as an instant response to customers seeking help when claiming. There were times when Floorwalkers inappropriately directed customers to the warm phones.
8 Recommendations

Many of the people with communication barriers in this study were disabled and would therefore be covered by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 in terms of the need to make reasonable adjustments to services. For its part, Jobcentre Plus is required to make reasonable adjustments to services for disabled people, which needs to be borne in mind in relation to the following recommendations. Customers with English as a second or other language would in many cases be covered by the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000. Again, Jobcentre Plus services need to respond to these customers in a positive way.

8.1 Recommendations for Jobcentre Plus as a whole

The following general recommendations are for Jobcentre Plus services as a whole:

• **Cross-referral between Contact Centres and Jobcentres**

  Communication lines between Contact Centres and Jobcentres need to improve to ensure that cross-referrals take place in appropriate circumstances, and that the correct supporting information follows the customer through the service.

• **Person with disability/Labour Market System markers**

  The person with disability (PWD) markers currently in use should be reviewed. They need to be able to capture detailed information on customers’ presenting problems. They also need to allow notes to be entered into specific text boxes situated close to the PWD marker.

  The current markers are too broad, and do not correspond to any useful categories. More specific markers are needed, such as:

  - poor concentration;
  - speech difficulty;
  - hearing problem;
  - short-term memory loss;
- dyslexia affecting numbers;
- anxiety and nerves affecting telephone manner;
- non-English speaker, plus language spoken where known;
- third party required;
- formal advocacy/appointee required.

**Recording and storing data on customers’ communication needs**

Clear guidance needs to be issued on how, how much and when to capture information about a customer’s communication requirements. The implications of the Data Protection Act for this process should be considered and clarified to reassure staff. Customer data needs to follow the customer through the claims process, to ensure that customers do not need to make multiple disclosures about their communication barriers, and that appropriate services are provided at each juncture.

**New technologies**

The new technologies potentially available to Jobcentre Plus merit further investigation. Feasibility research into interactive claim completion, video conferencing, online discussion boards and the use of webcams is warranted. However, this is suggested as a long-term solution which may need to overcome many issues (e.g. fraudulent online claims) before it can be implemented.

**Textphones**

Until more appropriate technologies are in place, the textphone will remain an important communication tool for some customers. Clear guidance and information on the location and use of textphones must be made available to all staff. The textphone number/s need to be widely known and advertised to customers.

**Marketing of contact options**

In a virtual environment, the marketing of available support options to both customers and Jobcentre Plus staff will be central to the service’s success, efficiency and effectiveness for people with communication barriers.

When marketing materials on interventions are developed, they should be produced in the most appropriate format. Leaflets explaining support services in the local area, for example, might be better produced as a staff resource and made available in formats that are inexpensive to alter, such as on the website, in both standard and large print.
8.2 Recommendations for Contact Centres

With the forthcoming introduction of virtual teams in mind, we have developed the following recommendations so that Contact Centres can provide additional support to customers with communication barriers:

• **The script**

  The script needs to incorporate an opening statement which helps to determine customers’ communication requirements at the outset of the conversation – for example: ‘if you have a communication barrier and need more help, then please say so’. In addition, customers should be invited to ask to have things repeated, ask the FCO to speak more slowly, take a pause if they are anxious, and ask for third-party assistance.

  An easy-read version of the script also needs to be developed to assist those customers who have learning difficulties or difficulties in understanding the standard script.

• **Specialisation options for first contact**

  An option would be to establish specialist First Contact Officer (FCO) teams to assist with the most common communication barriers (for example, teams of FCOs fully trained to work with specific communication difficulties). Responses to the opening statement would enable customers to be routed to these specialist teams, who would be able to deal with their calls more effectively and efficiently. Call routing would be needed to these teams, but should be carefully piloted to ensure that the system does not exacerbate communication barriers for some groups of customers.

• **Quality assessment**

  The Call Assessment Framework (CAF) currently focuses mainly on the achievement of benchmark call lengths and script adherence. The CAF needs to be revised to include a greater focus on customer service and successful completion of the claim form.

• **Call length**

  When the single call is rolled out, Jobcentre Plus should ensure that the planned changes to the removal of the call-back system acknowledge that a single call will be too long for some customers, and that FCOs may need to incorporate more breaks for these customers.

• **Training and guidance for staff**

  Jobcentre Plus should ensure that all Contact Centre staff receive further disability training specific to a call-centre environment. Such training should include, among other things, the variety of manifestations of disabilities and communication barriers, disability etiquette, and the key skills needed to communicate effectively with customers who have communication barriers.
Guidance on any changes to the process for effective engagement of customers with communication barriers needs to be distributed more efficiently, and the messages it contains understood by all staff. Face-to-face dissemination of guidance needs to be established, as reliance on the intranet and electronic guidance results in staff not taking the messages on board.

8.3 Recommendations for Jobcentres

Jobcentres provide an essential service for customers for whom telephony is not an option or is a difficult option, and will continue to do so. Recommendations for Jobcentre services are as follows:

• **Training and guidance for staff**

  Procedures for dealing with communication barriers need to be made clear to staff. The types of intervention they need to make to ensure that DDA requirements for adjustments to services are met must be clearly stated. Staff would benefit from clear guidance about who is and is not eligible for different interventions, or whether an intervention would be available to all those who wish to take it up.

• **Marketing of Jobcentres’ role and purpose for people with communication barriers**

  Jobcentres could proactively market different interventions to customers who require them, so that customers can make informed choices regarding their needs.

• **Working with local agencies**

  To help staff to make informed referrals to external support services, Jobcentres could map the local provision of organisations that have the capacity, are funded to support customers to claim, and will accept Jobcentre referrals. This has resource implications for Jobcentre Plus, but ties into the points made by stakeholder organisations, whose role has reportedly increased since the introduction of telephony-based services.

• **Extending the role of the Disability Employment Adviser**

  The above three recommendations could all be achieved by extending the role of Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) to include a role as mentor/trainer for staff in Jobcentres. This would make effective use of their individual skills, and DEAs would then also provide a reference point for staff with issues concerning customers with communication barriers.

• **Privacy in Jobcentres**

  More thought needs to be given to privacy in Jobcentres, specifically somewhere where customers with communication barriers can discuss their needs with
staff. Similarly, where customers’ barriers are exacerbated by the warm phone area, more private space could be offered to these customers to enable them to deal effectively with a phone call.

- **Warm phones**

  The warm phones lack a number of key features that are needed to support people with communication barriers. A whole series of potential improvements are required, including improved privacy around the phones, volume controls, and adaptations for customers to use them in conjunction with hearing aids and loop systems. However, before these changes are made, staff in Jobcentres need to be briefed as a matter of urgency on the alternatives to, and appropriateness of, directing people with communication barriers to the warm phones.

### 8.4 Recommendations for training and guidance

- Training and guidance are central to ensuring that all Jobcentre Plus staff are aware of their obligations under the DDA. Demonstrating that staff have appropriate skills and materials and can ensure that appropriate adjustments are made to services is vital. Regular updating rather than one-off interventions would be preferable for most staff.

- Greater use of practical training sessions that can provide solutions for customers rather than just increasing knowledge or soft skills is recommended. Use of expert speakers or asking members of staff with specific disabilities or conditions to deliver training should be further extended.

- Examples of particular areas where training is needed include: the use of appropriate language; awareness of different conditions and how they might manifest themselves in the Contact Centre or Jobcentre environment; dealing sensitively with personal information; and how to solicit and record information on communication barriers.

- Further development and dissemination of guidance on appropriate alternatives to telephony claims for people with communication barriers is needed. Clearer guidance on the use of clerical claim forms, third parties, informal and formal interpretation services and advocacy should be developed nationally for both Contact Centre and Jobcentre staff, to ensure that all customers receive the same level of access to services.

- Clear guidance is needed on the use of textphones and the local options for British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation is required.
8.5 Recommendations on the use of interpreters, signers and advocates

- **Specialist staff in Jobcentre Plus**
  
  There is the potential to employ a specialist team dedicated to language interpretation. Employing staff in Contact Centres who are fluent in the most commonly accessed languages and routing calls from anywhere in the country to make maximum use of these staff should be considered.

- **Use of visual aids to identify the language spoken**
  
  As standard, all Jobcentre offices should have a range of visual aids such as maps, language boards and leaflets to assist the process of language identification. Information on the language spoken should be passed to the FCO at the Contact Centre as a first step, via e-mail or telephone, by the staff member who initiates contact with the FCO.

- **BSL signing and interpretation**
  
  Waiting times for signers could be reduced if offices were proactive in establishing networks with local agencies, and in building on those that already exist in the customer community.

- **Consent for third-party intervention**
  
  Awareness needs to be raised among Contact Centre staff as to why customers may not be able to formally or verbally give consent for third-party support. Offering a range of methods to provide consent (e.g. fax, e-mail, text, Type Talk, minicom) would also make the process of gaining consent easier and quicker. Staff need guidance to ensure that they are not pressurising customers to proceed without appropriate advocacy.

- **Increasing access to third-party advocacy support**
  
  While the process of granting permission to use an advocate needs to be flexible, it also needs to be applied consistently. Where staff use their discretion and allow advocacy on the basis that they are only collecting data, this works well for all parties. If this model is acceptable, it needs to be formally acknowledged and guidance issued to enable it to be used more widely. If not, this also needs to be acknowledged.

- **Encouraging the use of advocates**
  
  Proactive efforts to raise awareness about formal advocacy providers should be encouraged within each locality. Improved marketing of the acceptability of using advocates would be helpful for customers who currently perceive that advocacy is not permitted.
Appendix A
Methodology

The research method used was divided into distinct yet associated strands that were designed to address the study aims and objectives. Each strand had the following specific aims and objectives:

• **Strand 1 – Research with stakeholder organisations**
  The first strand of the study explored the views of disability organisations and organisations representing non-English speakers. The discussions enabled us to establish the relative scale of the communication problems from their perspective, and explore:
  – the extent of the problems that telephony causes for people;
  – how reliant individuals are on carers and disability groups for support when contacting Jobcentre Plus;
  – the solutions that individuals have been known to use;
  – possible solutions to the problems caused by telephony.

• **Strand 2 – Research with current benefit claimants**
  Strand 2 explored the experience of the Jobcentre Plus process for current customers for whom the telephone causes communication difficulties. This strand investigated:
  – specific problems with initial contact;
  – methods that individuals used to overcome these problems;
  – what improvements Jobcentre Plus can make;
  – whether problems at the start of the process discourage continued engagement with Jobcentre Plus;
  – whether currently-claiming customers for whom telephony causes problems faced considerable difficulties when making their claim.
• **Strand 3 – Research with Jobcentre Plus staff**

Strand 3 examined how staff in Contact Centres and Jobcentres currently deal with individuals for whom telephony causes a problem. It explored the processes that are in place, training provision and support for staff to enable them to deal with such customers. More specifically, it investigated:

– What processes are in place and do they work?
– Do staff follow the processes?
– What training have staff received?
– What support do staff receive to deal with individuals where telephony causes a problem?

Fieldwork on the three strands was carried out in the following timescale:

• Strand 1 – Research with stakeholder organisations (September-December 2006);
• Strand 2 – Research with current benefit claimants (November-December 2006)
• Strand 3 – Research with Jobcentre Plus staff (October-December 2006)

**Strand 1 – Research with stakeholder organisations**

Primary research for the first strand of the study took place between September and December 2006. The 11 organisations interviewed as part of Strand 1 are outlined in the table below. The interviews were semi-structured to enable a free-flowing discussion around the research questions, and took place through a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer group represented</th>
<th>Organisation interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>ReThink</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MIND</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speech impairment</td>
<td>Speakability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>British Stammering Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
<td>Home Farm Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hearing impairment and hard of hearing</td>
<td>Royal National Institute for the Deaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-English speakers</td>
<td>National and local Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABs) outlined the issues for this group, but no specific organisations were available nationally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic issues</td>
<td>Carers UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CABs (national and local offices in fieldwork areas)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from these interviews was used to inform the design and research tools used in the second and third strands of the research.

In addition to the organisations interviewed, the following organisations were also invited to participate in the research. However, they did not believe that they would be able to provide the required information, or did not have the capacity to participate:
Interviews were also scheduled with the Disability Rights Commission and Mencap, but for a variety of reasons they were unable to participate in the research.

Strand 2 – Research with customers

Primary research for the second strand of the study took place in November and December 2006. Details of the method used are provided below. Research tools for this strand were also semi-structured, and tailored to explore the issues and needs of each communication barrier. A selection of four key questions was highlighted for use with those customers who were unable to concentrate or understand the longer topic guide. All of these interviews took place in a face-to-face setting.

Customer sample

The following customer groups were chosen as representative of the groups for whom telephony might cause the most problems in contacting Jobcentre Plus:

- people with a hearing impairment – profoundly deaf people who cannot communicate using the telephone at all, and people who need additional technology to use the phone;
- people with a speech impairment – from those who sign, through to those with communication barriers made worse by the phone, for example people who stammer;
- people with mental health conditions, covering a gamut of conditions from temporary illness or debilitation, such as stress or agoraphobia, through to long-term conditions such as depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and personality disorder;
- people with a learning difficulty/disability – those who have difficulty in processing information, which can lead to communication barriers on a spectrum from mild to severe;
• non-English speakers, who have more severe communication barriers when using the phone.

In total, 82 customers were interviewed; a further 26 scheduled interviews did not take place because of last-minute customer opt-out and lack of available interpreters.

The customer sample was drawn from Incapacity Benefit (IB) customers with a mental health condition, and Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) and IB claimants with the following person with disability (PWD) markers:
• PWD 64 – loss of speech, hearing, eyesight;
• PWD 128 – memory loss, inability to concentrate, learn or understand;
• PWD 512 – multiple disabilities;
• English as a second or other language – customers volunteer the information to have this marker activated;
• advocate.

Customer recruitment

We sent a letter of introduction to all those in the customer sample. This letter introduced the study, and asked customers to opt in and reply with:
• their preferred communication method;
• any communication or support requirements, such as an interpreter, signer or third-party support from an advocate, friend or family member;
• any preferences for the interview location;
• an indication of the communication barriers they faced when contacting Jobcentre Plus by telephone.

The response rate was much higher than expected, so we then undertook a sifting exercise to select the most appropriate customers for the study. As the study focused on communication barriers, we selected customers who indicated that they experienced either significant or some lower level of communication difficulty when using telephony services. This was based on their identified communication and support requirements and the barriers they had faced when contacting Jobcentre Plus. A recruiter then contacted all selected customers by post to arrange their interviews and support requirements.

Customers were also offered the option of booking their interview online. The online booking system was available on a live website that enabled customers to see when researchers would be undertaking interviews in their area and to book themselves in directly. Confirmation letters were then sent out to all those who entered their interview preferences.
Informed consent

People with disabilities, especially mental health conditions and learning difficulties, can be particularly vulnerable. We were very concerned to ensure that all who took part did so willingly, and gave their informed consent. As well as inviting all customers in the sample to opt in to the research, researchers also sought additional consent at the outset of the interview. This process was sound, and a proportion of people who had initially agreed to be interviewed actually declined to take part on the day, or requested interviews to be terminated early. Researchers were briefed in advance, and knew that interviews could be terminated at the request of the customer.

Interview and fieldwork considerations

All interviews were tailored to meet the needs of individual customers. The researchers aimed to make interviewees feel as comfortable as possible, for example by using sign language interpreters, or conducting interviews in the presence of a family member or carer. Owing to the vulnerability of some of the customers, we only undertook some interviews where three people were present: interviewer, interviewee and a carer, friend or family member, advocate, interpreter/signer or an additional ECOTEC member of staff.

We offered customers the following additional forms of communication:

- speech/hearing impairment – use of advocates/interpreters where necessary;
- mental health conditions – advocates/interpreters where necessary;
- learning difficulties – appropriate format and language/advocates where necessary;
- non-English speakers – interpreters/appropriate language.

Some customers preferred to make their own interpretation arrangements through local agencies with which they were familiar. In addition to these, we used the following organisations to provide interpretation services at customer interviews:

- British Sign Language interpretation – Prestige Network;
- language interpretation – thebigword, Linguassist, Prestige Network.

Strand 3 – Research with staff

Primary research for the third strand of the study took place between mid-October and December 2006. Details of the method used are provided below. Research tools for this strand were also semi-structured to enable staff to highlight issues they believed were relevant. With a few exceptions, all of the staff interviews took place in a face-to-face setting.
Staff sample

Primary research was conducted in eight fieldwork areas, ranging across all UK Jobcentre Plus regions. We took into consideration geographical spread, with a mix of rural and urban areas across England, Scotland and Wales, and operational considerations such as existence of Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs), office solutions in place, particular issues faced.

We conducted interviews with the following staff roles in the relevant Contact Centres and three Jobcentres in each area. A total of 88 interviews were completed in six Contact Centres and 24 Jobcentres.

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<tr>
<th>Contact Centre</th>
<th>Jobcentre</th>
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<td>Managers</td>
<td>DEAs</td>
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<td>First Contact Officers (FCOs)</td>
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<td>Team Leaders</td>
<td>Face-to-face FCOs</td>
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<td>Personal Advisers (both IB and JSA)</td>
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Analysis

Primary analysis

We developed analysis frameworks to analyse the emerging data from each strand. These frameworks related to the aims, objectives, research questions and topic guides and were designed to ensure that all detail was captured from the primary research.

Secondary analysis

The research objectives and the main delivery systems, processes and customer barriers were the central point for the secondary analysis and reporting. This combination provided a simple, effective way of ensuring that all researchers provided information on the key issues, and also that the study objectives were met and reported on.

The main analysis phase started following completion of fieldwork in each strand. We considered the data thematically and by type of respondent to gain a composite picture of the experiences of all involved and to determine the issues that needed to be addressed. By considering the data in these ways, it was possible to:

- gain a complete picture of the views and experiences of stakeholders;
- highlight key findings by stakeholder type to ascertain the extent of the problem, strategies in place to deal with individuals for whom telephony causes problems, and the effectiveness of these strategies;
- identify common research findings and research findings that are specific to individual stakeholders.
A considerable volume of material is available on Jobcentre Plus customers with communication barriers. This could be analysed and used in various ways to understand other issues concerning this customer group.

Methodological lessons learned

Research with the customer groups included in this study highlighted particular considerations that would need to be factored into any future planned work with people with disabilities and communication barriers:

- **Customer sampling and recruitment**
  The lead-in time for the customer research was much longer than anticipated. The original timetable did not factor in the two months it took to obtain the customer sample. This and other unexpected factors – the size of the sample (approximately 15,000) and the sifting process that had to follow, the need to undertake all customer communication using written forms of correspondence, and the high number of customers opting in (approximately 5,000) all resulted in a delay to the fieldwork taking place.

- **Recruitment system used**
  The use of a postal opt-in form worked well with this customer group and, as already noted, the response rate was considerably higher than anticipated. However, the recruitment process would have benefited from more direct filtering questions to determine which customers had genuine communication barriers as opposed to general issues with contacting Jobcentre Plus.

- **Informed consent**
  The research team were conscious of the need to ensure that customers fully understood the purpose of the interviews. To ensure this, in addition to asking customers to opt in to the study, researchers went to great lengths to explain the reasons for and nature of the study and what would happen to all data. Only on confirmation that customers had given their permission to proceed did interviews take place.

- **Interpretation**
  Interpreters were difficult to source, required a lot of notice (particularly for languages in high demand) and were sometimes very expensive. Time pressures meant that the research had to use an expensive company with the necessary capacity. The interpreting agency with the lowest price was slow to respond to requests, particularly when the named contact person was away on leave.

- **High drop-out rate**
  There was an unexpectedly high rate of customers dropping out of the research just before or at the interview itself. Reasons included lack of confidence and customers not feeling capable of undertaking the interview on that particular day. Customers either cancelled immediately before the interview, or started
the interview and then subsequently terminated it. Other reasons for interview cancellations included lack of interpreter availability or cancellation by the interpreter.

- **Level of importance of the study**

Some customers found the interview a challenge. Researchers were aware that these customers lacked confidence in communicating with a stranger, especially in a situation which called for them to disclose personal information. For some customers, the importance of the topic being discussed was the reason that they overcame their fears and undertook the interview. There were examples of customers with agoraphobia who told the interviewer that they rarely spoke to any strangers in a face-to-face situation and had summoned a great deal of courage to undertake the interview. Conversely, other customers placed real importance on the issue of communication barriers in contacting Jobcentre Plus and had rearranged their work schedules or taken leave from work to ensure their availability for interview.

- **Facilitating the interview process for customers**

The research team used various other methods to facilitate the interview process for customers. Customers were asked to inform us of their preferred location for the interview to ensure that they were as comfortable as possible with their environment (at their home or somewhere else), to overcome any mobility issues they may have had, and to remove the pressure of getting themselves to the interview, especially for customers with depression, agoraphobia, anxiety or learning difficulties.

Cash incentives are an important part of any study of this kind, because of the use of exploratory interviews to understand issues, concerns and barriers. The provision of a cash incentive was particularly important for this customer group as the barriers they faced were greater. Future work with disabled customers should ensure that cash incentives are commensurate with the contribution that customers make. As noted above, these efforts were considerable in the cases of people who took time off work or who overcame deep-seated anxieties and found the courage to speak to someone in a face-to-face situation to ensure that their issues and concerns were fed into the study.

- **Feedback to stakeholders**

The disability and stakeholder organisations interviewed as part of this study were all keen to hear the findings from the research, and it will be important for the Department for Work and Pensions to find an appropriate mechanism to do this. All the organisations and agencies interviewed placed great emphasis on communication barriers that customers face in their dealings with Jobcentre Plus. There were evident issues for their user groups, and in some cases organisations were actively involved in assisting customers with their correspondence in order to access Jobcentre Plus services and their benefits. All were keen to hear the findings from this study.
Appendix B
Research tools

Topic Guide for Interviews with Representative Organisations and Active User Groups

Introduction to the interview

Introduce yourself, and explain that ECOTEC was commissioned by Jobcentre Plus and that this is one part of a three strand study that will concentrate on Jobcentre Plus telephony services and will explore communication issues experienced by Jobcentre Plus customers.

Emphasise that we are a completely independent organisation, with no ties to any political parties or government departments, and that we’re primarily interested to hear about their views & experiences of communication and accessibility of Jobcentre Plus services.

Outline:
• Interview length – approximately 45-60 minutes
• Permission for taping and transcription
• Confidentiality

This strand of the study will explore the views of Disability Organisations, Disability User Groups and ESOL groups. These discussions will enable us to establish the relative scale of the problems from their perspective, and explore:

• general views about telephony based services;
• the extent of the problems caused by telephony that individuals face;
• general views about the accessibility of Jobcentre Plus; (the type of contact that the study is particularly interested in e.g. new and repeat claims, WFLs, job search etc)
• how reliant individuals are on carers/Disability Groups for support when contacting Jobcentre Plus;
• solutions that individuals have been known to use; and
• possible solutions to the problems caused by telephony faced by individuals.

Gain Agreement to continue with interview (note: basis for informed consent to be established)

Introduction
• Record organisation name and interviewee’s job role
• Geographical coverage of organisation/interviewee (local or national)
• Explore whose views the organisation represents, how many people they represent and how (establish how many people are active participants or users of the organisation/group as well as the number they represent)
• Gain description of the communication needs of these groups
  – During telephone conversations
  – Face-to-face meetings
  – When discussing personal and detailed information
  – By email
  – Other

Accessibility of Jobcentre Plus
• Please outline your understanding of individuals’ options for contacting Jobcentre Plus
• *(If relevant)* Which of these options is most used by your user groups and why?
• How accessible do you think Jobcentre Plus is for the groups you represent *(in terms of needing to use the telephone to make initial contact)*?
• How does this differ to accessibility before telephony was a key component of Jobcentre Plus?
  – Why is that?
  – What evidence do you have to show how it has changed for the groups you represent?
• How does accessibility via telephone differ between the groups you represent and the general population?
  – Why do you say that?
• What improvements could be made to Jobcentre Plus services to make them more accessible?
• Are they aware of the processes in place to help their members gain access to Jobcentre Plus services?

**Problems faced by individuals**

• What is the extent of problems faced by individuals you represent?

• What experiences have individuals informed you of when trying to access Jobcentre services? – *Explore frequency and forms of contact used by individuals.*

• How representative do you feel this feedback is in terms of the size and nature of difficulties experienced?
  – Universal issue(s) or not?
  – Where do you feel there may be under/over-reporting, and why?

• What do individuals do when they face these access difficulties?

• Do individuals make initial contact by going into Jobcentres?
  – Do you know why/why not?
  – How do staff respond? *(E.g. referral to warmphones, give clerical forms.)*
  – Any examples of good practice?

• What does Jobcentre Plus do to meet the communication needs of the individuals you represent?

• To what extent are referrals to Language Line for ESOL customers or textphones, used?
  – How well do referral processes for these alternatives work?

• How does Jobcentre Plus incorporate an individual’s needs into future contact and communication?

• What problems are there with specific types of equipment – textphones etc?
  – Explore whether this is typical across other organisations as well

• Are you aware of the different customer support processes in place to help members access Jobcentre Plus services?

• How regularly do you think these non-standard customer support processes are used?

• How aware are individuals of the face to face first contact staff in Jobcentres as an alternative to talking with an operator in a Call Centre over the phone?
  – If aware, then do organisations promote these to their members?

• Do your members think that alternative communication methods are effective such as textphones, language line or clerical claims?
• What could be changed to make it easier for the people that you represent/work with to communicate with Jobcentre Plus?
• Explore short-term and longer-term solutions?
• How does Jobcentre Plus respond to third party intervention?
• How disability confident are Jobcentre Plus staff?

**Advice given by bodies**
• What advice do you give to people regarding accessing Jobcentre Plus?
• What, if any, direct assistance do you provide?
• How reliant are individuals on carers/Disability Groups for support when contacting Jobcentre Plus?
  – Why do you say that?
  – What evidence do you have to support your assertion?
• Is there anything else you’d like to add?
Topic Guide for Jobcentre Plus Customers

**Interviewer Notes**

The use of non face-to-face forms of communication, particularly telephony, are now a key component of Jobcentre Plus’s modernisation agenda. The overall aim of this study is to investigate the experiences and perceptions of customers for whom contacting Jobcentre Plus via the telephone (to make a claim) causes problems.

**Confidentiality**

Emphasise that ECOTEC is completely independent of government departments and political parties. Anything you tell the interviewer will be treated in the strictest of confidence and the results will be presented in such a way that no-one will be able to identify you or your family.

*Remember the checklists we did from the training day*

When the interviews are complete, please check that you have collected evidence on:

- The findings within the context of Jobcentre Plus telephony services and in comparison with other telephony service providers.
- The accessibility of Jobcentre Plus for individuals who have communication barriers over and above the general population.
- Support methods used by individuals when contacting Jobcentre Plus.
- The effect of accessibility difficulties on discouraging customers to engage with Jobcentre Plus.
- Possible solutions to the problems caused by telephony, including those used by individuals.

**Health and safety considerations**

- Please make sure you carry your i/d card at all times and show it to every interviewee.
- Please ensure you have a mobile phone with you at all times and have nominated someone to call throughout the day.
- Remember the safety rules – sit near the exit; spend some time at the outset considering the place of interview and any potential hazards, escape routes etc; don’t accept tea and coffee; leave the interview site if you are uncomfortable – use your instinct for identifying dangerous situations; take time out or terminate the interview if the interviewee becomes agitated or aggressive; use calming language if the interviewee becomes upset.
Informed consent

The recruitment will be designed to ensure informed consent as far as possible. Customers have asked to actively opt-in to the research and agree to be contacted about their participation, or they/their advocate/carer/helper will be able to book an interview time themselves through an online booking system. A confirmation of the interview time will be sent to them following its arrangement and again we will indicate that participation in the study is voluntary. Describe the purpose of the interview, and before the interview commences confirm for a third time that the interviewee agrees to continue.

Introduction to the interview

Introduce yourself, and explain that ECOTEC was commissioned by Jobcentre Plus and that this is one part of a three strand study that will concentrate on Jobcentre Plus telephony services and will explore communication issues experienced by Jobcentre Plus customers.

Emphasise that we are a completely independent organisation, with no ties to any political parties or government departments, and that we’re primarily interested to hear about their views & experiences of communication and accessibility of Jobcentre Plus services.

Explain the time it will take and ask if this will be ok:
• Interview length – up to 90 minutes allowed to enable supported interviewing (interpreters/advocates)
• Permission for taping and transcription (otherwise permission for detailed notes)

Explain this strand of the research will explore the experience of the Jobcentre Plus process for current customers for whom the telephone causes communication difficulties. This strand will investigate:
• specific problems with initial contact;
• methods used by the individual to overcome these problems;
• what improvements Jobcentre Plus can make;
• whether problems at the start of the process discourage continued engagement with Jobcentre Plus; and
• whether customers for whom telephony causes problems, who are currently claiming, faced large difficulties when making their claim.

Gain agreement to continue with interview.
**Key/easy questions**

If time is short, the interviewee cannot concentrate, or you decide the interview requires early termination for any reason, please ask these questions only. Otherwise start with the long topic guide.

1. Do you have any problems using a telephone?
2. How do you contact the Jobcentre and why?
   - Phone
   - Face to face
   - By letter
   - Computer – e mail
   - Through a family member/person who helps you
   - Another way
3. Which is the best way to contact the Jobcentre, and why?
   - Phone
   - Face to face
   - By letter
   - Computer – e mail
   - Through a family member/ person who helps you
   - Another way
4. Explore any problems with Jobcentres related to contacting them

**Long topic guide**

*Introduction to telephony barriers*

1. Would you describe yourself as having a disability or a specific communication barrier? Explore what disability or barrier is, but make sure all information is voluntarily given.
   - During telephone conversations
   - When discussing personal and detailed information
2. Do you use a phone? If yes, how do you feel about using the phone?
   - if confused, stressed or anxious – is this more than when talking face to face?
3. How do you make contact with agencies which use phone systems?
4. How capable/able do you feel to have a 45 minute telephone conversation?
Feelings about Jobcentre Plus
5. How do you feel about Jobcentre Plus? Explore whether they have general anxieties/problems with the Jobcentre Plus process as a baseline to measure extent of phone-related problems.

Contacting Jobcentre Plus
6. How do you currently contact the Jobcentre? Phone or walk in? What happened in each case? (see variants below)
7. Do you ever abandon a call rather than use the phone – what happens?
8. Have you abandoned any call to Jobcentre Plus? What happened?
9. Have you ever been asked if you have any barriers to using the telephone? How did you feel about being asked that? (explore appreciation or annoyance) Would you have found it useful to have been asked this at the beginning of the claims process?
10. Do you tell First Contact Officers that you have a communication barrier? If yes, what do you say? How do they react? What do they offer? (see variants below)

Alternatives to telephone
11. How could contact with Jobcentre Plus be made easier for you? Why would this be better? Explore options below

Face to face
12. Would you prefer to be seen by an ordinary personal adviser for a face-to-face meeting? Why? Does the contact officer ever suggest this?
13. What additional support would you/do you use in a face-to-face meeting with a Personal Adviser? Who provides it?
   – How well has this worked out?

Computer
14. Do you have a computer?
   – Are you comfortable using a computer?
   – Would you use your computer to contact Jobcentre Plus?
   – Explore feelings about e-mail or online form filling.
15. Would you use a computer in a public access point?

Clerical claims
16. Have you ever chosen to complete a clerical claim form rather than over the phone/online? How did you obtain your form?
   – Did you find this process easier than the telephone? Why?
3rd party involvement
17. Do you use a signer or an interpreter – have you ever been offered an signer/interpreter by Jobcentre Plus? At what stage? How did this work out? Explore quality. (see variants below)

18. Do you use an advocate? Do you use anyone else to help make the call to Jobcentre? (See variants below)
   – How does this work?
   – How do they react?

19. Have you ever had a call back at a different time? How did this work in practice? (especially in terms of arranging 3rd party representation/interpretation)

General closing questions
20. Have you been offered other type of communication support by Jobcentre Plus? What was it? At what point is offer made – first contact or later?

21. What could be changed to make it easier for you to communicate with Jobcentre Plus? Explore short-term and longer-term solutions? (e.g. accessible website)

Jobcentre plus staff
22. How confident were Jobcentre Plus staff in accommodating your communication needs?

23. How sensitive were they to your requirements?

Close
24. Anything else you would like to add?

GIVE THEM THE LETTER
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental health</th>
<th>Hearing impaired</th>
<th>Speech impaired</th>
<th>Non-English speakers</th>
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<td><strong>Q6</strong> How do you currently contact the Jobcentre? Phone or walk in? What happened in each case?</td>
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<td>Do you use a text phone? Can you use your phone/is your phone compatible with Jobcentre Plus systems? If problems – what are they specifically?</td>
<td>Do you use a text phone? Can you use your phone/is your phone compatible with Jobcentre Plus systems? If problems – what are they specifically?</td>
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<td>How suitable do you think it would be to complete the necessary conversation on a text phone? (given the 45 min length of call)</td>
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<td><strong>Q11</strong> Have you ever been asked if you have any barriers to using the telephone? How did you feel about being asked that? (explore appreciation or annoyance) Would you have found it useful to have been asked this at the beginning of the claims process? Do you tell First Contact Officers you have a mental health problem? If yes, what do you say? How do they react? What do they offer?</td>
<td>Have you ever been asked if you have any barriers to using the telephone? How did you feel about being asked that? (explore appreciation or annoyance) Would you have found it useful to have been asked this at the beginning of the claims process? Do you tell First Contact Officers you have a mental health problem? If yes, what do you say? How do they react? What do they offer?</td>
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Appendices – Research tools
Carers/advocates/third party helper

1. How long have you been a carer/advocate/helper? For the interviewee only or for different people?

2. What is your job as a 3rd party supporter (carer, interpreter, translator, advocate, etc)

3. Are you a paid supporter? Who pays you? Where pay is from Jobcentre Plus – is this a satisfactory arrangement? Other payment issues, e.g. reliance on voluntary help rather than paid? What could improve?

4. Any experience of advocating with Jobcentre Plus? (Explore at initial claim and over phone/in person and how it works in practice). Compare to other agencies they contact for the customer.

5. What happened in each case? (Explore: acceptance by FCOs, ease of process for advocates/customers)

6. Explore practical issues, e.g. how practical is it to advocate for someone during a phone call that normally takes 45 minutes, other issues?

7. When advocating, how do your customers currently contact the Jobcentre? Phone or walk in? What happened in each case?

8. Explore length of phone calls undertaken for customer and how it worked. Any issues re informed consent?

9. Do you ever abandoned a call rather than use the phone – what happened (baseline question)?

10. Have you abandoned any call to Jobcentre Plus? What happened?

11. As an advocate, would you prefer to undertake the interview with an ordinary personal adviser as a face-to-face meeting? Why? Does the contact officer ever suggest this?

12. How could contact with Jobcentre Plus be made easier for you/the person you represent? Why would this be better? Explore other ways of contacting Jobcentre Plus and why easier/better.

13. Anything to add.
Topic Guide: Contact Centre Managers & Team Leaders

Introduction to the interview

Introduce yourself, and explain that ECOTEC was commissioned by Jobcentre Plus and that this is one part of a three strand study that will concentrate on Jobcentre Plus telephony services and will explore communication issues experienced by Jobcentre Plus customers.

Emphasise that we are a completely independent organisation, with no ties to any political parties or government departments, and that we’re primarily interested to hear about their views and perceptions of customers’ experiences of communication and accessibility of Jobcentre Plus services.

Outline:
• Interview length – approx. 30 minutes;
• Permission for taping and transcription (otherwise detailed notes);
• Confidentiality.

Strand three of the study will examine how staff in Contact Centres currently deal with individuals for whom telephony causes a problem. It will explore processes that are in place, training provision, and support for staff to enable them to deal with these customers. More specifically, it will investigate:
• What processes are in place and if they work?
• Do staff follow the processes?
• What training has been received?
• What support is received to deal with individuals where telephony causes a problem?

Background information
• Record interviewee’s job role.
• Record length of service with Jobcentre Plus (i.e. since before/after introduction of Contact Centres) and in Contact Centre.
• Record length of time in current job role and any previous roles held within Jobcentre Plus.
• Any work experience delivering other telephony based services?
**Scale of the issue**

1. Explore the total call volume to the Contact Centre.

2. Approximately what proportion of calls does the Contact Centre deal with where telephony makes it difficult for customers to communicate their needs?

3. How are these recorded? *e.g. CMS/LMS (gain description)*

4. Explore different types of communication difficulties that customers ringing the contact centre face (*interviewer note: how these are dealt with is explored later in topic guide*)

5. Explore differences between people with specific communications difficulties and other customers.
   - Are customers with communication barriers dealt with differently?

6. Any systems in place for dealing with customers with different kinds of communication barriers? Gain full description, including whether national/local set procedure.
   If no procedures, why?

7. How are correct procedures communicated to staff? (*e.g. e-mail, intranet, staff meetings*).
   - Explore effectiveness of these communication methods.
   - How do managers know whether staff have read, understood and taken on board correct procedures?
   - Could any improvements be made to the set procedures?
   - Have you developed any of your own set procedures?
   - If yes - Have they been implemented by staff?

8. Explore whether set procedures are adopted by staff in their daily dealings with customers.

9. Explore effectiveness of the set procedures in suitably helping customer, including evidence.
   - Any individual variations to the set procedures? – if so any idea why?

**Resource implications**

10. What is the expected call duration for each customer contact?

11. How does it affect the call duration when someone is having difficulty communicating on the telephone?
   - Explore whether longer or shorter than the average call.
   - If shorter – what is the level of essential information not gained? – how do they deal with this?
   - If longer – explore the resource implications and how they deal with this.
12 What are the implications for call centre staff as individuals for taking longer time with calls? On others in the call centre?

13 Is there an impact on call centre targets, and what are the implications of this?
   • How do you deal with/manage this if there is an impact?

**Training and guidance**

14 Have you ever delivered any training as to how to deal with customers with communication barriers to Contact Centre staff?
   • What did it cover?
   • Did it improve the way customers with communication barriers were dealt with?
   • What else is needed regarding training?

15 What guidance is available for frontline staff in how to best meet the needs of these customers? *(gain full description of content, duration and skills gained)*

If in place, explore:
   • Whether all staff receive training or just a selection
   • Effectiveness of guidance used – what is the evidence
   • Explore whether centrally or locally devised guidance
   • If local – reasons for its development and whether good practice has been disseminated to other offices

16 Time available for staff to undertake training/source guidance materials – and any resource implications of this.

If none in place, explore:
   • Reasons for lack of training/guidance
   • Views on need for training/guidance
   • Any action taken to secure training/guidance for staff?

17 What evidence do you have that staff put into practice the training/guidance given?

18 How confident do you believe your staff are to deal with telephony barriers (explore basis for perception)?

19 Are they able to identify customers’ specific disabilities for example mental health, learning difficulties *(explore basis for perception)*?

20 How are CMS markers used?
Solutions

21 What are the operational solutions in place to address telephony barriers?
   - Explore Language line/thebigword, interpreter services for people with disabilities, third party intervention/textphones
   - Are these local/national solutions?
   - Do staff receive specific training to use these operational solutions?
   - How successful is the training? How is training delivered?
   - Is it sufficient?

22 Are these operational solutions always used? If not – explore reasons why
   - What prompted the development of these?
   - How successful are they? (if more than one discuss each in turn) – availability, effectiveness of service for staff
   - What do customers using the solution think?

23 Gain views on what could be done to improve the service for these customers?

Summary
   - Anything to add?

Thank and close.
Topic Guide: First Contact Officers

**Introduction to the interview**

Introduce yourself, and explain that ECOTEC was commissioned by Jobcentre Plus and that this is one part of a three strand study that will concentrate on Jobcentre Plus telephony services and will explore communication issues experienced by Jobcentre Plus customers.

Emphasise that we are a completely independent organisation, with no ties to any political parties or government departments, and that we’re primarily interested to hear about their views and perceptions of customers’ experiences of communication and accessibility of Jobcentre Plus services.

Outline:

- Interview length – up to 60 minutes;
- Permission for taping and transcription (otherwise detailed notes);
- Confidentiality.

Strand three of the study will examine how staff in Contact Centres and Jobcentres currently deal with individuals for whom telephony causes a problem. It will explore processes that are in place, training provision, and support for staff to enable them to deal with these customers. More specifically, it will investigate:

- What processes are in place and if they work?
- Do staff follow the processes?
- What training has been received?
- What support is received to deal with individuals where telephony causes a problem?

**Background information**

- Record interviewee’s job role.
- Record length of service with Jobcentre Plus (i.e. since before/after introduction of Contact Centres) and in Contact Centre.
- Record length of time in current job role and any previous roles held within Jobcentre Plus.
- Any work experience delivering other telephony based services?
Experience of customers facing telephony barriers

1. Explore the call volume that they deal with.

2. Explore different types of communication difficulties that customers telephoning the contact centre face.

3. Is it possible to tell whether telephony makes it more difficult for some customers than others to communicate their needs because of their disability/condition/impairment?

4. How do communication barriers manifest themselves?
   - Explore hesitancy, aggression, misunderstandings, and language barriers.
   - Explore proportion of overall case load of these calls.

5. Are you able to identify customers’ specific disabilities, for example mental health, learning difficulties (explore basis for perception)?

6. Do callers ever tell you that they have a specific communication barrier?
   - What proportion?
   - What do they say?
   - How do you deal with this situation?

7. Do you ever ask if callers have a specific communication barrier? What proportion?

8. Do customers use advocates or family to make calls on their behalf?
   - What proportion?
   - How do you deal with this situation?

9. How do you deal with customers experiencing difficulties communicating over the telephone?
   - Explore: Support services available to FCOs;
   - Support provided by the customer (e.g. third party).

10. Do you ever pass calls on to others where there are communication barriers? If yes, who?

11. How are customers who experience difficulties in communicating recorded, e.g. LMS/CMS (gain description)?
    - Can enough/right information be recorded to make it useful to others?

12. Is this information passed on to Jobcentre staff?
    - How?
    - When?
    - Any other action taken (e.g. arrangement of an interpreter/signer or advocate)?
13. How confident do you feel when dealing with customers with telephony barriers?

14. Do you feel able to deal with customers with telephony barriers (explore basis for perception)?

**Impact and resource implications**

15. What is the expected call duration for each customer contact?

16. Is it possible to estimate different call times for someone is having difficulty communicating on the telephone?

17. Explore whether longer or shorter than the average call?

18. If shorter – what is the level of essential information not gained? – how do they deal with this?

19. If longer – explore the impact of this and how they deal with this
   - personally
   - for the call centre as a whole.

20. Are calls ever abandoned before completion? (*Interviewer note:* assure them of confidentiality again here.)
   - Why?
   - Who initiates this?

**Training and guidance**

21. What training/guidance are available for you on how to best meet the needs of these customers (*gain full description of content)*?

   If in place, explore:
   - How is the training delivered? (e.g. guidance to read, sessions from trainers etc)
   - Is this appropriate?
   - Scope of training/guidance – which groups covered, amount of training/guidance
   - Effectiveness/appropriateness of training/guidance used
   - Explore whether centrally or locally devised training/guidance
   - If local – reasons for its development and whether good practice has been disseminated to other offices
   - Do all staff receive this training?

22. Time available for staff to undertake training/source guidance materials – and any resource implications of this.
If none in place, explore:

- Reasons for lack of training/guidance
- Views on need for training/guidance
- Any action taken to secure training/guidance for staff.

23. Have you received any information from your managers on how to communicate with customers with specific communication needs? If so, when?

24. Any guidance on how you should decide what constitutes a significant difficulty with using the telephone?
   - If in place – gain full description of guidance and effectiveness of guidance
   - If none – explore views on need for this

25. Any guidance on using markers?

26. Are there many occasions when you can put into practice the training/guidance given? Explore how, how frequently, and impact.

**Procedures/solutions for dealing with customers where telephony causes problems**

27. Explore whether there is a set procedure to follow for customers with communication barriers.
   - What circumstances set procedure in train?
   - Gain full description, including whether national/local set procedure
   - If appropriate – gain reasons for local variation
   - If no set procedure, gain reasons (e.g. perceived lack of need for one)

28. How are correct procedures communicated to you (e.g. e-mail, intranet, staff meetings)?
   - Explore effectiveness of these communication methods
   - how do managers know whether you have read, understood and taken on board correct procedures?

29. Explore whether set procedures are adopted by staff in their daily dealings with customers.
   - Explore effectiveness of the set procedures in suitably helping customer
   - Any individual variations to the set procedures – if so any idea why?

**Solutions**

30. What are the operational solutions in place to address telephony barriers? *Explore Language line/thebigword, interpreter services for people with disabilities, third party intervention/textphones.*
31. Have you received any training to use any of these operational solutions?
   • How useful?

32. Are these local/national solutions?

33. Are these operational solutions always used? *If not – explore reasons why*

34. What prompted these developments?

35. How successful are they? *(if more than one discuss each in turn)* – availability, effectiveness of service for staff

36. Have any customers using the solution given any feedback?

**Summary**

• Gain views on what could be done to improve the service for these customers?
  
• Anything to add?

**Thank and close.**
Topic Guide: Disability Employment Advisers

Introduction to the interview

Introduce yourself, and explain that ECOTEC was commissioned by Jobcentre Plus and that this is one part of a three strand study that will concentrate on Jobcentre Plus telephony services and will explore communication issues experienced by Jobcentre Plus customers.

Emphasise that we are a completely independent organisation, with no ties to any political parties or government departments, and that we’re primarily interested to hear about their views and perceptions of customers’ experiences of communication and accessibility of Jobcentre Plus services.

Outline:

• Interview length – up to 60 minutes;
• Permission for taping and transcription (otherwise detailed notes);
• Confidentiality.

Strand three of the study will examine how staff in Contact Centres and Jobcentres currently deal with individuals for whom telephony causes a problem. It will explore processes that are in place, training provision, and support for staff to enable them to deal with these customers. More specifically, it will investigate:

• What processes are in place and if they work?
• Do staff follow the processes?
• What training has been received?
• What support is received to deal with individuals where telephony causes a problem?

Background information

• Record interviewee’s job role.
• Record length of service with Jobcentre Plus (i.e. since before/after introduction of Contact Centres).
• Record length of time in current job role and any previous roles held within Jobcentre Plus.
• Establish:
  – the size of their caseload
  – the scope of their caseload
  – its proportion to the whole office customer base
  – proportion of their caseload for whom telephony causes difficulties
  – whether they cover one office or a number (how many, distance between each one, working arrangements e.g. set days in specific offices)
  – length of waiting time for an appointment from referral
Communication and accessibility barriers

1. What sort of communication barriers do customers face?
   - Any more common than others?
   - Are these general barriers or are these barriers made worse by the telephony system now in place?

2. How often do you see customers for whom telephony specifically causes problems?
   - What sort of problem?
   - What would be the result for the customer (e.g. abandoned contact)?
   - What is the result for other Jobcentre Plus staff?

3. What level of problem with telephony would an individual need to have to be referred to a DEA as a solution to the telephony problem?
   - Is this the correct use of DEA skills?

4. Has your level of referrals increased since the telephony system was introduced?
   - Have these referrals been appropriate?

5. How would they be put in touch with you as the DEA?
   - referrals made from where?
   - at what stage?
   - any opportunities for self-referral?
   - explore use of CMS/LMS markers and notes.

6. Explore level of information received on referral about customers’ communication needs.
   - How is this communicated?
   - Is the information specific about the types of communication barriers that the individual faces?
   - Does it allow you to be prepared to meet the individual’s communication needs?

7. What are the barriers to referral to DEA for communication issues with telephony systems?
   - Should these barriers be addressed?

8. How have these customers managed to contact Jobcentre Plus? What are the pros and cons of each as a solution to telephony (i.e. only where telephony is a barrier, not as general forms of access)? Explore use of:
• Telephone
• Advocate/signer/interpreter
• Online contact
• Face-to-face First Contact Officers
• Other

9. Have you ever had any experience of customer dissatisfaction about discussing their communication barriers with Jobcentre Plus contact staff? If so, explore:
   • Level of staff understanding of the customers’ needs
   • How customers communicated with staff
   • Ability of staff to see to the customers’ benefit needs

10. Explore availability of interpreters, advocates and signers for interviews – e.g.:
    • how often do they have a customer who needs one?
    • how easy to get one?
    • how often do they have to wait for one?
    • how do they book one?
    • is there a difference between availability of signers and interpreters?

11. How do Jobcentre Plus deal with advocates?
    • How do Jobcentre Plus deal with intermediaries (e.g. CAB)?
    • How do Jobcentre Plus deal with informal support – e.g. family and friends attending to interpret/sign/advocate?

Procedures and solutions
12. Explore whether there is a set procedure to follow for dealing with people experiencing problems with telephony-based services.
    • If so, gain full description, including whether national/local set procedure
    • Is the procedure always followed?
    • Does it involve referral to the DEAs – if no should it?
    • Is the set procedure appropriate for these customers?
    • If appropriate – gain reasons for local variation
    • Explore whether set procedures are adopted by staff in their daily dealings with customers?
    • Explore effectiveness of the set procedures in suitably helping customer?
    • Any individual variations to the set procedures? If so any idea why?
    • If no set procedure, explore DEA’s views on this
13. How are correct procedures communicated to staff? (e.g. e-mail, intranet, staff meetings)
   - Is this effective? Evidence?

**Jobcentres with specific operational solutions**
- What are the operational solutions in place to address problems with telephony?
- What prompted the development of these?
- How successful are they? *(if more than one discuss each in turn)* – availability, effectiveness of service for staff
- What do customers using the solution think?
- What can be improved in this area

**Training and guidance**
14. Is there any training/guidance available/given for frontline staff in how to best meet the needs of these customers? *(gain full description of content)*
   
   If in place, explore:
   - Effectiveness of training/guidance used.
   - Explore whether centrally or locally devised training/guidance.
   - If local – reasons for its development and whether good practice has been disseminated to other offices.
   - What methods are used to deliver the training?
   - Are there many occasions when staff can put into practice the training/guidance given?

15. Time available for staff to undertake training/source guidance materials
   - If time available explore whether any resource implications.

16. If none in place, explore:
   - Reasons for lack of training/guidance.
   - Views on need for training/guidance.
   - Any action taken by staff to secure training/guidance.

17. Have you received any information from your managers on how to communicate with customers with specific communication needs?
   - If in place – gain full description of guidance and effectiveness of guidance.
   - If none – explore views on need for this.

18. Anything to add?

**Thank and close.**
Topic Guide: Face to Face First Contact Officers

Introduction to the interview

Introduce yourself, and explain that ECOTEC was commissioned by Jobcentre Plus and that this is one part of a three strand study that will concentrate on Jobcentre Plus telephony services and will explore communication issues experienced by Jobcentre Plus customers.

Emphasise that we are a completely independent organisation, with no ties to any political parties or government departments, and that we’re primarily interested to hear about their views and perceptions of customers’ experiences of communication and accessibility of Jobcentre Plus services.

Outline:

• Interview length – up to 60 minutes;
• Permission for taping and transcription (otherwise detailed notes);
• Confidentiality.

Strand three of the study will examine how staff in Contact Centres and Jobcentres currently deal with individuals for whom telephony causes a problem. It will explore processes that are in place, training provision, and support for staff to enable them to deal with these customers. More specifically, it will investigate:

• What processes are in place and if they work?
• Do staff follow the processes?
• What training has been received?
• What support is received to deal with individuals where telephony causes a problem?

Background information

• Record interviewee’s job role.
• Record length of service with Jobcentre Plus (i.e. since before/after introduction of Contact Centres) and in Contact Centre.
• Record length of time in current job role and any previous roles held within Jobcentre Plus.
Experience of customers facing telephony barriers

1. Explore the customer volume that they deal with as a face-to-face First Contact Officer.
   - How many of these customers have tried to initiate a claim through the Contact Centre route?
   - Do customers have to present with a certain level of communication needs to be able to use a face to face First Contact Officer? If so, what is this?

2. Explore different types of communication difficulties that customers telephoning Contact Centres face.

3. Explore their experience of whether telephony makes it more difficult for some customers than others to communicate their needs because of their disability/condition/impairment?

4. How do communication barriers manifest themselves?
   - Explore hesitancy, aggression, misunderstandings, and language barriers.
   - Explore proportion of overall case load of customers with these manifestations.

5. Are you able to identify customers’ specific disabilities for example mental health, learning difficulties (explore basis for perception)

6. Do customers ever tell you that they have a specific communication barrier?
   - What proportion?
   - What do they say?
   - How do you deal with this situation?

7. Do you ever ask if customers have a specific communication barrier? What proportion?

8. Do customers use advocates or family to speak on their behalf?
   - What proportion?
   - How do you deal with this situation?

9. How do you deal with customers experiencing difficulties communicating with you?
   - Explore: Support services available to FCOs.
   - Support provided by the customer (e.g. third party).

10. Do you ever pass customers on to others where there are communication barriers? If yes, who?

11. How are customers who experience difficulties in communicating recorded, e.g. LMS/CMS (gain description)?
   - Can enough/right information be recorded to make it useful to others?
12. Is this information passed on to other Jobcentre staff?
   • How?
   • When?
   • Any other action taken (e.g. arrangement of an interpreter/signer or advocate)?

13. How confident do you feel when dealing with customers with communication barriers?

14. Do you feel able to deal with customers with communication barriers (explore basis for perception)?

**Impact and resource implications**

15. What is the expected duration for each customer contact?

16. Is it possible to estimate different times for someone having difficulty communicating with you?

17. Explore whether longer or shorter than the average contact.

18. If shorter – what is the level of essential information not gained? – how do they deal with this?

19. If longer – explore the impact of this and how they deal with this:
   • personally;
   • for the Jobcentre as a whole.

20. Are interviews ever abandoned before completion? *(Interviewer note: assure them of confidentiality again here.)*
   • Why?
   • Who initiates this?

**Training and guidance**

21. What training/guidance is available for you on how to best meet the needs of these customers *(gain full description of content)*?

   If in place, explore:
   • How is the training delivered (e.g. guidance to read, sessions from trainers etc)?
   • Is this appropriate?
   • Scope of training/guidance – which groups covered, amount of training/guidance.
   • Effectiveness/appropriateness of training/guidance used.
   • Explore whether centrally or locally devised training/guidance.
• If local – reasons for its development and whether good practice has been disseminated to other offices.
• Do all staff receive this training?

22. Time available for staff to undertake training/source guidance materials – and any resource implications of this.
   If none in place, explore:
   • Reasons for lack of training/guidance.
   • Views on need for training/guidance.
   • Any action taken to secure training/guidance for staff.

23. Have you received any information from your managers on how to communicate with customers with specific communication needs? If so, when?

24. Any guidance on how you should decide what constitutes a significant difficulty with using the telephone?
   • If in place – gain full description of guidance and effectiveness of guidance.
   • If none – explore views on need for this.

25. Any guidance on using markers?

26. Are there many occasions when you can put into practice the training/guidance given? Explore how, how frequently, and impact.

**Procedures/solutions for dealing with customers where telephony causes problems**

27. Explore whether there is a set procedure to follow for customers with communication barriers.
   • What circumstances set procedure in train?
   • Gain full description, including whether national/local set procedure.
   • If appropriate – gain reasons for local variation.
   • If no set procedure, gain reasons (e.g. perceived lack of need for one).

28. How are correct procedures communicated to you (e.g. e-mail, intranet, staff meetings)?
   • Explore effectiveness of these communication methods?
   • how do managers know whether you have read, understood and taken on board correct procedures?

29. Explore whether set procedures are adopted by staff in their daily dealings with customers?
   • Explore effectiveness of the set procedures in suitably helping customer?
   • Any individual variations to the set procedures? If so any idea why?
Solutions
30. What are the operational solutions in place to address telephony barriers? *Explore Language line/thebigword, interpreter services for people with disabilities, third party intervention/textphones.*

31. Have you received any training to use any of these operational solutions?
   - How useful?

32. Are these local/national solutions?

33. Are these operational solutions always used? *If not – explore reasons why.*

34. What prompted these developments?

35. How successful are they? *(if more than one discuss each in turn) – availability, effectiveness of service for staff.*

36. Have any customers using the solution given any feedback?

Summary
- Gain views on what could be done to improve the service for these customers?
- Anything to add?

Thank and close.
Topic Guide: Floorwalkers

**Introduction to the interview**

Introduce yourself, and explain that ECOTEC was commissioned by Jobcentre Plus and that this is one part of a three strand study that will concentrate on Jobcentre Plus telephony services and will explore communication issues experienced by Jobcentre Plus customers.

Emphasise that we are a completely independent organisation, with no ties to any political parties or government departments, and that we’re primarily interested to hear about their views and perceptions of customers’ experiences of communication and accessibility of Jobcentre Plus services.

Outline:

- Interview length – up to 60 minutes;
- Permission for taping and transcription (otherwise detailed notes);
- Confidentiality.

Strand three of the study will examine how staff in Contact Centres and Jobcentres currently deal with individuals for whom telephony causes a problem. It will explore processes that are in place, training provision, and support for staff to enable them to deal with these customers. More specifically, it will investigate:

- What processes are in place and if they work.
- Do staff follow the processes?
- What training has been received?
- What support is received to deal with individuals where telephony causes a problem?

**Background information**

- Record interviewee’s job role.
- Record length of service with Jobcentre Plus (i.e. since before/after introduction of Contact Centres) and in Contact Centre.
- Record length of time in current job role and any previous roles held within Jobcentre Plus.
- Any work experience delivering other telephony-based services?
Experience of customers with additional communication needs

1. Explore the volume of customers that they deal with.

2. Explore different types of communication difficulties that customers visiting their office face.

3. Are you able to identify customers’ specific disabilities, for example mental health, learning difficulties (explore basis for perception)?

4. Do customers ever tell you that they have a specific communication barrier?
   - What proportion?
   - What do they say?

5. Do you ever ask if customers have a specific communication barrier? What proportion?

6. Do customers use advocates or family to communicate on their behalf?
   - What proportion?
   - How do you deal with this situation?
   - How do you deal with customers experiencing difficulties communicating their needs?

7. How is this information passed on to other Jobcentre staff, e.g. PA?
   - How?
   - When?
   - Any other action taken (e.g. arrangement of an interpreter/signer or advocate)?

8. How confident do you feel when dealing with customers with additional communication needs?

9. How able do you feel to deal with customers with communication barriers (explore basis for perception)?

Training and guidance

10. Is there any training/guidance available/given for you on how to best meet the needs of these customers (gain full description of content)?
    If in place, explore:
    - Scope of training/guidance – which groups covered, amount of training/guidance.
    - Effectiveness/appropriateness of training/guidance used.
    - Explore whether centrally or locally devised training/guidance.
    - If local – reasons for its development and whether good practice has been disseminated to other offices.
• Are there many occasions when you can put into practice the training/guidance given? Explore how, how frequently, and impact.

11. Time available for staff to undertake training/source guidance materials – and any resource implications of this.

If none in place, explore:
• Reasons for lack of training/guidance.
• Views on need for training/guidance.
• Any action taken to secure training/guidance for staff.
• Have you received any information from your managers on how to communicate with customers with specific communication needs? If so, when?

**Procedures/solutions for dealing with customers with additional communication needs**

12. Explore whether there is a set procedure to follow.

13. How are correct procedures communicated to you (e.g. e-mail, intranet, staff meetings)?
   • How do managers know whether you have read, understood and taken on board correct procedures?

14. Explore whether set procedures are adopted by staff in their daily dealings with customers.
   • Explore effectiveness of the set procedures in suitably helping customer.
   • Any individual variations to the set procedures? If so any idea why?

**Summary**

• Gain views on what could be done to improve the service for these customers?
• Anything to add?

**Thank and close.**
Introduction to the interview

Introduce yourself, and explain that ECOTEC was commissioned by Jobcentre Plus and that this is one part of a three strand study that will concentrate on Jobcentre Plus telephony services and will explore communication issues experienced by Jobcentre Plus customers.

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Outline:

• Interview length – up to 60 minutes;
• Permission for taping and transcription (otherwise detailed notes);
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Strand three of the study will examine how staff in Contact Centres and Jobcentres currently deal with individuals for whom telephony causes a problem. It will explore processes that are in place, training provision, and support for staff to enable them to deal with these customers. More specifically, it will investigate:

• What processes are in place and if they work?
• Do staff follow the processes?
• What training has been received?
• What support is received to deal with individuals where telephony causes a problem?

Background information

• Record interviewee’s job role.
• Record length of service with Jobcentre Plus (i.e. since before/after introduction of Contact Centres).
• Record length of time in current job role and any previous roles held within Jobcentre Plus.
• Establish:
  – the size of their caseload.
  – proportion of their caseload facing communication and accessibility barriers (specifically those covered by this study).
Communication barriers

1. What sort of communication barriers do customers face?
   - Any more common than others?
   - Are these general barriers or are these barriers made worse by the telephony system now in place?

2. How often do you see customers for whom telephony specifically has caused problems?
   - What sort of problem?
   - What would be the result for the customer (e.g. abandoned contact)?

3. What is the result for other Jobcentre Plus staff?

4. How do you deal with customers’ additional communication needs? Explore:
   - support services available to PAs.
   - support provided by the customer (e.g. third party).

5. What level of problem with telephony would an individual need to have to be referred to a DEA as a solution to the telephony problem?
   - Is this the correct use of DEA skills?
   - Are you responsible for referring customers to DEAs? Explore how they do this and at the circumstances or stage in process.
   - How often do you put customers in touch with the DEA?
   - Explore level of availability of DEAs.
   - Any opportunities for customers to self-refer?

6. How able do you feel to deal with customers with communication barriers (explore basis for perception)?

7. How confident do you feel when dealing with customers with communication barriers (explore basis for perception)?

8. Are you able to identify customers’ specific disabilities, eg mental health, learning difficulties (explore basis for perception)?
   - Explore the implications of different conditions/disabilities for their communication with the customer.

9. Explore use of CMS/LMS and usefulness regarding customers’ communication needs (how is this communicated).

10. Is there any other support available for customers with communication barriers not referred to a DEA (e.g. on IB).
    - Is this adequate?
    - Could any improvements be made?
11. How have these customers managed to contact Jobcentre Plus? What are the pros and cons of each as a solution to telephony (i.e. only where telephony is a barrier, not as general forms of access)? Explore use of:
   - telephone
   - advocate /signer/interpreter
   - online contact
   - face to face First Contact Officers
   - other.

12. Have you ever had any experience of customer dissatisfaction about discussing their communication barriers with Jobcentre Plus contact staff? If so, explore:
   - level of staff understanding of the customers’ needs.
   - how customers communicated with staff.
   - ability of staff to see to the customers’ benefit needs.

13. Explore availability of interpreters, advocates and signers for interviews – e.g:
   - how often do they have a customer who needs one?
   - how easy to get one?
   - how often do they have to wait for one?
   - how do they book one?
   - is there a difference between availability of signers and interpreters?

14. How do Jobcentre Plus deal with advocates?

15. How do Jobcentre Plus deal with intermediaries (e.g. CAB)?

16. How do Jobcentre Plus deal with informal support – e.g. family and friends attending to interpret/sign advocate?

**Procedures and solutions**
- Explore whether there is a set procedure to follow for dealing with people experiencing problems with telephony-based services.
  - If so, gain full description, including whether national/local set procedure.
  - If appropriate – gain reasons for local variation.

17. How are correct procedures communicated to staff (e.g. e-mail, intranet, staff meetings)?

18. Explore PA’s views on the effectiveness of these communication methods.

19. Explore whether set procedures are adopted by staff in their daily dealings with customers.
   - If no set procedure, explore PA’s views on this.
20. How are correct procedures communicated to staff (e.g. e-mail, intranet, staff meetings)?
   - Explore PA’s views on the effectiveness of these communication methods.
   - Explore whether set procedures are adopted by staff in their daily dealings with customers.


22. Any individual variations to the set procedures? If so any idea why?

23. Explore PA’s views on what could be done to improve the Jobcentre Plus service for these customers.

24. What can be improved in this area (are there Jobcentres with specific operational solutions in place)?
   - What are the operational solutions in place to address problems with telephony?
   - (Explore Language line/thebigword, interpreter services for people with disabilities, third party intervention.)
   - What prompted the development of these?
   - How successful are they? (if more than one discuss each in turn) – availability, effectiveness of service for staff?
   - What do customers using the solution think?

Training and guidance

25. Is there any training/guidance available/given for frontline staff in how to best meet the needs of these customers (gain full description of content)?
   - If in place, explore:
     - Effectiveness of training/guidance used.
     - Explore whether centrally or locally devised training/guidance.
     - If local – reasons for its development and whether good practice has been disseminated to other offices.

26. What methods are used to deliver the training?

27. Are there many occasions when staff can put into practice the training/guidance given?

28. Time available for staff to undertake training/source guidance materials.
   - If time available explore whether any resource implications.
   - If none in place, explore:
     - Reasons for lack of training/guidance.
     - Views on need for training/guidance.
     - Any action taken by staff to secure training/guidance.
29. Have you received any information from your managers on how to communicate with customers with specific communication barriers? If so, when?

30. Anything to add?

Thank and close.