A report of research carried out by Insite Research and Consulting on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions
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Insite Research and Consulting is an independent consultancy which provides research and evaluation services to public sector organisations working in the employment and social policy fields.
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<td>Adviser Discretion Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATJ</td>
<td>Action Team for Jobs</td>
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<td>CTC</td>
<td>Child Tax Credit</td>
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<td>DMA</td>
<td>Decision making and appeals</td>
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<td>DWP</td>
<td>Department for Work and Pensions</td>
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<td>English for Speakers of other Languages</td>
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<td>EZ</td>
<td>Employment Zone</td>
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<td>IWBC</td>
<td>In work benefit calculation</td>
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<td>Failure to attend</td>
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<td>ND 25+</td>
<td>New Deal 25 plus</td>
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<td>New Deal for Lone Parents</td>
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<td>New Deal for Young People</td>
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<td>PA</td>
<td>Personal adviser</td>
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<td>PJA</td>
<td>Personal Job Account</td>
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<td>PC</td>
<td>Personal computer</td>
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<td>WFI</td>
<td>Work focussed interview</td>
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Summary

Background

Employment Zones (EZs) were introduced in April 2000 in 15 areas of the UK experiencing high concentrations of long-term unemployed people. EZs currently target unemployed individuals aged 25 and over who have been claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) for at least 18 months. Participation is mandatory for eligible JSA claimants. EZs were expanded in 2003 to include lone parents in receipt of Income Support (IS), young unemployed people aged 18-24 returning to New Deal, and JSA claimants entitled to early entry to the EZ due to the disadvantages they face in the labour market. Participation is mandatory for young people and early entrants who have chosen to join but is voluntary for lone parents.

Insite Research and Consulting, an independent research consultancy, was appointed by the Department for Work and Pensions to evaluate the extension of EZ to new client groups in seven EZ areas with a single contracted EZ provider. The objectives of the research were to examine the delivery and content of EZ interventions and to assess their role and effectiveness in helping customers secure and sustain work, and to increase the understanding of what works and why for the new client groups. The research was conducted over two phases; phase one took place between November 2003 and November 2004; phase two between January and October 2005. This document summarises phase two findings.

Research methods

Phase two research comprised in-depth, face-to-face follow-up interviews with 72 EZ customers and seven EZ staff approximately one year after they were first interviewed. Follow-up interviews were designed to record longer-term customer outcomes and experiences. Phase two also included 23 new interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff to address issues around the referral of new customers to EZs.
What is working and why?

Regardless of the specific nature of the intervention, the EZ approach seems to work by seeking to improve customers’ labour market position by motivating and providing them with practical help through one-to-one interaction. While adviser skills and expertise are at a premium in terms of packaging successful interventions, customers want to be listened to and to feel that they can exercise some semblance of choice. The flexible and accommodating approach of EZ advisers in taking on board customer job aspirations therefore appears to be key.

Rather than matching customers to existing job vacancies, the EZ approach works to motivate and support customers to achieve an agreed employment goal; a better fit here appears to improve the chances of work being retained longer term. EZs’ employer links help further by building bridges into areas of the labour market from which disadvantaged customers would ordinarily be excluded. Finally, a robust model of in-work support and incentives may also be fundamental, especially where customers have limited work experience or have been away from the labour market for significant periods of time.

EZ delivery to new customer groups

One year on, the introduction of new customer groups had reinforced and consolidated the fundamental EZ approach. Individually tailored packages of help delivered one to one, including supported access to employers and jobs, represented the core tenet of EZ delivery in most single provider areas. One EZ had dedicated lone parent delivery; however, in most EZs, integrated provision and delivery across the different customer groups was the norm. Little distinction was drawn between mandatory and voluntary customers in terms of the help and support provided or adviser working practices. Though several EZs had specialist lone parent advisers, most EZ advisers were generalists dealing with all customer types and ages.

A degree of retrenchment and restructuring was evident in EZs’ staffing and delivery arrangements. In part this was due to lower than predicted client flows which had reduced the need for advisory staff and premises. It was also a response to the experience of dealing with a wider customer base and to difficulties encountered in achieving sustained job outcomes. Many EZs found that new customers who moved into work often left or lost their jobs before 13 weeks of employment. To boost performance and income, greater focus, effort and investment was being made on ensuring that customers who moved into work stayed employed for at least 13 weeks.

To this end, some EZs had recently introduced specialist advisers to support working customers. Others had restructured EZ delivery, redeploying staff according to the particular EZ stage customers were at. Many EZs were seeking to incentivise job retention through funding training courses or paying financial bonuses when customers reached thirteen weeks employment. It was too soon to say whether such methods were working or which types of intervention were more or less successful with different customer groups.
18-24 New Deal returners

Following a slow start, the referral of 18-24 New Deal returners was now operating effectively. In most EZ areas, Jobcentre Plus advisers were generally happy to refer customers whom Jobcentre Plus had been unable to help into sustained work. Customers were responding well to mandatory referral; few needed sanctioning by Jobcentre Plus advisers to ensure their attendance at the EZ. EZs generally used sanctions as a last resort.

Jobcentre Plus advisers had mainly positive views of EZs due partly to the perceived absence of any strong sense of competition. EZs’ performance in terms of helping individual New Deal returners into work had also influenced perceptions. EZs’ greater flexibility and the availability of one-to-one help were viewed as key reasons for their apparent success, together with the fact that they were seen to be offering customers something new and different from Jobcentre Plus.

EZs had found New Deal returners to be more challenging than originally anticipated, underestimating their propensity to lose or leave their jobs before 13 weeks employment. Greater time and effort was being invested in ensuring a good match between customer aspirations and job referrals, and in helping and motivating customers to sustain work. Customers were being encouraged to widen job search beyond agency work and jobs paying minimum wages where job retention was low. Most EZs also sought to resolve any relevant personal or domestic problems prior to placing customers into work. The benefits of providing continuity of support for 18-24 year old customers who had moved into work was another important lesson EZs had learnt. Many now offered ongoing help and were seeking to incentivise job retention through the payment of financial rewards when customers reached 13 weeks employment.

Overall, one-to-one help and support was more holistic, more tailored, more intensive and being provided for longer periods than EZs had initially expected. Few 18-24 year old customers appeared to offer the prospect of a ‘quick win,’ virtually all required support and investment both before and during employment if they were to sustain work.

The vast majority of 18-24 New Deal returners had positive views and experiences of EZ help. Customer satisfaction was largely unrelated to the amount of financial spend or even to customers’ success in securing work. Rather, positive views stemmed from the one-to-one help and practical support customers received. Having choice in terms of job search activity and not being compelled by the EZ into jobs they did not want, was an important factor in the willingness of customers to engage and co-operate with EZ advisers.

EZs had helped some 18-24 year old customers to secure jobs they would not otherwise have access to through their contacts and relationships with local employers. Having the one to one support of EZ advisers was again key to the ability of customers to move beyond the types of jobs and sectors they were familiar with. The small number of customers who reported they had received in-work support believed it had been instrumental in enabling them to remain employed.
18-24 early entrants

18-24 early entrants were mostly referred to the EZ by Jobcentre Plus advisers because of low levels of literacy and numeracy or learning difficulties. Occasionally, 18-24 customers requested a referral themselves, having heard about the EZ from a friend or relative. Both Jobcentre Plus and EZs went to considerable lengths to ensure younger early entrants understood that participation would be mandatory once they had decided to join the EZ.

Essentially the same EZ help and one-to-one methods were being used for younger early entrants as for New Deal returners. However, greater emphasis was placed on providing practical help with job search and on resolving lifestyle issues, said to be more prevalent among this group, before placing them in work. Some EZs also delivered short work-related basic skills training prior to helping customers move into employment.

Other than knowing that they wanted work, many 18-24 early entrant customers lacked confidence and direction and were not clear what they wanted to do or could do. Most had very limited employment experience and some had never worked. Lacking in the practical skills of job search, the availability of one-to-one, personalised help from an EZ adviser assumed key significance. EZ employer links and supported work trials and employer placements were also important aspects of help, together with proactive in-work support. Taken together, these elements of EZ support were crucial in the ability of 18-24 early entrants to access and sustain work.

25 plus early entrants

25 plus early entry customers were considerably more likely to ‘self refer’ or request a referral to the EZ than 18-24 customers. Many knew of the EZ and of the type of assistance available, either by word of mouth or from previous EZ experience. Customers frequently wanted financial help to pay for training or business start-up. Assuming customers were eligible, Jobcentre Plus advisers were generally amenable to such requests. However, there was often a need to manage expectations concerning any financial help they might get and to highlight EZs’ main focus on work, not training.

25 plus early entry customers comprised two distinct sub-groups – the ‘job ready’ and the ‘hardest to help’. Those who arrived at the EZ with a clear job goal and a firm idea of the help they needed often moved quickly into work and sustained their employment. At the other end of the spectrum were EZ repeat customers, many of whom had multiple and deeply-entrenched barriers. These customers could be helped if they genuinely wanted to work and were prepared to be flexible. However, EZs found those with entrenched behaviours and attitudes to be among the hardest to help. Many such customers left the EZ without a job. People with mental health conditions were particularly hard to help and some EZ managers questioned whether such individuals were suitable for EZ referral.
Among 25 plus early entry customers, flexible financial support and incentives came strongly to the fore as a successful EZ intervention. For customers with significant employment barriers, intensive, individually-tailored support also appeared to be key. Again, what customers appreciated most was receiving one-to-one help from a personal adviser. In-work support seemed less critical to sustainability; once 25 plus customers moved into work, most stayed employed and few seemed to need further help.

Lone parents

Across all EZ areas, the number of lone parents referred from Jobcentre Plus was reported to be low. Customers referred to EZs were said to be mainly those whom New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) was unable to help. This tended to be lone parents who were not immediately job ready who wanted or needed expensive training or specialist help, or who had longer-term career goals.

There were different views as to why lone parent referral was low. Jobcentre Plus advisers tended to attribute it to a lack of differentiation between NDLP and EZ help. Others believed that lone parents engaged through a Work Focused Interview (WFI) liked to stay with the same Jobcentre Plus adviser. An alternative view among managers was the strong sense of competition between the two agencies for lone parent customers. Joint efforts to improve working relationships had increased the referral of lone parents in some areas but elsewhere had not.

EZs had adopted a variety of methods to engage lone parents independently of Jobcentre Plus including marketing and publicity, outreach activity and dedicated lone parent delivery. In spite of these efforts, lone parent recruitment remained generally low and mostly happened by word of mouth. The difficulties of engaging lone parents were perceived by EZs to be largely due to a shrinking pool of customers interested in work.

EZs’ experiences of working with lone parents were mixed. For some EZs, lone parents represented the customer group among whom job entry and retention levels were highest. Other EZs reported lone parents to be much like mandatory customers; many were said to lack motivation and could be difficult to move into work.

Lone parent customers liked the friendliness, informality and accessibility of EZ help, especially when delivered on an outreach basis and away from Jobcentre Plus environments. They particularly valued the ability to pursue their own work and career agendas and the fact that EZ help was delivered one to one and holistic, addressing a broad range of issues and barriers. EZ interventions had helped some lone parents to sustain work when problems arose early on. However, some customers experienced difficulties after several months of working and would have liked EZ support to have been provided for longer.
1 Introduction

1.1 Evaluation of Employment Zones

This report presents the findings of a two phase longitudinal research study to evaluate the extension of Employment Zones (EZs) to lone parents, unemployed 18-24 year olds otherwise returning to New Deal for Young People (NDYP) and unemployed individuals eligible to join EZs early because of the disadvantages they face.

EZs were introduced in April 2000 in 15 areas of the UK experiencing high concentrations of long-term unemployed people. The introduction of Employment Zones formed an important part of the Government’s welfare to work and anti-poverty strategies, marking a radical shift in approaches to addressing long-term unemployment. Flexibility and adviser discretion were fundamental to the EZ approach which delivered adviser-led customised help to assist unemployed individuals into work. Contracts were awarded by open competition to commercial organisations and strongly emphasised payment by results measured in terms of helping clients into sustained employment.

The current research is the latest in a series of studies commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to examine the effectiveness, outcomes and impact of EZs. Previous research and evaluations have shown the EZ approach to be working for some long-term unemployed people for whom mainstream Jobcentre Plus services have proved unsuccessful in the past.1,2


1.2 Extending EZs to new client groups

EZs originally targeted unemployed individuals aged 25 and over who had been claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) for at least 12 months. In 2003, eligibility for 25 plus customers was increased to 18 months. The customer group was also expanded in October 2003 to include lone parents in receipt of Income Support (IS), young unemployed people aged 18-24 otherwise returning to New Deal and JSA claimants entitled to gain early entry to the EZ due to the disadvantages they face in the labour market. Customers may spend up to 52 weeks on the EZ. Participation is mandatory for young people and for early entrants who have decided to join, but for lone parents participation is voluntary. EZ activity to increase the participation of mandatory clients is not permitted. Providers are however encouraged to market their services independently to lone parents.

1.3 Single provider contractors

In seven EZ areas, a single provider is delivering services to new and existing 25 plus customers. In other EZs areas, multiple provider arrangements have been implemented which are the subject of a separate evaluation. Single provider EZs operate in: Plymouth, Nottingham, Doncaster, Middlesborough, South Wales, North West Wales and Brighton. Following a competitive tendering exercise, four providers were awarded contracts to deliver EZ services. The same provider is contracted to deliver services in Plymouth, South Wales, North West Wales and Brighton.

1.4 EZ stages and funding

EZ stages relate to the periods for which providers receive funding. There are three stages and a follow on period:

- Stage One: A maximum four week introductory period to identify clients’ needs and employment barriers.

- Stage Two: Up to 26 weeks of intensive support to implement the action plan and place the client into work.

- Stage Three: EZs receive outcome payments when clients move into work and a further payment if clients remain in work for at least 13 weeks.

- Follow on: A maximum of 22 weeks follow-on support is available for mandated clients who remain unemployed at the end of Stage Two. EZs are not paid for this stage but can claim outcome payments if clients secure work.
1.5 Research aims and objectives

In November 2003, Insite Research and Consulting, an independent research consultancy, was appointed by the DWP to evaluate the extension of EZs to new client groups in the seven single-provider areas. The research was conducted over two phases. Phase one took place between November 2003 and November 2004, and phase two between January and October 2005. The overall aims of the research were to:

- investigate the effectiveness of referral, recruitment and EZ delivery arrangements for the new client groups;
- record the experiences of lone parents, young people and early entrants in EZs, and examine the factors that underpin and affect their participation and outcomes;
- explore the content and effectiveness of EZ interventions in sustaining work to increase the understanding of what works and why for the new client groups;
- to contribute to the body of evidence and wider debates concerning the modernisation and contestability of public services.

The research was not intended to compare EZ delivery and outcomes with Jobcentre Plus services but sought to describe the EZ approach, assessing the effectiveness and value of specific EZ interventions to new customer groups.

This report presents findings from phase two. Phase one findings which addressed early implementation issues were published separately by DWP in January 2005.

1.6 Research methods

Phase one explored early implementation issues through 147 in-depth face-to-face interviews with new customers participating in EZs and 42 EZ advisers and managers. Live observations of meetings between EZ advisers and clients were also conducted.

Phase two was conducted between January and October 2005 and comprised a series of follow-up interviews with EZ customers and staff across the seven EZ single provider areas, as follows:

- 72 (of 147) follow-up interviews with EZ customers between 12 and 15 months after they were first interviewed in phase one;
- six face-to-face interviews and one telephone follow-up interview with the same EZ managers, 15 months after they were interviewed in phase one.

The aim of follow-up interviews was to explore longer-term experiences and customer outcomes and to assess changes in views over time.
In addition, phase two included interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff, as follows:

- ten face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus New Deal advisers;
- nine face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus New Deal for Lone Parent advisers;
- five face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus District Managers/Deputy Managers.

1.7 Methodological issues

It is important to highlight the achieved customer sample size in phase two and the overall attrition rate. The 72 customers reinterviewed in phase two represented just under half (49 per cent) of the original cohort of 147 customers interviewed in phase one. The number of achieved interviewed and attrition rates for the different customer groups were:

- 28 New Deal returners (55 per cent attrition)
- 7 early entrants aged 18-24 (46 per cent attrition)
- 16 early entrants aged 25 plus (48 per cent attrition)
- 21 lone parents (49 per cent attrition)

Attrition was greatest among customers originally observed at the EZ; 76 per cent compared with 42 per cent for those originally interviewed at home.

Attrition rates at these levels are fairly typical for customers of active labour market programmes. Attrition here was largely due to the difficulties of making contact with EZ customers up to 15 months after they were first interviewed, rather than any unwillingness to take part in the research. In spite of several attempts to make contact, many of the original cohort of interviewees could not be reached using the telephone numbers and addresses available from phase one. Only one former interviewee with whom contact was made declined to participate in phase two.

Regarding any potential for bias that attrition rates may possibly indicate, there is nothing to suggest that customers with whom interviews were held in phase two were any more or any less likely to be employed or unemployed, or any more or less likely to hold positive or negative views, than those who did not take part. The customer who declined to take part in phase two, for example, gave as his reason pressing work commitments.

Regarding the sample size and the qualitative nature of the research, findings are neither intended to be, nor should they be interpreted, as statistically significant or statistically representative of the original sample or of the different customer groups within it. Rather, the research was designed to help evaluate the efficacy and relative success of the specific EZ intervention – essentially to uncover what worked, for whom and under what circumstances. As such, the real life narratives of individual participants represent its proper subject matter and the data with which it operates.
1.8 Report structure

This report is written in six further sections:

- Section 2 describes current EZ management and delivery arrangements in respect of the new client groups and explores key relationships, particularly with Jobcentre Plus.

- Sections 3 to 6 cover each new client group in turn: New Deal returners; early entrants aged 18-24; early entrants aged 25 plus; and lone parents. Each section addresses referral and recruitment issues, Jobcentre Plus perceptions and EZs experiences of working with new customers, and customer outcomes and experiences. The intention throughout is to give an indication of what is working in EZ provision for new customer groups.

- Section 7 summarises findings and presents conclusions for both phases of research.

The appendix lists the eligibility criteria for early entry to EZs.

The references section presents a bibliography of related research and background material to provide a context for the evaluation.
2 EZ delivery arrangements and relationships

2.1 Staffing and delivery arrangements

Since the extension of Employment Zones (EZs) to new customer groups, there had been a degree of retrenchment in the staffing structures and delivery arrangements of single provider EZs. Fluctuating and lower than anticipated client flows appeared to be a key reason, though natural staff turnover had also been a contributory factor. EZs learning how best to deliver services to, and secure sustained employment outcomes from, new customer groups as they got to know them, also represented a key motor of change. Underlying this continuous evolution was the apparent sensitivity of contractors’ behaviours and actions to the EZ funding model.

In many areas, the volume of new customers being recruited by and referred to EZs was reported to be initially lower than planning assumptions indicated. Customer flow had also been variable over time, making it difficult for EZs to plan and manage the delivery of services. Early on, a few providers had concerns about commercial viability because of reductions in anticipated levels of income. Recent improvements in new customer referrals, together with an increase in the flow of traditional 25 plus customers reaching 18 months unemployment, had since stabilised matters:

‘The flow has impacted on everything we did, you know, it really impacted on the company and the staffing and what we could afford to do.’

(EZ Manager)

In terms of responding quickly to changing circumstances, the flatter organisational structures and flexible operating mechanisms of EZs appeared to have stood them in good stead. Over-ambitious staffing plans meant that a number of EZs were obliged to make advisers redundant (though increases in referrals six months later meant that many subsequently recruited more). Some EZs used this opportunity to dispense with a layer of management and to restructure or redefine management roles, placing greater emphasis on performance and quality.
In a number of EZs, plans for specialist customer advisers were set aside in favour of integrated delivery across the different customer groups:

‘We had specialist lone parent advisers but we’ve found that that hasn’t worked because again the volumes are low.’

(EZ Manager)

Exposure to a wider customer base was believed to bring greater variety and interest to the adviser role:

‘It gives a diversity to the caseloads…they’re not dealing with all the same client groups.’

(EZ Manager)

Overall, the trend had been towards less specialism around customer types, and most EZ advisers now dealt with all client and age groups. Rather than focusing on one particular customer group, the approach had been to ‘spread expertise around…and [share] specialist knowledge across the whole team’ (EZ operations manager). To fulfil these broader roles, some advisers had received specialist training, for example, to help identify and assess specific employment barriers such as low levels of literacy and numeracy and drug misuse problems, and to understand the needs of particular disadvantaged groups such as ex-offenders.

One key exception to this trend was in respect of lone parents, whom most EZs believed warranted a different approach and treatment to other customers. The perceived degree of difference and type of response varied between contractors. Most EZs simply recruited specialist lone parent advisers, drawing no further distinction between mandatory and voluntary customers. One contractor, however, considered lone parent customers to be so distinct as to justify separate, dedicated provision. In addition to specialist lone parent advisers, this contractor appointed a dedicated lone parent employer liaison adviser to identify family-friendly employers and provide in-work support.

Another noteworthy trend was for greater focus and adviser specialisation around helping customers to retain work. Most EZs had initially envisaged that all advisers would have responsibility for in-work support and aftercare. However, in the light of experience, several had recently appointed specialist in-work advisers, in some cases merging this role with employer liaison activity.

‘Our anticipation…in terms of in-work support was that the adviser…would deliver…post-placement support. Our practice here found that…we had a shortfall in [this] support.’

(EZ Manager)

Recently introduced at the time of the research, it was too soon to judge the overall effectiveness or impact of specialist in-work advisers, though early results were said by EZs to be promising.
Also going against the general trend was one EZ which had adopted specialist 18-24 advisers. Though customer specific, these too had been introduced in recognition of the need to improve job sustainability among this younger age group.

### 2.2 Caseload sizes

Peaks and troughs in referrals had resulted in large fluctuations in adviser caseload sizes, both within and between different EZ contractors; from as low as 20 to as high as 70. Caseload sizes were also a function of geography, as well as staffing arrangements and time lags in adviser recruitment. High caseloads tended to coincide with unexpected surges in referrals and often reduced following adviser recruitment. Low caseloads were more common in rural areas and among specialist advisers. Typical lone parent adviser caseloads, for example, were around 23-30 customers, compared with between 40 and 50 for mandatory customers. Certain EZ contractors chose to operate with smaller caseloads believing that large caseloads might encourage advisers to ‘park’ customers, resulting in poor job outcomes.

### 2.3 EZ premises

Most EZs had retained the same town centre and high street premises. However, mainly due to lower than expected client throughput, the delivery of EZ operations from satellite venues had been curtailed and a number of these smaller offices had been closed or rationalised. Planned improvements in office environments had been shelved by one EZ and in another customer tea and coffee making facilities had been withdrawn. Peripatetic coverage designed to reach customers in more isolated areas was under review. EZs located in rural areas were finding that delivering services to mandatory customers too close to home could serve to reinforce barriers of distance and travelling. Overall the tendency was towards the centralisation of provision and services. In some EZs, advisers working on different programmes had relocated to the same single office resulting in the expansion of some head offices and moves to larger premises. In most cases, these changes had been instituted relatively recently and it was not possible to assess their effects or impacts on customers.

EZs had generally retained their usage of outreach venues to engage lone parents and, in some areas, outreach activity had increased. In most cases, EZs did not operate the venues but only made use of them. Some EZs continued to use Jobcentre Plus offices to meet and greet clients at the point of referral, though again in some EZs this usage was under review.

The contractor operating a dedicated service for lone parents was still based in separate premises and had no plans to discontinue. The decision to separate lone parent delivery was mainly in recognition of the perceived importance of venue and ambiance for engaging this customer group. It was also partly a response to local circumstances where the siting of a prison had increased the prevalence of ex-offenders among mandatory customers and where the mixing of these customers with lone parents was considered to be inappropriate. Separate premises also reflected a different method of delivery based on informal drop in.
2.4 Delivering EZ services to a wider customer base

EZs’ experiences of delivering support to 25 plus customers had strongly informed the practices of EZs and provided a platform for developing services for new customers. From the outset, integrated provision based on individually tailored support represented a core tenet of EZ delivery. One year on, the introduction of new customer groups had done little to change this underlying maxim or on key design features:

‘We haven’t really changed the nature of what we’re offering.’

(EZ Manager)

Segmenting clients into groups or according to contract was seen as overly prescriptive and at odds with offering a personalised, customer-focused service:

‘Our experience here has shown that regardless of whether someone’s 18 or 58, 28...their needs are their needs, it’s...not automatically driven by which age category they fall in...and that is fundamentally the approach...That’s proven in our experience over the last year to be the right approach.’

(EZ Manager)

Even in EZs with specialist lone parent advisers and delivery, EZs drew little distinction between mandatory and voluntary customers in terms of the nature of support and provision available or adviser working practices.

Integrated delivery across the different customer groups had been taken further by some providers by consolidating and streamlining services across the different DWP contracts they operated. Here, dual take up of provision among certain customers and the ‘mixing and matching’ of support funded through different contracts, was not uncommon. A lone parent engaged via Action Team for Jobs (ATJ) activity might, for example, be referred on to the EZ to receive help in the transition to work. Early entrants with substance misuse problems might receive specialist help through a referral to Progress2Work. Customers were reported in most cases to be unaware of these integrated delivery arrangements.

While the underlying EZ approach remained unchanged, dealing with a wider customer base was nevertheless said to have provided EZs with greater insight into and understanding of customers’ barriers to work (whether as groups or as individuals), and therefore of how best to help them sustain employment. This wider experience was believed to have improved adviser skills and expertise, from which individual customers would ultimately benefit:

‘Advisers...learn to deal with different people, they get experience from that and they pick up on their experiences and they can use that breadth of experience to deal with the specific issues that the next client brings along.’

(EZ Manager)

3 Chapters 3 to 6 deal separately and in detail with the specific issues surrounding EZ referral and delivery to each of the new customer groups.
Delivering to a wider base of customers also offered more scope for innovating approaches and developing provision, a process seen to be dynamic and ongoing:

‘What we’ve found is if you try to do too much of the same routine, the jobseekers get used to it, the [advisers] get used to it and you lose that dynamic of change and you actually lose the buzz…’

(EZ Manager)

From a business perspective too, having new customers was believed to have contributed to providers’ longer-term commercial viability through diversifying sources of income and spreading financial risk.

Some EZs had experimented with different customer mixes in group workshops and training sessions – 18-24 customers only and mandatory customers of all ages. The greater mix of customers across the different age groups was believed to have produced a better dynamic in group situations. It had also helped to challenge attitudes to work within different customer groups. One provider had introduced in-house basic skills provision for all mandatory customers needing help. This had not been independently evaluated but was said to be working well.

There also appeared to be a degree of retrenchment evident in terms of the content of customer support. Emphasis was being placed on improving the quality of customer adviser relationships rather than winning over hearts and minds with treats and days out:

‘Going to the Sea Life Centre is all very nice, but do they want to go there?’

(EZ Manager)

Linked to this were reductions and changes in Personal Job Account (PJA) usage and spend. This was said to reflect changes in the way advisers used their discretion, rather than the imposition of any particular rules or limits on the amount or flexibility of PJA usage:

‘Our average spend is less than the amount that [previously we] were spending…because people are thinking about what they spend.’

(EZ Manager)

Focus, effort and spend was clearly being placed on helping customers to sustain work. 18-24 customers, in particular, were found to be especially prone to losing or leaving their jobs before 13 weeks. Virtually all EZs had introduced some form of innovation, initiative or incentive to encourage customers to retain jobs or quickly find them alternative work if, for whatever reason, the job ended before 13 weeks. These included support packages such as a 24-hour telephone helpline and rewards and financial incentives paid when customers had sustained work for 13 weeks – rent deposits, training and driving lessons, for example.
Other EZs concluded that more significant changes were needed in their staffing arrangements, believing that existing structures hampered advisers’ ability to respond quickly when things went wrong. Once customers moved into work, advisers’ interest was often felt to wane, their main focus being on the live caseload of unemployed clients.

‘Our advisers started to concentrate on those in the early part of the programme, pre-work stage and tended to concentrate less on those in work.’

(EZ Manager)

While all EZs identified in-work support as a key element of customer service, here the EZ funding mechanism appeared to be particularly effective at reinforcing provider behaviours:

‘This isn’t about pushing people into work and leaving them to flounder...we support people once they’re in work because... if they’re going to stay 13 weeks, the chances are they’re going to stay a long time, but it’s also critical for us in terms of payment, our key payment comes at 13 weeks into work.’

(EZ Manager)

In EZs that had appointed dedicated specialists to work with a caseload of working customers, support would trigger even before customers started work. These EZs reported promising early results though it was too soon to say which aspects of in-work help were most successful and in which circumstances:

‘We’ve seen our sustainability rate go up by at least...10-15 per cent and increasing all the time.’

(EZ Manager)

Another contractor had gone one step further and restructured adviser roles according to the particular EZ stage the customer was at, freeing-up advisers to concentrate their efforts and expertise on one key stage. Advisers were split into teams focusing on initial assessment (Stage One), pre-employment support and job placement (Stage Two) and in-work after care (Stage Three). The latter team worked alongside employer liaison staff to help customers stay in work or find another job if employment ceased. Though initially developed in response to younger clients, this new arrangement was operating in respect of all customer groups. A system of risk assessment sought to identify in advance those customers with a greater propensity to lose their jobs or leave work early:

‘We split them into risk groups...we will have increased contact with them... probably weekly for a couple of weeks to make sure that they’ll stay in work.’

(EZ Manager)

Those in the high risk category received the greatest support and those considered low risk the least. That said, support was provided on the basis of need and any customer needing help would be given it. Again, the EZ funding model had helped to reinforce EZ behaviours in terms of encouraging them to respond quickly to customers who dropped out of work before 13 weeks employment:
‘If somebody drops out of work, we’ve got five days to get them into work again. We can retain our original sustained outcome date which guarantees our income, but it doesn’t give people a chance to lapse back into claiming benefit.’

(EZ Manager)

Again, it was too early to say whether this approach was working. The one key area of concern raised was how customers would react to having different advisers at different stages of the EZ process.

Reports by EZs of providing help to customers beyond 13 weeks were not uncommon, though support consisted mainly or only of telephone advice, not financial spend. Former customers were also allowed to use office facilities including access to computers and the internet:

‘It’s not uncommon people post 13 weeks come in and do a bit of job search here...we’ve 14 personal computers sat upstairs with all the equipment. In terms of spend, it becomes more difficult...’

(EZ Manager)

EZ managers reported very little take up of follow-on among customers who remained unemployed at 26 weeks. The fact that participation in follow-on was voluntary, and a perceived lack of distinction between fortnightly signing and EZ follow-on, were felt to be key reasons. Most EZs admitted they did little to sell follow-on or differentiate it from Jobcentre Plus help. In recognition of this, some EZ were planning to introduce specific follow-on provision planned to be more informal and delivered on a drop-in basis.

2.5 Relationships with external organisations

Since the extension, external relations at the strategic level appeared diluted. Several EZs had withdrawn from local and regional committees and networks of strategic partners. External relations at operational levels had however strengthened. In particular, relationships with organisations delivering complementary provision and specialist services had consolidated and expanded:

We’re going to have...more of a three way relationship with some outside providers...we’ve had to develop...a lot more links whereby there’ll be...an outside organisation, ourselves and a [customer].’

(EZ Manager)

Some EZs acknowledged that, initially, they had been inclined to operate in isolation of other support agencies and services. In recognition of the depth and complexity of barriers faced by customers, many EZs had come to accept that they could not work alone:
‘Often we’ve operated a bit in isolation, now in cases where we’ve got significant barriers, we’re…going to have to operate a lot more openly.’

(EZ Manager)

Relationships had developed with a range of external organisations and agencies including Sure Start, Remploy, Business Link, National Probation Service, refugee services, Citizens Advice Bureaux and money advice agencies. EZs were both taking referrals from and making referrals to these various specialist support agencies. Relationships here were mutually supportive rather than contractual, and functioned at the individual adviser and customer level. Advisers were encouraged to network to garner knowledge and contacts:

‘What we’ve got are lots of individual working relationships with very specific ...referral agencies – refugee centres, drug and alcohol support agencies, those kinds of relationships...specifically targeted initiatives.’

(EZ Manager)

Where relationships were contractual – training providers and specialist service providers delivering CV preparation, first-aid training and career counselling, for example, usage of provision was judicious. Specialist services were bought in on a customer-by-customer basis and there was no evidence of large scale or pre-contracted provision.

2.6 Relationships with employers

All EZs were involved in actively engaging employers at different levels and in a variety of settings and circumstances. Rather than maintaining large banks of employers or jobs which customers were referred to, individual customers would be marketed to specific employers. Where successful outcomes were achieved, ongoing relationships ensued:

‘[We are] taking clients out to employers and marketing them to employers. On the back of that, we have got employers who come to us and have said “oh that’s worked out really well, can we have more, you know we’ve got five vacancies, can you fill them?”’

(EZ Manager)

Many EZs had fostered mutually beneficial relationships with large mainly public sector employers that needed a constant supply of reliable but not necessarily highly skilled workers. As such they were willing to be flexible and work alongside the EZ to address skill shortages and fill vacancies:

‘We’ve got a very, very close relationship with the NHS Trust who need to recruit huge amounts of workers. They’re adaptable to changing their working patterns to encourage difficult groups to work for them.’

(EZ Manager)
Several EZs ran short employer-led courses to prepare and train customers for specific skill shortage areas. These ranged from call centre to track maintenance and auxiliary nursing courses, depending on local circumstances. Course graduates were guaranteed a job interview or work experience placement, while others moved straight into work. Job sustainability among short-course participants was said to be high.

Dedicated EZ staff took responsibility for building and maintaining relationships with employers and for liaising with customers, as they did in phase one. The only significant change was in respect of the introduction of dedicated in-work advisers attached to employer liaison teams, who worked alongside colleagues helping customers sustain work.

2.7 Relationships between EZs and Jobcentre Plus

Relationships between EZs and Jobcentre Plus were generally cordial and constructive, though complex and multi-faceted. At a personal, senior management and strategic level, there was said to be regular dialogue and a culture of mutual understanding and respect; a number of EZ managers and advisers were former Jobcentre Plus employees and have known colleagues for many years. A certain mutual wariness was however detectable between staff and manager working at operational levels; here views could be more guarded. Opinions were strongly coloured by contractual relationships, performance measurement arrangements and the extent to which there was perceived competition between the agencies.

2.7.1 Strategic management

The majority of District Managers were upbeat in their assessment of EZs. The predominant view was to see EZs as strategic partners charged with achieving different but complementary aims and objectives to Jobcentre Plus. EZs were mainly seen as adding value through offering an alternative approach for moving harder-to-help clients into work, in the belief that some customers would respond better to a different environment to Jobcentre Plus. Here relationships were generally mutually reinforcing and supportive.

It was acknowledged that, historically, relationships with EZs had not been as constructive as they might have been. Conscious efforts to foster a common sense of purpose and to build rapport through dialogue were reported to be paying off, though most managers accepted that more needed to be done:

‘We’re talking about more of a collaborative approach you know – I’ll scratch your back and you scratch mine and we’ll work together, that’s what we’re trying to work towards. Now we haven’t got there yet...but they understand the importance...’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Specific referral roles and relationships between Jobcentre Plus and EZs in respect of the different new customer groups are dealt with separately in the following chapters.
Fostering a culture of mutual support had been facilitated by greater inter-agency information exchange on performance. EZs were said by most District Managers to share with them their DWP-negotiated contract information, including performance targets, and in some areas EZ managers were, in turn, privy to Jobcentre Plus targets and performance.

Opinions varied as to whether EZs were ‘just another provider’ or something different. Some viewed EZs as a contracted provider much like any other contractor. Others saw them as a special partner whose performance was inherently linked to that of Jobcentre Plus:

‘They are an arm of our service...just another contractor.’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘I suppose...I see them as a contractor. They’ve got a contract from DWP and they’re delivering part of our service.’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘They’re a bit different...they are more integral than the other parts of [the business] and I think it’s important the staff do remember that.’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘Their performance is our performance.’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

The extent to which Jobcentre Plus was able to influence and affect EZ behaviour and performance was a moot point. Some District Managers felt constrained by contracting arrangements which they believed placed them at arms length to the EZ:

‘We’re expected to have liaison, dialogue and make things work but on the other hand we have no levers to pull. Our other contracts we manage locally and...the nature of the relationship is then a little different because you...have some authority...With EZ we don’t have that, all the buttons are pressed somewhere else, or not as the case may be.’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘What you’ve essentially got is a provider delivering in your area, but you’re not part of the negotiating dialogue.’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Many District Managers admitted they had yet to fully convince all Jobcentre Plus staff that EZs did not pose a threat and were not in competition for customers and outcomes:
‘We do need to work together...to try and break down the ‘us and them’ culture.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘I think we’ve gradually weaned people off the idea that it’s a competition for work and jobs. It’s simply about the best way to help individual customers to move on into work from benefits...I think it translates to some of the advisers, but certainly not all of them.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

To facilitate greater understanding of EZs as partners, one district provided a breakdown of EZ targets to Jobcentre Plus managers to display on office performance boards. The hope was that, by seeing the tangible contribution EZs make to the achievement of targets, advisers would be encouraged to develop closer working relationships with them:

‘I’m keen to point out...that...[the EZ] is more than a cog, a link in the chain, it does produce results and this is the size of the results that you can get...part of my push to get people to understand that you don’t have to do it all yourself as an adviser.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Others believed that proposals to replace the current system of performance measurement in Jobcentre Plus held the prospect of greater understanding and co-operation between the agencies. New methods being piloted in two Jobcentre Plus districts were said to be showing early promise in terms of closer working practices and relationships, but it was still early days. Local, rather than district, management of lone parent advisers was also believed to be contributing to changing attitudes and allegiances.

Most respondents believed EZs could do more to provide better information about what they did that was distinctive. While some EZs published regular bulletins and leaflets, many did not. A number of District Managers said that they and their staff had limited knowledge of what services and provision EZ offered to customers and how it differed from Jobcentre Plus.

‘They don’t get any real feedback from customers after they’ve been, so I think there’s a lack of clarity as to exactly what the Zone does do that we couldn’t have done anyway.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Some felt these gaps in knowledge and feedback needed to be filled if advisers were to effectively sell services and recruit customers on EZs’ behalf.
2.7.2 Operational management

Operationally, most EZ managers enjoyed strong working relationships with Jobcentre Plus colleagues, though relations in some districts appeared better than in others. Virtually all managers attended ‘keeping in touch’ and other communication meetings and contact appeared to be regular and constructive. Teething problems, mainly associated with low customer flows and referrals, had generally been resolved through dialogue and joint working. There was mutual acknowledgement, however, of the need for more team working and better information exchange between the agencies, for example, regarding customers’ progress and entry and exit data.

Better relations were clearly evident where specific efforts have been made to improve information flows and foster interagency co-operation. In one area, for example, designated Jobcentre Plus advisers had been appointed with specific responsibility for liaising with the EZ, managing paperwork and facilitating information flows. The initiative was reported to have been helpful in smoothing day-to-day operations, resulting in better working relationships. It had also promoted further joint working including work shadowing:

‘We’ve...been over to [the EZ]...had breakfast mornings...job shadowing...so we can have a greater understanding about what their role is... So when we do market it to our customers, we have more of a fuller understanding and...talk of personal experience, not just by hearsay or what we’re told to say. So it’s brought us both closer together, the two organisations.’

(New Deal adviser)

Advisers from both agencies were reported to be conducting customer interviews on the premises of the partner agency. A ‘practitioners group’ comprising both EZ and Jobcentre Plus advisers also met once a month to share information and good practice. The group was in the process of formulating a service level agreement to formalise the way in which the organisations will work together at the adviser level. Closer working here was reported to have translated into better results which in turn were contributing to improved perceptions:

‘I think that is really positive and it has got the stronger relationship and because of processes becoming either simplified or because we’re sharing the best practice, they’re getting the results, we’re getting the results and I think while we continue to do that, I think both parties will be very happy.’

(New Deal adviser)

This high degree of co-operation was less in evidence elsewhere. While there was goodwill and stated intentions, ideas were often slow to be put into practice and most agreed that more needed to be done:

‘We were working together at the hand-over at the front end and at the back end...I don’t think we’re quite there, there’s still work to be done on that, and it’s patchy.’

(EZ Manager)
2.7.3 Adviser to adviser

It is mainly at the individual adviser level where views are more guarded and relationships between the agencies more wary. Opinions here must be set against a backdrop of ongoing reviews and restructuring within Jobcentre Plus. In the context of the increasing contestability of public services, concerns among staff about job security also played their part.

While Jobcentre Plus advisers readily acknowledged that the two agencies should be working in partnership, in practice the effectiveness of relationships and perceptions of EZs were largely shaped by the extent to which Jobcentre Plus and EZs were viewed as competitors. Relations were at their best and views of EZs most positive where customer referral was mandatory and where EZs were seen as offering a distinctive service. Under these circumstances, there was no perceived conflict of interest between Jobcentre Plus and the EZ. New Deal for Young People advisers thus had mainly good relationships and positive views of EZs.

In contrast were the more guarded views of lone parent advisers. Even in areas where other staff reported constructive working relationships, negative views of the EZ were to the fore among New Deal for Lone Parent (NDLP) advisers. Prevalent perceptions were shaped by the strong impression that EZ provision for lone parents had been set up to operate in competition with Jobcentre Plus. While managers often cited joint communication and team meetings as examples of good practice, advisers themselves were less convinced of their effectiveness.

Jobcentre Plus managers were hopeful that increases in the responsibilities, workloads and caseload sizes of NDLP advisers would lead to a lessening of the sense of threat, contributing to the development of more constructive working relationships between the agencies. EZ managers reiterated this hope.
3 New Deal returners

3.1 Jobcentre Plus referral

In Employment Zone (EZ) areas, Jobcentre Plus staff refer customers to the EZ who are aged between 18 and 24 years old, have previously participated in New Deal for Young People (NDYP) and have been in receipt of income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) continuously for six months or more.

Following a mainly slow and unpredictable start, the referral of New Deal returners from Jobcentre Plus was reported to be going well. Across most EZ areas, NDYP advisers were generally happy to refer customers whom, by definition, Jobcentre Plus had been unable to help into sustained work. Customer referral was said to be at or near planned levels in all but one area which was experiencing exceptionally low client flows.

By and large, the identification of New Deal returners eligible for mandatory EZ referral appeared to be routine and was said to be working satisfactorily. The process did, however, vary by EZ area, depending on whose responsibility it was to identify eligible returners. Some Jobcentre Plus offices had EZ lead advisers who identified and referred eligible customers. In others, New Deal advisers or front-line staff took responsibility.

In one EZ area, referral was organised jointly between Jobcentre Plus and the EZ – two ‘back-to-back’ appointments were made with a New Deal and EZ adviser. This was said to have worked well at making the transition between Jobcentre Plus and EZ provision seamless. In particular, it had significantly reduced the previously high number of failures to attend (FTAs) as customers had already had an opportunity to meet their EZ adviser.

3.2 Use of sanctioning

The need for and instances of sanctioning among New Deal returners were reported to be generally lower than first anticipated. Many New Deal advisers had initially been concerned about the amount of time they would be spending sanctioning
young people who refused to go to the EZ. In most areas these concerns proved to be largely unfounded. Mandatory 18-24 customers were said to be responding well to mandatory referral and most were being fully compliant. Few required sanctioning to ensure their attendance at the EZ:

‘My initial concern, was that I was going to be spending all day doing sanctions on people but...for some reason, they tend to go.’

(New Deal adviser)

Differences did exist, however, in the reported incidence of FTA and how this was dealt with. In most areas, the majority of sanctions were said to be in respect of ‘hardcore dissenter’s who had a history of non-attendance. Sanctions were generally issued in EZ Stage One for this group:

‘Some clients won’t turn up anyway for anybody, you know, and that wouldn’t be the fault of [the EZ].’

(New Deal adviser)

In another area it was reported that sanctions were being used systematically and unwaveringly for all customers who failed to attend a first EZ appointment. EZ advisers were apparently applying rigid rules of attendance with little leeway granted. This had caused some bad feeling among Jobcentre Plus staff due to the amount of paperwork FTAs generated:

‘Advisers particularly get frustrated with the amount of paperwork we end up having to do for EZ. We do get a lot of decision making...[when] people fail to attend an interview...and they’ve sent it back for a decision to be made.’

(New Deal adviser)

Here there was considered to be room for EZs exercising greater flexibility, particularly when they operated waiting lists and there were long delays between referral and EZ appointments. Customers who had to wait some time for appointments were more likely to forget to attend.

Cases of maverick EZ advisers operating their own personal sanctioning regime were said to be rare, but some EZ managers admitted that this had happened in the past:

‘I had one or two [advisers] that, well there was one, thankfully she’s left – she was frightening people into work or sanctioning them.’

(New Deal adviser)

Generally, sanctions were considered by most EZs to be an unhelpful start to building trust and rapport, and the policy was to avoid using them except as a last resort. Customers who needed sanctioning were said to be those for whom the deterrent effect was, in any case, ineffective:
‘But we try to use sanctions as a last resort because it is a negative approach and we really don’t want to go there.’

(EZ Manager)

‘For some of them, they’re not scared at all about sanction measures. They are not bothered about losing a fortnight’s money whatsoever. There isn’t a deterrent there for them.’

(EZ Manager)

The Decision Making and Appeals (DMA) process was said to be lengthy and subject to the differing interpretations of individual decision makers. Some EZs reported that DMA staff would only accept a refusal of employment if the customer concerned had been referred to a job vacancy sourced from LMS (a Jobcentre Plus vacancy referral system). Since EZs did not have access to LMS, this restricted the number of cases where sanctioning was successfully applied. This was said to be deterring EZs from seeking to sanction customers who refused a job offer, had left work voluntarily or been dismissed due to misconduct, resulting in a dilution of the deterrent effect. Some EZs did, however, admit that there was little incentive for them to sanction, given that an element of their performance was measured by, and income derived from, the conversion rate from starts into sustained employment. An imminent change in the way EZ performance was measured and financial bonuses applied was expected to change behaviours in this regard.

3.3 Jobcentre Plus views of EZ delivery

NDYP advisers had mainly positive views of EZs. In large part this derived from the absence of any strong sense of competition with Jobcentre Plus. Nevertheless, opinions about what, and how well, EZs were doing with New Deal returners were also influenced by results known to have been achieved by individual customers, together with general customer feedback. Several advisers admitted to being surprised and impressed when customers they had previously been unable to help had started work following referral to the EZ.

‘Today, I’ve had two notifications come through from [the EZ]...he was with me for a long time and we couldn’t do anything for him. So you can only go on those cold-light-of-day results...It’s pretty successful in my eyes.’

(New Deal adviser)

‘I’ve got nothing but good things to say about the EZ...’

(New Deal adviser)

Reported and aggregate EZ performance data was said by New Deal advisers to have had little effect on their perceptions of EZs.
EZs’ greater flexibility, availability of funding and personalised, one-to-one service, were believed to be key reasons for their apparent success in helping New Deal returners. Advisers also felt that EZs were seen to be offering customers something new and different from Jobcentre Plus help:

‘It’s probably refreshing to them [New Deal returners] to be doing something different because a few of them…came out of the New Deal not really having benefited a great deal.’

(New Deal adviser)

Sometimes, even small amounts of money were said to have been effective in moving harder-to-help customers into work:

‘You get them up to the EZ and a couple of months later you’re getting the sign-off sheet back saying “oh we’ve managed to get them into work”. Sometimes I’ll just be astounded…and I’ll say “what did you do?”…they’ll say “well, we had to spend a few quid”…but that’s what it can take sometimes.’

(New Deal adviser)

Among customers who had returned to benefits, some had been disappointed that the EZ had failed to live up to expectations regarding the purchase of items such as mobile ‘phones or driving lessons. In some cases, expectations were felt by advisers to have been unrealistic. Other customers had not established a satisfactory relationship with their EZ adviser.

In drawing comparisons with Jobcentre Plus, many advisers made reference to recent reductions in New Deal provision and referral choices available to them, together with increasing workloads and caseload sizes. Others mentioned the greater restrictions placed on advisers’ time and the more prescribed methods and working practices of Jobcentre Plus compared with EZs:

‘Provision has been cut to such an extent in New Deal that the EZ can be a blessing in disguise…’

(New Deal adviser)

‘There’s only so much you can get through in 20 minutes.’

(New Deal adviser)

‘We have pillar boxes…they’ve got to do this training…whether that is around the person’s needs or not…whereas the EZ…they’ve got so much more resources and contacts…appropriate to the customer’s needs.’

(New Deal adviser)

Staff were less generous in their assessments of EZs in areas where EZ provision was not considered to be offering customers anything different or better than help available through New Deal. Low client volumes in one area were said to have split
provision for customers between New Deal and EZs. Not only was this seen to represent a dilution of Jobcentre Plus, it was said to be undermining the viability of provision. Here, staff believed EZ referral compromised continuity of care and interfered with the development of customer adviser rapport:

'It's taken that first stint just to...sort out their barriers...it's a shame...and a frustration for the advisers where they were saying “oh, I've worked so hard ...and now I've got to give him to the Zone when we've just started to understand each other”.'

(New Deal adviser)

A common observation in this area was that the EZ was only interested in securing jobs for customers without seeking to address underlying employment barriers:

'All [the EZ] are interested in is getting them back into work...Jobcentre Plus would look at maybe barriers that need to be sorted and maybe training needs prior to actually going into employment...[EZs are] a lot more work orientated ...as opposed to looking at provision...to overcome barriers.’

(New Deal adviser)

These views were informed anecdotally and through personal contact between advisers and customers who had not secured or sustained jobs and returned to Jobcentre Plus:

‘An apprehension that the advisors have is that we do get people back from work, so it seems to be a bit of a revolving door with a lot of them...because they seem to be coming back to us without the sustainability.’

(New Deal adviser)

It was also strongly influenced by a poor relationship between Jobcentre Plus and the local EZ derived, in large part, from the perception that it was not performing as well as it might. Practical matters such as the amount of paperwork and decision making generated by EZs when customers failed to attend also tended to colour views unfavourably.

In spite of such grievances, the majority view was mainly positive and most NDYP advisers were grateful that EZ provision existed locally.

‘It’s invaluable to me, otherwise I’d have a caseload of about 1,000!’

(New Deal adviser)

Advisers frequently qualified their views by saying that information about what the EZ does was sparse or out of date. Feedback about the progress and success of individual customers was also only usually available anecdotally or third hand. Most advisers wanted regular and systematic information from the EZ about the provision on offer and customer exits. Good news bulletins highlighting success stories were seen as an effective method of sharing good practice and improving perceptions.
3.4 EZ views and experiences

Most EZs reported that New Deal returners had proven to be more of a challenge than was first believed to be the case. Initially it was thought that the relatively shorter period of time many customers had been unemployed (six months compared with 18 months for 25 plus customers) would result in better job outcomes, from which sustainability would naturally follow. Some EZs were, however, finding that New Deal returners were the most difficult new customer group to work with. While job outcomes could relatively easily be achieved, getting customers to stay in work was a different matter:

‘Because they’re only six months unemployed, we find that they’re eminently placeable...The difficulty that we have...is they’re less likely to sustain. ...They’re very enthusiastic, you can normally sell them quite easily to employers, but there’s a great deal of “oh well I don’t actually like that now, I want to move on”.’

(EZ Manager)

‘Our results on our 18-24s are good at getting them into work, but not so good at getting them to sustain.’

(EZ Manager)

A common initial perception, based on the compliance and apparent job readiness of many New Deal returners, was that many would represent ‘quick wins,’ requiring some intensive help prior to moving them into work. Job sustainability had been believed largely to begin and end with placing customers into work they wanted to do. Experience had shown otherwise. Most EZs acknowledged that they failed adequately to anticipate the capriciousness of the New Deal returner customer group, underestimating the difficulties this would entail in terms of ensuring they stayed in employment.

While ensuring a good match between customer aspirations and job referrals was already enshrined in adviser practice, greater time and effort was being invested in getting this right:

‘We see them...a lot more and for longer periods of time...at least an hour a week with an [adviser]...so they’re getting...a lot more input...and we...really challenge them about where they’re going, what they want to do in life, what are their dislikes, what are their likes, what do they really want out of a job? What we’re really trying to do is...get to know them before...thinking about applying for positions.’

(EZ Manager)
'We don’t push, push them to be applying for jobs from day one, we’re trying to get to know them and find out what they want to do, the retention is generally about getting the match right. If you get the match right, you get the retention.’

(EZ Manager)

Poor quality jobs were said to result in lower retention rates, so, where possible, customers were being encouraged to widen job search beyond agency work and jobs paying the minimum wage:

‘We’re finding that we’ve got to... put more work into getting the right type of work.’

(EZ Manager)

There was also recognition in EZs of the importance of resolving customers’ associated life issues – including housing problems – prior to placing them into work. As a consequence, one-to-one help and support was said to be more holistic, more tailored and provided for longer periods. Very few 18-24 customers offered the prospect of a ‘quick win;’ virtually all were said to require an appreciable level of support and investment if they were to sustain work.

In-work aftercare for the 18-24 customer group was acknowledged by EZ managers as an underdeveloped area of their expertise. Though 25 plus customers could be difficult to move into work, once they did so, they tended to stay. EZs were finding younger customers to be different; many would drop out of work within the first few weeks or months, often for apparently trivial reasons. For these customers, making the transition from benefits to work was evidently more difficult than EZs first imagined.

Poor skills of financial management and the difficulties of managing debt were highlighted as common barriers among New Deal returners:

‘People really don’t understand when you get into work and the first bill comes in, they go “oh I can’t do this, I want to go back onto benefits”.’

(EZ Manager)

‘There’s the shock... during week six their benefit run-on has ceased... and they’re starting to get letters through demanding payment for the Council Tax and the rent.’

(EZ Manager)

In partnership with a local debt and money advice service, one contractor was planning to introduce specialist provision to help customers manage their finances more effectively in the first few weeks and months after moving into work. Though initially developed in response to issues 18-24 customers were raising, this help was being offered to any customer who would potentially benefit.
Inexperience and under-confidence in dealing with employers and of work situations generally, was cited as another characteristic behaviour of young people which EZs had identified as increasing the propensity of these customers to leave work early:

‘For some of them, if they can’t get there in the morning, or their car has broken down, rather than phone the employer and say “look I’m going to be half an hour late, the car’s broken down”...they just wouldn’t turn up...’

(EZ Manager)

Such issues often emerged in the first few weeks of employment and required an immediate response if customers were not to return to benefits. Contactors that had employed specialist in-work advisers often worked intensively with young people in this period. 18-24s were also said to comprise the majority of high-risk customers with a greater likelihood of losing or leaving their jobs early, according to the contractor which used a system of risk assessment:

‘...18-24s are a high-risk group and very volatile, so they’re all high risk.’

(EZ Manager)

Another EZ provider had run a work ethics course to help prepare younger customers for work. It had been stopped for staffing reasons but was considered successful and was due to be reinstated.

Not all emerging issues around poor sustainability were found to be solely attributable to the attitudes and behaviours of New Deal customers. At least part of the difficulties were labour market, job and employer related. Employment opportunities in several EZ areas were characterised by low paid, seasonal and temporary agency work which could serve to undermine sustainability:

‘The problem [here] is you’ve got...110 recruitment agencies in this small town! It’s a very low cost base economy. Employers use agencies a lot, so you have to work around that as best you can...’

(EZ Manager)

The regime of such jobs, often based on long working days and early starts, came as a serious culture shock to many young people:

‘The first week is critical...They’ve got the shock of going...from no work to 12 hour shifts...having to get up at four in the morning...then work 12 hours ...It’s a big shock.’

(EZ Manager)

Individual employers, too, could also be found wanting in terms of how they advertised job vacancies and treated recent recruits:

‘Employers are quite fickle, they’ll offer a job but the job doesn’t materialise as being the one they went for. They do it on purpose to try and get people to be attracted and apply for the positions...they’ll offer a job as a fork lift truck driver
when the job they’ll really be doing is a production operative...So it’s about employers being open and honest.’

(EZ Manager)

Having specialist and non-judgmental advisers to quickly find alternative work for disappointed customers was one important way EZs were seeking to tackle such issues.

Generally, feedback among New Deal returners was said by EZ managers to have been mainly positive, though negative views were acknowledged to exist. Many were realistic in recognising that customers’ views were largely determined by the extent of their success in finding suitable work:

‘You always get the positive feedback from the ones that have been successful and...we’re getting negative feedback from the ones who are not happy.’

(EZ Manager)

Overall, since the extension of EZs to New Deal returners, EZs felt they had developed a much greater appreciation of the employment barriers and behaviours of younger customers and therefore how better to help them secure and retain jobs. One EZ manager neatly summed up his assessment of approaches to New Deal returners:

‘Where we’ve gone wrong, we’ve been treating them as children...What we’re trying to [do is] treat them as adults, get them to understand that it’s an adult world, they are adults and that’s where some of the difference has happened.’

(EZ Manager)

EZs that had innovated in this area reported promising early results and measurable improvements in performance around job sustainability for 18-24 customers. Most were sanguine that ongoing innovation and development would improve results further.

3.5 New Deal returners’ outcomes

3.5.1 New Deal returners who sustained work

There were 28 New Deal returners in the phase two study group. Of these, 21 had left the EZ for work. Eleven of the 21 customers were employed at phase two, though not necessarily in the same job as phase one. Among the 21 customers whose immediate destination on leaving the EZ was work, 12 moved into full-time work and nine moved into part-time work. Of the 12 who secured full-time employment, eight were still employed at phase two. Of the nine who moved into part-time work, only three were employed at phase two.

The most common of the defining factors in the sustaining group of New Deal returners was qualifications. Some had five or more GCSEs or A Levels or had
engaged in further or higher education. One of the sustaining customers had a degree in philosophy. Even though a number of customers had relatively good qualifications, what the research highlighted was that qualifications in themselves had not been enough to facilitate entry into the labour market. In a majority of cases, the specific EZ intervention had been instrumental in providing help and support that contributed to customers’ success in securing work. Many in this age group had limited experience of the job market and application process and lacked an understanding of the particular techniques required to succeed. Such techniques were often learned through coaching by their EZ adviser.

Other, more discrete, life experiences outside of qualifications served as key motivators to some customers’ job search efforts, resulting in a greater likelihood of success. An ex-offender was very much influenced by the fact that he had recently become a father and needed to be in stable employment; an asylum seeker who did not yet hold a full British passport needed employer testimonials to secure special leave to remain. While the prior motivation to find and keep work was a useful starting point, again, what the research illustrated was the key role of specific EZ interventions in overcoming complex employment barriers.

While the standard of qualifications was clearly a contributory factor in helping to explain why some New Deal returners sustained employment, it did not figure in all successful outcomes. A significant number of sustaining New Deal returners had left school with very few or no qualifications and many had poor literacy and numeracy skills or learning difficulties. Some had never had a paid job in the open labour market. In such circumstances, the specific EZ intervention had proved invaluable to customers’ ability to secure and sustain employment. In particular, one to one intensive practical support and coaching from advisers had been instrumental in a majority of cases.

Customers who were willing to be flexible and consider work other than their original goal were also more likely to sustain. Even customers with a history of temporary employment and agency work had succeeded in progressing into full-time permanent employment. Specific EZ interventions including employer contacts and initiatives proved key.

Even allowing for the fact that there was a strong representation of qualifications in the sustaining sample and that life experiences could be motivating factors, there was clear evidence that the approach, type and range of interventions deployed by the EZ provider had an important role to play in facilitating moves into the labour market.

Sections 3.6.3 to 3.6.12 seek to explore in greater depth and detail the way in which specific EZ interventions helped New Deal returners to overcome employment barriers, contributing towards sustained job outcomes.
3.5.2 New Deal returners who did not sustain work

Of 28 New Deal returners in the phase two study group, 17 were unemployed when interviewed. Of these, seven had had no paid work since joining the EZ. Some had never had a paid job. The remaining ten customers had left the EZ for work but had lost or left their job subsequently, some before reaching 13 weeks employment and some after. With the exception of one customer, the job they had secured upon leaving the EZ was the only job they had had in the intervening period.

Among customers that did not secure or sustain work, a number of contributory factors appeared, on the face of it, to be quite discrete to individual circumstances: customers who left work after becoming pregnant; those who became ill or re-entered further education and were no longer part of the job-seeking regime; others had offended or re-offended and received custodial sentences. Customers with no qualifications and low-level basic skills were, however, prevalent among those who had not worked or sustained work. Many of these customers were further hindered by the fact that they had very little or no experience of employment other than through New Deal provision.

Unskilled work, often in factories and warehouses and contracted by employment agencies on a temporary basis, was characteristic of the labour market and of many job opportunities available to young people in some EZ areas. Work was frequently organised around flexible hours and shift patterns in which wage levels could fluctuate week to week. Customers who left the EZ to take up such work were less likely to sustain their jobs and only in a small minority of cases did it lead to permanent employment.

Where agency work and temporary contracts featured strongly in the employment experience of a young person, it was often symptomatic of underlying skill and qualification shortfalls. Many customers who did not sustain work appeared unable to break out of a pattern of moving in and out of such insecure work. Transport to other areas, for example, while usually a surmountable obstacle, did not necessarily lead to qualitatively different employment opportunities. In these cases, though EZ interventions often resulted in employment outcomes, in the absence of skills development they did not necessarily enhance overall job security or assist progression.

18-24 customers unwilling to countenance agency work or work which paid the minimum wage often exited the EZ without a job. The vast majority had left school with no qualifications and many had never secured work in the open labour market. The small minority of New Deal returners with negative views of the EZ mainly comprised those who had left the EZ without work and returned to benefits. Nevertheless more positive than negative views prevailed even among customers who had not found work. Some New Deal returners who had remained or become unemployed since leaving the EZ had chosen to return voluntarily as early entrants. Many were hopeful of a successful outcome second time around.

Sections 3.6.3 to 3.6.12 explore further why, for some customers, EZ interventions were less successful in helping them move beyond insecure, low paid work opportunities.
3.6 New Deal returners’ views and experiences

3.6.1 Views of New Deal and Jobcentre Plus

Given that New Deal returners have had significant involvement with Jobcentre Plus, it is perhaps not surprising that they discern differences in approach at the EZ most keenly. Similarly, as customers whom, by definition, New Deal had not succeeded in helping, they are more likely than most to be among its critics. This needs to be born in mind when appraising their views.

Whatever the rhetoric about the availability of individually tailored support within Jobcentre Plus and New Deal, the common experience of New Deal returners who were followed up was of being left largely to their own devices. Customers reported a passive, almost disinterested attitude among Jobcentre staff:

‘The Jobcentre is quite impersonal...The job search is left completely up to you and can be a bit confusing on those machines.’

(New Deal returner)

‘Through the Jobcentre you’re basically relying on yourself to do everything.’

(New Deal returner)

Staff were believed to have little time available to spend on anything other than meeting the mandatory requirements of signing-on and New Deal regimes:

‘You would stand in the queue...“what have you done in looking for jobs...right sign there and on your way”...They just seemed to rush you on, sign you on and get rid of you...’

(New Deal returner)

‘Every six weeks, you would have to see an adviser and you would sit down...and look through jobs...then another six weeks or so, you would get another appointment...’

(New Deal returner)

Interestingly, the small minority of New Deal returners who said they preferred Jobcentre Plus services agreed with this description. For them, however, the more passive, ‘hands off’ approach was what they particularly liked.

Jobcentre Plus was believed by many New Deal returners to be premised on an underlying assumption that young people did not really want to work. Not only did customers say they wanted work, most wanted active intervention to help them search and apply for jobs. A common perception was that help available in Jobcentre Plus lacked structure, flexibility and customer focus. Staff were said to function as benefit administrators, rather than to provide concerted help to assist customers to find work. Advisers’ apparent lack of expertise and interest in supporting individual job search, together with a sense of compulsion experienced by many customers to take any job regardless of its quality, tended to fuel such opinions:
‘It’s just a place that you need to go to sign on…they don’t have the experience to have the interaction of one to one.’

(New Deal returner)

Jobcentre Plus was seen to be either too pushy (into jobs they did not want) or not pushy enough (into jobs they did want).

‘There was too much pressure to take jobs that you didn’t want.’

(New Deal returner)

Mandatory programmes such as New Deal were seen to offer customers limited choice. For many, the experience was of group-based generic training. Some felt inhibited by a format which was said to provide little practical help and failed to take account of individual needs and circumstances:

‘You don’t get that much help through New Deal…the New Deal is more a course like they would send you…when you are in a group… sometimes you don’t want to ask questions.’

(New Deal returner)

‘I had no choice…you know what the New Deal is like, so I didn’t have a great choice…not for people with learning difficulties.’

(New Deal returner)

3.6.2 Mandatory EZ participation

As veterans of mandatory regimes and programmes, New Deal returners were fully aware that a failure to engage with the EZ would result in sanctions being levied. This did not appear to unduly affect or prejudice views. The culture of acceptance and indeed expectation of mandatory participation was widespread. Very few customers expressed any surprise or resentment at being mandated to attend the EZ. A few even said they preferred the mandatory regime, believing it have helped to motivate and spur them into action:

‘I’ve always thought, if you don’t go along you get your money stopped is a good idea because it gives people the incentive to go along.’

(New Deal customer)

Most customers said they wanted to work and so had no qualms about being referred to the EZ, other than a reservation over what some initially understood was a re-referral to New Deal. Once at the EZ, the greater sense of choice and control over what they did and how they were helped, served to counter any resentment customers may have had regarding the mandatory nature of participation.

There were isolated instances of customers being threatened with sanctions where they had failed to attend EZ interviews or co-operate with advisers, but in most cases the threats were said not to have been carried out. Only one New Deal returner reported that his benefit had been stopped when he forgot to attend an appointment. He was later accepted back onto the EZ.
3.6.3 EZ offices and ambience

New Deal returners appeared mainly oblivious to and unaffected by the physical appearance of EZ premises. The atmosphere and ambience of EZs – described invariably as friendly and relaxed – seemed considerably more important than the standard of the décor. Office layout and working practices were, however, identified as relevant factors. In Jobcentre Plus, the positioning and routine usage of personal computers (PCs) during customer interactions was said to have created an ‘us and them’ situation, suggesting disinterest on the part of advisers:

‘It’s a more laid back atmosphere at [the EZ]...at the Jobcentre, as you’re talking to them, they’re sat there, like, on the computers...so it’s like “are you taking any notice or are you just seeing what’s going on the screens”.’

(New Deal returner)

Many customers preferred the more limited use of PCs during meetings with EZ advisers and felt it contributed to the establishment of a better rapport. One EZ had ergonomically designed its offices to enable adviser and customer to sit alongside each other rather than face to face. This appeared to have worked well in promoting a sense of collaborative working towards a shared goal:

‘Instead of having a person behind a desk, you were both on the same level working together to achieve the goal...it felt like they were on your level and not just talking down to you.’

(New Deal returner)

3.6.4 Ability to choose

There was good evidence that, in spite of the mandatory referral, the ability to exercise choice in employment objectives lay at the heart of EZs’ success in engaging New Deal returners. Having their job preferences taken seriously and not being compelled into activity by the EZ, made them more likely to become a willing partner in negotiations around job search. Many described the EZ approach in terms of a trade off between the job they would like in an ideal world and what was realistically achievable:

‘[EZ adviser] did say from the start, we’re not going to try and push you into a trolley-pushing job in Tesco’s. It’s basically a trade off between what I want to do and...what is practical...Because it makes sense, everyone wants to be a millionaire but not everyone can do that.’

(New Deal returner)

Ironically, co-option of the customer through the mutual agreement of a job goal made some more willing to accept work other than that initially considered. This typically happened following a period of activity by the customer and adviser in which the initial goal had proven to be unattainable. Some customers were thus initially allowed to pursue their employment interests despite the fact that the local labour market did not really support these activities. Where the adviser and the customer worked towards a narrow job goal such as this yet were unsuccessful, the
customer was then more willing to broaden the job search as, evidently, the chances of success with the initial goal seemed remote. In a number of cases, this resulted in customers securing work in employment sectors or occupational areas with which they had no familiarity or prior experience.

3.6.5 Focus on quality jobs and longer-term goals

The research highlighted a number of cases of customers being encouraged to think more laterally about work options, to broaden job search and adopt a ‘fall back’ position if things did not work out, an approach that was key to a number of successful outcomes. One customer, for example, had been accepted into training by the police, but was encouraged to consider a fall back position (care profession). When, as the adviser had suspected, a job in the police proved unsuitable, with EZ help the customer progressed into alternative employment as a forensic healthcare worker, a position he sustained:

‘She didn’t want me to put all my eggs in one basket...if things don’t work out...there is always other options available...She tried to get me interested in other...work and not just focus on one thing. So that’s when I started getting more interested in health care because the more she started speaking about it, the more I was getting interested in it.’

(New Deal returner)

Another customer was initially supported in photography and music aims but failed to secure work. He achieved a sustained outcome by broadening his job search with the help of an EZ adviser:

‘For the first couple of weeks we would just mainly concentrate on finding work within photography and music...It opened my eyes not to be too narrow with what I was looking for. If I was aiming completely for photography or music that is going to be hard work and you are going to be looking a long time.’

(New Deal returner)

Customers saying they had been pushed into work that they did not want were conspicuous by their absence. Rather, many said they were encouraged to think more strategically and longer term and to broaden their horizons beyond the short-term agency work they had formerly been used to.

‘They gave me the opportunity to look into other areas of work that was available within my reach which is not really advertised, so it was just opening up all the avenues and finding work.’

(New Deal returner)

In these cases, having the support and expertise of EZ advisers was key to customers being able to move beyond the types of jobs and sectors they were familiar with.

An important aspect of successful EZ persuasion techniques was in being able to reassure customers that if things did not work out, they would not be penalised or
sanctioned. To many, these reassurances were key to their willingness to consider new areas of work. Job trials and work placements proved useful in a number of cases in helping to test the waters and minimise the risk of moving into unfamiliar work. The conciliatory approach came as a refreshing change from their previous experience:

‘The adviser said if I don’t like the job after at least trying it don’t do it...if I was at the Jobcentre I’m sure they would stop your money.’

(New Deal returner)

Customers with more entrenched views who could not be persuaded of the value of being flexible were less likely to move into work and to sustain jobs.

3.6.6 The EZ shows you how

Virtually all New Deal customers reported that the time EZ advisers had to spend with them, and the intensity of the help, had enabled them to overcome significant barriers in the job application process. This was the case among those with good and with poor qualifications. One-to-one coaching and practical tips from the EZ adviser helped to improve skills and boost confidence in applying for jobs and performing well at interviews. Increased confidence at interview often led to successful job outcomes:

‘I never had the motivation...guts or confidence to go out there and...talk to people and get jobs. I wouldn’t be able to go through an interview, because I would be stuttering and stammering. They gave me a lot more confidence to...think about what I am saying and go through with it and do the interview.’

(New Deal returner)

‘I think it was more or less my confidence in interview...I was really petrified going to my first interview.’

(New Deal returner)

‘Generally building up my confidence with interview techniques, filling out forms and helping me to speak to people over the phone.’

(New Deal returner)

‘They explain how to do your CV, how to do interviews and everything, they tell you how to do it.’

(New Deal returner)

Job search skills gained as a result of EZ interventions were retained longer term, giving customers the confidence to apply for other job vacancies without EZ help. One customer, whose previous work pattern comprised short-term factory jobs secured through agencies, successfully applied EZ-taught job application and interview tips and techniques to facilitate a move into permanent work:
‘She gave me a lot more confidence in interviews and showed me different ways to express myself on application forms… I still remember a lot of the things she told me…I remembered for the interview, on the application form itself, the things she asked me to write on there, I remembered as well.’

(New Deal returner)

3.6.7 Employer liaison

As well as assisting customers with the ‘how’ in the application process, there was strong evidence from the research of the way in which EZs proactively created opportunities for individuals through contacts with the local labour market, resulting in sustained outcomes. The help ranged from marketing individual customers to specific employers, through formal EZ employer initiatives and networks, to the use of adviser’s informal links and personal contacts.

One customer who was encouraged to broaden his search, moved into sustained employment as a result of securing an interview at a company in which his adviser had previously worked and retained contacts:

‘[It was] a very big assistance because one of the guys that worked at [the EZ] used to work for this company that I’m working for at the moment. He was the guy that put me up for the interview.’

(New Deal returner)

Other customers sourced additional job opportunities and had sustained outcomes through EZ employer-led initiatives offering short training courses and guaranteed interviews for those who passed. In other cases, customers found jobs as a direct result of EZ adviser interventions with individual employers. This included jobs not advertised through Jobcentre Plus, together with jobs customers had themselves identified.

‘If you go to [the EZ] you can go on the Internet and look at a whole different lot of jobs, not just the Jobcentre ones.’

(New Deal returner)

‘I feel they did help me in a lot of ways, in finding the job and setting up the interview.’

(New Deal returner)

One customer had progressed from temporary agency work into short-term hourly-paid contracting to full-time, permanent salaried employment, as a result of an EZ’s links with the health sector:

‘When I was doing the locum work [first job] it felt like I was standing in the queue for the ladder and then once I got this job, I feel like I’m on the ladder. Now I feel like I’m half way up. I’ve gone from an hourly wage to a yearly salary of about £12,000 a year. I’ve never had that much money.’

(New Deal returner)
3.6.8 Extra support for harder-to-help customers

Customers who could be described as being ‘harder to help’ presented with a variety of special needs and difficult circumstances. Most had poor levels of literacy and numeracy, and some had learning difficulties. A number had criminal convictions, difficulties at home or housing problems. Some had never had a paid job in the open labour market. In many respects, their characteristics and barriers were similar to 18-24 early entrants.

EZ help took different guises, depending on the nature and severity of barriers. Among the sample of customers interviewed, there was little evidence that any had been systematically ‘parked’ or had received an inferior level of service. Indeed, advisers often worked more intensively and for longer to help customers access suitable work. In some cases, EZs had provided specialist help or worked alongside partner organisations to help customers secure and sustain work.

One EZ, for example, used its links with Remploy to find work for a customer with learning difficulties. Having attended a special school, the customer had spent three years in further education, then four years on benefits, participating in New Deal twice before finding her first paid job, aged 24, with the specific help of the EZ. At the time of interview, she was looking forward to her next job, her confidence and income having increased sufficiently to enable a move into her own flat:

‘I think I will stay there for a couple of years at least and then move on. I don’t want to be there for the rest of my life...it’s a stepping stone job really.’

(New Deal returner)

Another customer received help and advice from a specialist Progress2Work adviser about how to present information about criminal convictions on CVs and job applications. After many months of EZ help and job-search activity he moved into sustained work.

3.6.9 Financial support used flexibly

Though Personal Job Account (PJA) spend could help smooth the transition into employment for young people, or be used as an incentive to encourage them to sustain employment, financial help with this younger age group was much less of a factor in successful outcomes than the more proactive, one-to-one support and coaching type of interventions employed by advisers.

Customer satisfaction was largely indifferent to and unaffected by the act or absence of spending. Though potential financial support on offer was sometimes cited by early entrant customers as a reason for electing to join the EZ, it was generally absent in the narratives of mandatory customers (though an aspiration, usually unmet, to obtain driving lessons from the EZ often featured in remarks made by younger customers).

Generally, PJA spend was used selectively and rarely as an incentive to engage this group. Rather, In Work Benefit Calculations (IWBCs) had been used, apparently with
some degree of success, to overcome financial barriers by showing customers how much better off they could be in work. Some interviewees were surprised at the difference even part-time work could make; others were unaware they could be eligible for tax credits:

‘He worked it out on a standard week’s wage and then with tax credits on top...I wanted to go straight away then, knowing I’d get a decent amount.’

(New Deal returner)

There were instances of PJA spend being deployed holistically and in a more flexible manner than might have been the case at Jobcentre Plus, to pay rent deposits for example or to meet short-term living expenses to bridge the income gap between jobs. In most cases, payment was made when the customer had sustained work for 13 weeks, though spend was sometimes used to bridge the transition to work to purchase clothing or travel passes for interviews or new jobs for example. Even relatively small amounts of money had proved critical to the ability of some customers being able to start or sustain work:

‘I wouldn’t have survived without it...I wouldn’t have been able to feed the kids [or] been able to get to work...They helped me out with £30, I think it was £3 a day...It wasn’t much...but...it did help...All the pennies I got from [the EZ] was a bonus...because without I would have been struggling.’

(New Deal returner)

### 3.6.10 One-to-one support

Regardless of the content of the help, one-to-one interaction between the customer and adviser was a key defining feature of EZ support and underpinned positive customer comments:

‘All my life I have lacked in confidence, I have never really been able to keep myself going, I just needed somebody else to kick me up the backside...and she was giving me that...It just seemed so personal I was number one at the time, that time and space I had with her, I was the most important thing there, I was like her task for the day...’

(New Deal returner)

‘I thought the EZ was better because they have more of a one to one with you...it does help a lot when you are on your own...when it’s just you and an adviser you seem to like just ask what you need.’

(New Deal returner)

With one-to-one interaction at the core of EZ delivery, customers reported upon the way in which the adviser took the time to get to know them. This made them feel valued, helping to build rapport and trust. Equally important, it enabled a better fit between what customers wanted or had agreed to do and the targeted job search activity customer and adviser could jointly undertake.
‘They just get to know you and I think they get a feel for what type of work you want.’

(New Deal returner)

The one-to-one dynamic helped some customers to motivate and organise themselves better, making them feel more responsible for their actions:

‘You’re accountable to somebody, it’s like “what have you done this week?” Because if you’ve got nobody there to say that you can easily slip into getting very unmotivated and not bothering.’

(New Deal returner)

Most New Deal returners had established good relationships with a single adviser. However, a minority had not, and these were strongly represented in the small group of customers who held negative views of the EZ. A poor relationship with one or more EZ advisers also featured in the accounts of New Deal returners who had not secured or sustained work. Some customers had simply not ‘hit it off’ with their allocated adviser. Others had been passed between several different advisers which many disliked and some attributed to their failure to find work. Comparisons were made with Jobcentre Plus, where customers would often see different advisers:

‘[I saw] three or four different people...you tend to repeat what you’ve said, like to everybody.’

(New Deal returner)

3.6.11 Duration and intensity of help

The intensity and duration of EZ support appeared to be key to customers securing and sustaining job outcomes. Meetings typically lasted between 40 minutes and an hour and longer meetings of two or even three hours were occasionally mentioned. When required, customers could meet their adviser without an appointment.

Most customers who moved into sustained work had spent on average three to six months working with an adviser on a weekly, and at times, daily basis, before moving into work. Conversely, those who moved into work within the first few weeks of a referral were among the group of customers less likely to sustain their jobs.

Due to the amount of time EZ advisers spent getting to know their customers, there was little evidence of ‘creaming’ the most job ready. Customers with whom advisers had secured quick and ‘easy hits’ were few and far between and most New Deal returners followed up had received an appreciable amount of help.

3.6.12 Aftercare and in-work support

Examples of in-work support or aftercare were largely absent in the narratives of customers who were followed up. Some mentioned they had had telephone contact with an adviser, but they were in a minority and mainly among the group
that had sustained work. Virtually no mention was made of aftercare among customers who did not sustain jobs. This may reflect the timing of the research; the study cohort had joined the EZ relatively soon after the extension to new customer groups when systematic aftercare was not widely available. It may also be due to an initial misjudgement on the part of EZs that job outcomes secured by New Deal returners would sustain without in-work support. Some customers did not need or want in-work support. One explicitly stated that he wanted to be left alone once in employment:

‘Being an independent man, if I get my job, I get my job.’

(New Deal returner)

In the minority of cases where aftercare had been provided, it did emerge as a significant EZ intervention among customers who had sustained work. One customer who had learning difficulties, for example, received ongoing, ‘hand-holding’ support in pursuit of sustained work:

‘There’s a three-month after care period where I was in contact with them... [The EZ adviser] was very good. He phoned up every now and then saying how are things going and if I had any problems then I could phone him...’

(New Deal returner)

Another had his rent and other living expenses paid when work dried up for two weeks. Other customers told of being helped by the EZ into two or three jobs until they finally sustained work.
4 Early entrants aged 18-24

4.1 Jobcentre Plus referral

In Employment Zone (EZ) areas, unemployed clients aged 18-24 whose barriers and circumstances are deemed by a Jobcentre Plus adviser to place them at significant disadvantage in the labour market are entitled to join the EZ earlier than the normal six months qualifying period, provided they are in receipt of Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA). At this stage, they volunteer to join. However, once they agree to start on the EZ, their participation becomes mandatory and subject to the same sanctions regime as New Deal returners.

There was little differentiation in Jobcentre Plus referral practices and procedures with regards to 18-24 and 25 plus customers. Differing interpretations and implementation of early entry policy and criteria had, however, produced a broad mix of early entry referral experiences and outcomes across EZ areas. In some, early entry customers comprised the majority of new customer referrals from Jobcentre Plus, whereas in others, referrals were said to be low and comprised a minority.

Differences did not appear to derive from any lack of understanding on the part of advisers as to the eligibility criteria themselves or the circumstances under which they could be applied. These were said to be well understood, particularly among Jobcentre Plus EZ specialists and New Deal advisers, given the close similarity between New Deal and EZ early entry criteria:

‘We have particular EZ specialists within this district, so they would know the criteria really, really well, inside out, upside down.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

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5 Jobcentre Plus advisers did not generally differentiate between referral practices and procedures in respect of 18-24 and 25 plus customers. The first part of this chapter therefore addresses itself to both groups of customers, unless stated otherwise.

6 The full list of early entry criteria is included in the Appendix.
‘The list of early entry criteria, luckily for me...pretty much mirrors the early entry criteria for New Deal.’

(New Deal adviser)

In part, the differences in referral numbers reflected local unemployment levels and client flows, for example where 25 plus customers were said to significantly outnumber 18-24s in the local unemployed population. However, variations also appeared to stem from local policies and working practices and, in particular, the extent to which early entry criteria were being used solely on the basis of client need or as a mechanism to control client flows. District Managers stressed the importance of advisers using eligibility criteria only in response to individual client needs:

‘It should be an individual approach based upon the needs of the person.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘If we have policies then I expect [advisers] to follow them, not to be innovative in the way that we use them...’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘...I think it’s a case of advisers only using it when it’s appropriate to the individual. So we wouldn’t push early entry...to get additional people onto EZ. It would be because it is correct for that individual at that moment in time.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

However, several did admit to knowing that early entry had been used to manage peaks and troughs in the flow and referral of mandatory 25 plus and 18-24 customers, particularly when EZ provision was first extended to new customers:

‘Early entry criteria is...too well understood to be honest...is being used to make most of the referrals...they’re looking for opportunities and I think that’s been encouraged by [the EZ]...to maximise early entries.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Fluctuations in client flows and referrals were due to a combination of factors. In some areas, raising the eligibility from 12 to 18 months unemployment had significantly reduced the numbers of mandatory 25 plus customers. This, together with lower than anticipated numbers of eligible 18-24 customers, meant that some EZs initially struggled to fill adviser caseloads. Later, when mandatory referrals increased, some EZs found they were operating at near capacity levels, and early entry referrals were temporarily ceased or waiting lists started:

‘We’ve slowed down on the early entrant information sessions because we just couldn’t cope with it.’

(EZ Manager)
‘Early entrants [are now] probably quite low...We haven’t needed to market it because we’ve had the flow through of clients that are...mandatory.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Advisers were aware when local policy changed but not necessarily the reasons why:

‘They were running sort of early entry...workshop once a month...then the next week they turn around and say “no more early entrants”. I don’t know whether that’s a funding issue or...because the course is full...Then two weeks later you get [an email] saying they’re accepting early entrants again.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Flexible usage of early entry was also apparent among some Jobcentre Plus advisers to manage their own caseloads, increasing referrals when caseloads were high and reducing them when they were low. Reductions in New Deal provision and less flexibility around Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF) usage was also said to have encouraged advisers to refer customers early to the EZ:

‘We don’t have a great deal of money for a person to be able to spend. So we’re always aware that EZ do have a bigger pot of money...’

(New Deal adviser)

‘There is some concern around how the early eligibility is being used...but it’s not in anybody’s interest not to send them, especially when we haven’t really got any other provision to send them to.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Higher and more predictable mandatory referrals had meant that at the time of the research, early entry criteria were being used mainly in response to individual need. Ultimately, there was recognition that attempts to increase early entry referrals were short-sighted and could be counterproductive in the longer term:

‘The problem with early entrants is if you get them early, you won’t get them later will you?’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

4.2 Decision to join

18-24 customers were said by advisers to be generally less familiar with EZs and, in most areas, fewer early entry referrals were made in this age category. For some Jobcentre Plus staff, existing New Deal provision was said to be the destination of first choice for young people who met the eligibility criteria, not the EZ. Going against the trend, in one EZ area, 18-24 early entry referrals were said to be considerably higher than for 25 plus customers. This was attributed to the impact of word of mouth and peer recommendation among young people:
'It’s a lot of word of mouth...with the 18-24s...it’s kind of like all your mates being on it...they kind of see each other more. It might be a social thing.’

(New Deal adviser)

Elsewhere, advisers confirmed that word of mouth from friends or family about the kind of help they might get, or general EZ marketing and publicity, were the main reasons why younger customers wanted to be referred early:

‘You do get a fair few who won’t be informed by us. They’ll have seen an advert in a newspaper or they live near [the EZ] and a friend of theirs has gone there.’

(New Deal adviser)

In the main, younger early entrant referrals were made on the recommendation of New Deal advisers in respect of individual clients they considered as having eligible needs and barriers and whom they considered would benefit from EZ help. Mostly, this was said to be young people with poor literacy and numeracy and learning difficulties including dyslexia. Customers with chronic health conditions such as diabetes, haemophilia and arthritis were also said to have been referred early, though less commonly.

4.3 Communicating EZ provision and mandatory requirements

Methods used to inform potential early entrants (18-24 and 25 plus) about EZ services and provision tended to reflect local referral practices. EZs that were keen to boost early entry, for example, had organised group information sessions to inform potential early entrants of EZ provision and of the mandatory requirements around attendance:

‘We get groups of potential early entrants together, customers, and we have a joint meeting with [the EZ] and ourselves and we talk to them about all the things that it means...so they go in with their eyes open...’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

In other areas, potential early entrant customers were invited to attend an initial meeting with an EZ adviser before a formal referral was made.

‘We suggest that they go and just have a chat with [the EZ] before we make a referral, so they’re not tied into it and having to attend if they’re not able to be helped, if what they want isn’t available.’

(New Deal adviser)

Elsewhere, advisers did not actively promote EZ services, any more than they would seek to sell other Jobcentre Plus provision for which early entry was possible:
'We can’t just single out EZ for early entry...it’s not only the EZ provider that we’ve signed up to.’

(New Deal adviser)

Some advisers said that a lack of information about what EZs did made it difficult for them to advise customers and help them make informed decisions:

‘Really I don’t know a lot of what happens on the provision as such, on EZ, so it’s difficult to sell stuff you don’t know.’

(New Deal adviser)

Both Jobcentre Plus and EZs went to considerable lengths to inform potential early entrants about the implications of referral. Ensuring that customers understood the mandatory nature of participation once referral had been made, without dampening their enthusiasm, was said to be a tricky balance. Young people in particular were said to be less familiar with early entry criteria and did not necessarily fully appreciate the implications of early entry:

‘Often those requesting early entry may not understand the implications of their choice.’

(New Deal adviser)

4.4 Jobcentre Plus views of EZ delivery

New Deal advisers had mainly positive views of EZs’ efforts to help early entrants. Views were mainly informed by EZs’ apparent success in helping customers into work. Some advisers had had good reports from customers about the intensity of EZ help and the fact that it could lead onto decent jobs and pay rates.

Word-of-mouth reports from satisfied customers were said to have played a part in helping to promote a positive image and perception of some EZs in the wider community:

‘If one of their friends has had a good experience from it, it seems to kind of spread around a bit...’

(New Deal adviser)

4.5 EZ views and experiences

18-24 early entrants were seen by EZ managers as generally having more severe barriers to employment than New Deal returners, including basic skill problems, learning difficulties, criminal convictions and drug and alcohol misuse. Many also had housing problems and chaotic lifestyles.

Essentially the same provision and methods were being used for young early entrants as for New Deal returners. However, greater emphasis was placed on resolving lifestyle issues said to be more prevalent among this group, before placing
them in work. Financial help to pay for flat deposits and driving lessons, for example, were believed to work well to incentivise customers to sustain work for 13 weeks.

EZs felt that 18-24 early entrants were no less likely to succeed than New Deal returners, but finding them suitable work could often take longer. Any in-work support and aftercare was also typically provided for longer.

4.6 18-24 early entrants’ outcomes

4.6.1 18-24 early entrants who sustained work

The phase two study group contained only seven individuals in the 18-24 early entrant category. All seven customers had worked in the intervening period between leaving the EZ and being interviewed. However, only four customers were employed at phase two.

Rather than exhibiting perhaps more debilitating conditions or disabilities, most of the sustaining 18-24 early entry customers who were followed up had basic skills problems, including dyslexia or other learning difficulty. Close intensive adviser support delivered one to one featured strongly in terms of EZ interventions, together with practical help with job search, the application process and any necessary written work.

Most customers needed a considerable time to achieve a sustained outcome – typically between six and twelve months – indicating they may have participated (unknowingly) in follow through. Most had also received proactive in-work support from an adviser which included regular telephone contact and employer liaison. Other life experiences, including providing for home and family, may also have served as key motivators and provide indicators of a greater likelihood of sustaining work.

Key EZ interventions and their role in enabling 18-24 early entrant customers to secure and sustain work are covered in more detail in Sections 4.7.3 to 4.7.6.

4.6.2 18-24 early entrants who did not sustain work

The group of 18-24 early entrants who did not sustain work comprised only three customers. Given such low numbers, it is not possible to generalise about common characteristics or the possible reasons why; issues appeared to be discrete to the individuals concerned.

Two customers left the EZ for jobs which they did not sustain. One initially moved into employment through a vacancy advertised at the EZ before their previous erratic employment pattern of starting then quickly leaving work was repeated. The customer had voluntarily rejoined the EZ for further help. Another customer left work after becoming pregnant following a brief period of employment found during her time on the EZ. The third customer left following a disagreement with an EZ adviser who sought to address his problems with dyslexia. The customer was
referred to an external provider for a basic skills course, from which he dropped out, finding it to be too much like school. At the time of phase two, he had returned to the EZ, where he was happier with a new adviser who was concentrating on job search.

Despite the fact that these customers did not secure or sustain employment, they remained positive about their involvement with the EZ, in particular the one to one support they received which was seen to differ significantly from New Deal.

4.7 18–24 early entrants’ views and experiences

4.7.1 Decision to join

Most 18-24 early entrants followed up in phase two had joined the EZ on the recommendation of a New Deal adviser, usually due to poor literacy and numeracy skills. Some customers admitted they could not read or write or had very poor basic skills. It was not always clear that these customers fully understood that joining the EZ as an early entrant was voluntary; some may have thought they had no choice:

‘Well they suggested it, I don’t really think you had a choice.’

(18-24 early entrant)

That said, very few were unhappy about being referred, particularly if it was going to help them find work:

‘I didn’t have much of a choice but I thought if it’s going to help me find work and everything...I just needed to get a job.’

(18-24 early entrant)

Subtle pressure or coercion to attend was experienced by a small minority who believed EZ participation was mandatory. Such customers had often a history of being sanctioned by Jobcentre Plus and may therefore have been under the impression that they had no choice but to attend. Most customers said they had no particular objection to being referred even though they did not choose to join.

A small number of early entrants knew about the EZ from friends or family members and of the kind of help they might provide and requested a referral in preference to rejoining New Deal. A few wanted financial help with learning to drive. One, newly unemployed customer sought immediate help rather than having to wait six months. Less common for this younger age group was a referral to access specialist training or funding for setting up in business.

4.7.2 Views of Jobcentre Plus and New Deal

All but one 18-24 early entrant appeared to have participated in New Deal before. It should therefore be borne in mind that, as customers whom Jobcentre Plus had not succeeded in helping, they were more likely than most to hold negative views.
A common thread ran through the narratives of 18-24 early entrants; that of a perceived absence of personalised, one-to-one help being available in Jobcentre Plus, together with a lack of choice over job and training options. The absence of any practical help was especially problematic for customers with poor basic skills who dominated this category:

‘With the Jobcentre it’s a bit like a cattle market. You line up, wait your turn, right done...next one...I know it is...one to one but you feel like in a group.’

(18-24 early entrant)

‘They [New Deal] don’t seem to give you as much help as they do here.’

(18-24 early entrant)

4.7.3 Ability to choose

Perhaps indicative of the perceived lack of choice in Jobcentre Plus and New Deal, 18-24 early entrants particularly valued the ability to exercise choice in job search. Many reported a marked and welcome change in approach at the EZ. Of particular significance was the fact that EZ advisers listened and seemed open to clients’ views regarding jobs and work. Advisers were said to be more accommodating and focused around the achievement of clients’ aspirations:

‘It was very refreshing [at the EZ] to have someone turn around...and say “what do you want to do?”.’

(18-24 early entrant)

4.7.4 One-to-one, intensive support

The availability of one to one, customised help featured as a key form of help among the large majority of 18-24 early entrants with positive views of the EZ. Other than knowing they wanted work, many customers lacked direction and were not clear what they wanted to do or indeed could do. Advisers were able to help them decide on a realistic and achievable job goal:

‘What I wanted to do, where I wanted to go. Basically...a job of course...and then, what would be realistic idea...to head towards.’

(18-24 early entrant)

Most younger early entrants lacked confidence and motivation and the practical skills of job search. The availability of one-to-one help from a personal adviser assumed the greatest significance here. Virtually all customers mentioned how important and effective this element of EZ support was to their ability to secure work, perhaps most crucial for early entrants:

‘It’s always helpful when you have got someone one to one dealing with you.’

(18-24 early entrant)
‘There is one adviser who just concentrates on you.’
(18-24 early entrant)

‘Here, it’s more one to one.’
(18-24 early entrant)

The intense level of support often produced an upturn in confidence and motivation which for many resulted in work:

‘If it wasn’t for [the EZ] I wouldn’t have done anything really...they helped me get motivated and...played a very big part in getting [me] into work.’
(18-24 early entrant)

‘She has helped in so many ways...she has made me feel more confident.’
(18-24 early entrant)

‘It makes me feel comfortable knowing that there is at least somebody there who is willing to help.’
(18-24 early entrant)

4.7.5 Practical help

Customers with no qualifications, limited work experience and with basic skills difficulties were often fearful of writing covering letters, filling in job applications and attending interviews. Close help and practical support with completing forms, preparing curriculum vitae (CV), interview techniques and job search was reported to be invaluable in customers’ ability to secure job interviews and job offers. Access to personal computers was also said to have been very useful:

‘I wouldn’t have been able to write covering letters...things that make a big difference when you are looking for work.’
(18-24 early entrant)

‘She printed a CV out, that is what got me a job the CV.’
(18-24 early entrant)

One customer with basic skills problems and dyslexia was referred to the EZ with a view to him becoming a self-employed gardener. The EZ adviser helped him to write a business plan and submit applications for funding. Though the funding applications were unsuccessful, with further EZ help, he secured garden maintenance work first on a temporary and later on a permanent basis.
4.7.6 Employer liaison

There was evidence of the way in which EZ contacts with large employers and specialist support agencies could contribute to sustained outcomes. One customer’s adviser had previously worked for the National Health Service (NHS) and arranged an interview and work trial. Following a successful four-week trial period, the customer progressed into temporary work with the NHS, which later turned into permanent employment:

‘They helped me a hell of a lot to get the…job because I didn’t have the foggiest where to start.’

(18-24 early entrant)

Another customer secured her first paid job with the help of a specialist agency, Remploy, working alongside the EZ to source an employer willing to take on a young person with learning difficulties.

4.7.7 In-work support and aftercare

Given that sustained jobs might be harder to achieve in the early entrant category it is perhaps not surprising that in-work support had been one of the key facets of successful outcomes for these young people. Aftercare appeared to have been more systematic and provided for longer than for individuals in other customer groups. There were several examples of customers being contacted by telephone to check on progress, together with further EZ help being provided when jobs had not been sustained:

‘Every couple of months he would ‘phone me and see if everything was going alright in my job.’

(18-24 early entrant)

One customer returned to the EZ for further assistance when agency positions were not sustained. Eventually, he was taken on full-time by one of the factories where he had completed temporary agency work. Contact continued on a weekly basis and the EZ remained in touch with the customer one year later (in this EZ, a dedicated in-work support adviser is now in post):

‘She phoned me about once a week…then she phoned again a couple of weeks after. Then I got laid off and I went back to see her. I was out of work for two to three weeks and then they called me back, she phoned me three or four times then after to see how the job was going.’

(18-24 early entrant)

Holistic and flexible uses of financial support also contributed to sustained outcomes. One customer had a week’s rent paid by the EZ during a downturn in work at the 13 week stage. He sustained the job and had since been promoted.

More significant items of funding would be offered as an incentive to sustain work. One EZ provider paid for a mobile ‘phone and helped with an electricity bill and
clothing for a customer. The driving lessons and chainsaw training for which he had originally approached the EZ were funded after he had sustained employment for 13 weeks:

‘They turned around to me and said, if you are willing to take this job, we will pay for your driving lessons and went “OK”. I’ve stuck with it ever since. It’s over a year now.’

(18-24 early entrant)

Another customer, unsuccessful in attempts to obtain funding from business support agencies, turned his attention to paid employment in the same sector. The EZ paid for work clothing and financial help towards the purchase of a car to remove a transport barrier, the latter provided at the 13-week stage.

Customers with dependants in particular found that the better standard of living that came with regular, well paid work was accompanied by increased financial responsibilities. The need to pay rent, mortgage and other household bills meant they were less likely to leave work without having an alternative job to go to:

‘…I’ve got to stick with it because I’ve got a mortgage, family.’

(18-24 early entrant)
5 25 plus early entrants

5.1 Jobcentre Plus referral

Clients aged 25 and over in EZ single-provider areas who are disadvantaged in the labour market are entitled to join the EZ early provided they are in receipt of Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA). As with younger early entrants, they volunteer to join the EZ. However, once they agree to start, their participation becomes mandatory and subject to the same sanctions regime as other 25 plus customers. The same early entry eligibility criteria listed in the Appendix apply to 25 plus customers.

25 plus customers were considerably more likely to ‘self refer’ and Jobcentre Plus advisers more amenable to heeding their referral requests than for 18-24 customers. Such customers were said to know of the EZ, either by word of mouth, or from previous experience, and of the type of help and financial assistance available:

‘We seem to get more people wanting early entry through the 25 plus than through 18-24.’

(New Deal adviser)

Among the reasons why 25 plus customers were asking for referrals, the greater perceived availability of funding in Ezs figured prominently. Many customers were said to want financial help to pay for training or equipment for business start up. Ezs were considered a good referral option by advisers due to the more limited choice of provision and financial help now said to be available in Jobcentre Plus:

‘In this area we don’t have a great deal of money for a person to be able to spend. So we’re always aware that EZ do have a bigger pot of money to spend.’

(New Deal adviser)

Some such referrals were considered by Ezs to be inappropriate, for example when the customers simply wanted help with driving lessons:
‘They’re very blatantly obvious when they do come through, people who, “I’ve been sent here from the Jobcentre...to get driving lessons”. Well we’ll decide whether or not somebody needs driving lessons.’

(EZ Manager)

A number of EZs also mentioned that too many older customers were being referred early for ‘personal and social’ reasons without any supporting information supplied to identify their particular circumstances or employment barriers.

Occasionally, 25 plus early entrants had self referred directly to the EZ by calling into a local office or via Action Team for Jobs (ATJ) provision. In such cases, EZs made contact with Jobcentre Plus to check eligibility and, where appropriate, ask for a referral to be made:

‘...you’ll come back to your desk and find that...somebody [at the EZ] has phoned you saying they’ve had a client in...asking about [the EZ] can you check to see if they’re eligible and possibly refer them on an early entry basis.’

(New Deal adviser)

For 25 plus customers, there was often a need to manage expectations concerning any financial help available and to highlight EZs’ main focus on work, not training.

‘Many early entrants have the impression that EZ will spend lots of money on them.’

(New Deal adviser)

‘There’s...an impression that we’ve got...tons of money to spend on them when in reality we’ve got to manage that expectation...so we have to be very clear what we’re trying to achieve...’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘You do have to spell that out to them...I think a lot of them come in with this rosy picture that they’ll go in and do whatever it is that they want to do.’

(New Deal adviser)

5.2 Jobcentre Plus views of EZ delivery

Many 25 plus early entrants were said by advisers to be grateful of having a choice and appreciative of any help available towards achieving their goal:

‘They’re just thankful that we’ve sent them there because they appreciate our constraints.’

(New Deal adviser)

If customers were disappointed, generally it was because they did not receive the financial assistance they wanted or expected, hence advisers’ views regarding the need to manage expectations.
Views were also informed by EZs’ apparent success in helping 25 plus early customers into work. Though feedback was often patchy, advisers said that most customers referred to the EZ had been successful in quickly securing work:

‘Generally early entrants go and they tend to be the ones that you know, they’re not there long before they’ve got a job.’

(New Deal adviser)

5.3 EZ views and experiences

25 plus early entry customers were said by EZ managers to comprise two distinct and extreme sub-groups – the ‘job ready’ and the ‘hardest to help’. Those who arrived at the EZ with a clear job goal and a firm idea of the help they needed often moved quickly into work and sustained employment. At the other end of the scale were EZ repeat customers, many of whom were said to have multiple and deeply entrenched barriers:

‘Our results at 25 plus…if we get them into work they tend to sustain.’

(EZ Manager)

‘You seem to get two ends of the scale, you either get really, really good ones that are quite easy to work with, they’ve got barriers but they know where they want to go...Then the other end of the scale is...people that...have been through the Zone two or three times, real huge problems, conscientious objectors, really not happy and they’re quite a challenge.’

(EZ Manager)

Several EZs included people with mental health conditions in this category, some reporting a marked increase of late in the number of referrals. Specialist counselling provision was offered by one EZ, but many questioned whether such individuals were suitable for referral or even for work:

‘We’ve seen a huge increase in mental health issues over the last year...the Occupational Psychologist [is] doing a range of one-to-one counselling...but also working with our advisers on how to spot issues of mental health.’

(EZ Manager)

‘You start to question whether or not JSA was ever the right benefit in the first place.’

(EZ Manager)

Even customers with serious barriers and issues could be helped if they genuinely wanted to work. However, those with entrenched behaviours and attitudes and an apparent aversion to work were said by EZs to be among the hardest to help. There were suspicions that some customers might be engaged in undeclared work but EZs had no evidence of this:
‘The hardest people to help are those who don’t want to be helped... Somebody who has been out of work for seven years, lives on this estate, has a drug and alcohol addiction... they’ve got issues which have to be dealt with and some of those issues might be hard, but they’re not the hardest to help, they’re the easiest to help because they’ve actually given you the issues to deal with.’

(EZ Manager)

Many such customers left without a job, said to be a fairly accurate predictor of the likelihood of their reappearance at the EZ in six or twelve month’s time.

5.4 25 plus early entrants’ outcomes

5.4.1 25 plus early entrants who sustained work

Of 16 25 plus early entrants in the phase two study group, 11 were employed. All but one were male. All 11 had left the EZ for a job, although few had stayed in this job. Some had a poor history of sustaining work and had participated in the EZ before. One customer had been on the EZ on three previous occasions before finally securing sustained work.

The one key factor of influence in the sustaining group appeared to be that they had arrived at the EZ with a firm idea of exactly what it was they wanted to do and self-referred in order to seek help and funding towards that goal. If forthcoming, this usually led on to a sustained outcome. As such these customers provided the only clear examples of what could be called ‘easy hits’ for the EZ. Nevertheless, those who moved rapidly into work during stage one still comprised a minority of those who sustained. Most stayed with the EZ on average three to four months before finding work.

The type and effectiveness of different interventions EZs used with 25 plus early entrants is discussed further in Sections 5.5.3 to 5.5.5.

5.4.2 25 plus early entrants who did not sustain work

The strongest trend to emerge in the non-sustaining group was an unwillingness, for whatever reason, to countenance work outside of the narrow parameters they set when joining the EZ. In a number of cases, this reflected higher level educational qualifications in a specialised field or a desire to become self-employed in one particular area.

Customers who presented with mental health conditions were another particularly difficult group to move forward. It was not uncommon for such individuals to have participated in the EZ three or four times. Where customers had a clear history of mental illness, questions may have needed to be asked as to whether they were receiving the correct benefit. One customer had in fact moved from JSA to Incapacity Benefit as a result of the EZ intervening on his behalf. Long-term drug users are another group who may require a longer or different intervention than the EZ is able to provide.
5.5 25 plus early entrants’ views and experiences

5.5.1 Decision to join
The majority of 25 plus customers who were followed up in phase two had a clear idea of what they wanted to do and the help they needed to achieve it. Many had joined specifically to access EZ funding for training or business start up prior to moving into work or self employment. Others simply wanted a job. Referrals were made by Jobcentre Plus advisers on the advice that EZs were better placed to help and source the necessary funding. There was clear understanding on the part of customers that the decision to join was voluntary but that participation thereafter was mandatory.

5.5.2 Views of Jobcentre Plus
Few of the older early entrants had recent experience of New Deal or reached six-months unemployment. As such, most of the comments about Jobcentre Plus services were in regard to their experiences of signing on for benefits.

Of all new customer groups, 25 plus customers were the least judgmental about Jobcentre Plus. Bureaucracy and inflexibility, rather than the shortcomings of individual advisers, were seen to characterise services and support. A number of customers remarked on recent improvements in Jobcentre Plus offices and services:

‘I have got to be honest the Jobcentre...was 100% transformed from my previous experience...[it] was a totally different place...they was very helpful and friendly in their attitude and demeanour and the way they handled people.’

(25 plus early entrant)

Help and services were still mainly described as inflexible and insufficiently customer focused. Echoing the views of other customer groups, Jobcentre Plus advisers were often portrayed more as benefit administrators, offering little help with job search or help that was tailored to individual needs:

‘The Jobcentre don’t have advisers that sit down with you and work things through...I didn’t find much follow up...to see where your job search was going.’

(25 plus early entrant)

‘In the Jobcentre, what they want to know is what you have been doing for a job basically...you tell them, they write it down and off you go.’

(25 plus early entrant)

‘...they have got no interest in finding you a job.’

(25 plus early entrant)
Others said they felt pressured into applying for jobs they had no interest in:

‘The man that I signed on with, he told me I wasn’t trying hard enough, I hadn’t applied for enough jobs and I wasn’t doing enough to get back on the job market. That’s what put me off.’

(25 plus early entrant)

‘I felt intimidated at the Jobcentre... it was like you had to apply for things that you didn’t really want to apply to, and get a job that you would probably be unhappy in...’

(25 plus early entrant)

5.5.3 One-to-one, intensive support

Among customers interested in work, intensive, one-to-one support was said to be a key and beneficial form of help. Again, as featured in remarks throughout the research, what customers appreciated most about these services was that they were provided by a single adviser on a personal, one-to-one basis:

‘You can go there and you are on a one-to-one basis.’

(25 plus early entrant)

‘Very useful to have somebody as an adviser that can work with you on a one-to-one basis and follow up with you to give you that momentum.’

(25 plus early entrant)

‘You have the one-to-one coaching...they are interested, they want you to succeed.’

(25 plus early entrant)

This contrasted with early entrants’ experiences of the Jobcentre Plus approach:

‘They [the EZ] were more friendly and more focused on what you wanted to do and not like shove a job right into your face.’

(25 plus early entrant)

‘I think [the EZ] have got more time for you...one on one rather than one of the many through the Jobcentre.’

(25 plus early entrant)

Female customers, in particular, appeared to benefit from the encouragement and gentle persuasion of a personal adviser. Some had secured jobs in sectors they were unfamiliar with or that they were initially reluctant to apply for:
'I initially applied to [supermarket] but I didn’t get anywhere...when I was with [the EZ]...she encouraged me to apply. I said they didn’t want me but she said no, keep applying and I did and...I got a job interview...I probably wouldn’t have pushed myself again...I would...have thought well they’ve rejected me the once, then what’s the point of applying again?‘

(25 plus early entrant)

Always seeing the same adviser was perceived to be another important distinction between the EZ and Jobcentre Plus.

### 5.5.4 Financial support used flexibly

In the older early entrant category, financial support came strongly to the fore as a key EZ intervention. A number of customers self-referred to the EZ from Jobcentre Plus specifically after failing in attempts to obtain funding for training or for business start up through Jobcentre Plus. Some wanted nothing more than financial help.

The research highlighted the way in which EZ financial help could operate as an incentive to sustain work to the 13 week stage, at which point funds would be released for business equipment or training courses. One customer set up a garden maintenance business, accessing EZ funding at the 13-week stage to enable the purchase of equipment. At phase two the customer was fully self-employed and hopeful that the business would succeed. He was also able to access specialist business advice on an ongoing basis.

### 5.5.5 Strategies for sustaining work and income

There was evidence of advisers persuading customers to adopt broad strategies for sustaining work and maintaining income. Some job-ready customers were advised to wait until the right job came along before moving off the EZ:

‘They emphasise the fact that you ought to try other things...you don’t just ought to have tunnel vision, you have to look at everything else as well.’

(25 plus early entrant)

Other customers were persuaded to adopt a ‘fall back’ position in the event that their first choice of employment fell through. One such customer was referred to the EZ for rail track safety training. Track maintenance work paid considerably more than the local factory agency work the customer had been doing prior to becoming unemployed, but was only available on a temporary contract basis. The EZ adviser agreed to pay for the course on agreement of a ‘fall back’ position. The customer remained on track maintenance work for seven months until the end of the contract. At the time of phase two, he was working full time as a driver, boosting his income with track maintenance work at weekends, as available.

Another customer involved with the EZ on three previous occasions (in addition to three times on New Deal) was persuaded to adopt a ‘fall back’ position. Referred to the EZ to access funding for heavy goods vehicle (HGV) training, though strongly
resistant to the idea he was persuaded to do taxi work in the meantime as a ‘filler’, for which he received funds for a licence, medical and police check:

‘I don’t want to be a taxi driver, I want to drive trucks so...I said “look if you don’t get my HGV sorted, I certainly won’t be taxi driving at the end of the three months”.’

(25 plus early entrant phase 1)

Sustaining employment for 13 weeks, he ultimately received funding for the HGV course, which he failed, though he continued working as a taxi driver. Admitting this was the longest period of sustained work he had had (15 months), with hindsight, the customer was grateful for EZ advice:

‘It’s quite a novelty having money now. I am able to buy myself something without worrying.’

((same) 25 plus early entrant phase 2)

Customers who had moved into relatively well-paid work, or were entitled to Working Tax Credit (WTC), found they quickly became accustomed to higher levels of income. Those with partners and children, in particular, were strongly motivated to sustain work in order to maintain this better standard of living:

‘I don’t think I could go back on the dole. I have got used to having the money.’

(25 plus early entrant)

Persuasion techniques were less effective with customers who were resolute in wanting to pursue a highly specialised area of work or singular course of action to the exclusion of all else. Often such individuals were highly qualified compared with other EZ customers.

A chemistry graduate, his second time on the EZ, sought laboratory work which the EZ adviser was willing to support:

‘They were helpful and never pushed me into a job that I didn’t want.’

(25 plus early entrant)

The customer remained focused on this area of activity due to the amount of effort he felt he put into his studies, despite the fact that there was a dearth of such opportunities locally. He was ultimately unsuccessful in securing work.

Another customer qualified to PhD level was referred by the EZ to an independent careers consultant for specialist job search help. At the time of phase two he was unemployed and had not worked in the interim. He concluded that the EZ had difficulty in dealing with highly qualified graduates who were atypical of the majority of the customers seen by advisers:

‘They just don’t know how to handle graduates.’

(25 plus early entrant)
A further example was a customer recovering from long-term drug use referred to the EZ for funding to become a driving instructor. The adviser was willing to support the customer in his endeavour and offered a financial contribution on condition that the customer secured interim sustained part-time employment. The customer did not agree and returned to benefits:

‘[The EZ adviser] was trying to encourage me to do...part-time work but I wasn’t really accepting of any of that.’

(25 plus early entrant)

As these and other cases exemplify, sustained outcomes are difficult to achieve where customers are resolute in pursuing courses of action that rule out the possibility of regular paid work in the short term. For the same reason, sustained outcomes are also difficult to achieve for those seeking to make a radical change of employment direction into areas in which they have little or no experience.

5.5.6 In-work support and aftercare

With the exception of financial incentives paid at 13 weeks and the occasional bus pass, little mention was made of in-work support or aftercare by this category of customers. Given that all 11 older early entrants sustained employment, once in work, few in this group appeared to need further help.
6 Lone parents

6.1 Jobcentre Plus referral

Lone parents working less than 16 hours per week who are in receipt of Income Support undertake a second Work Focused Interview (WFI) six months after their initial claim for benefit. At this point, and at subsequent WFIs, Jobcentre Plus lone parent advisers in Employment Zone (EZ) single-provider areas are meant to ask lone parent if they wish to volunteer to participate in EZ provision. In addition, lone parents can volunteer to join the EZ at any time. However, lone parents cannot participate in New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and EZs at the same time.

Across all EZ single-provider areas, lone parent referrals from Jobcentre Plus were reported to be low. Only one EZ reported a significant number and proportion of lone parent referrals as coming from Jobcentre Plus. Elsewhere, the volume of lone parent referrals varied but, in most areas, averaged no more than perhaps two or three per week. One EZ stated that in the previous week, they had received just one referral from a team of 12 NDLP advisers.

A variety of different reasons were advanced for low referrals. Jobcentre Plus District Managers admitted that many NDLP advisers had been less than enthusiastic about ‘sharing’ their lone parents with EZs. Some attributed this to a sense of threat concerning the perceived loss of customers and ‘points’, referencing the fact that, historically, advisers’ performance has been measured by the conversion rate to NDLP and jobs. Others highlighted the influence of the training, management and working practices of lone parent advisers:

‘...I think to begin with...it was a case of they’re taking all the points away from us...’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)
‘...we train people[lone parent advisers] to keep hold of them[lone parents]...this is your customer, you look after them, you get them into employment. Now what we are...saying is...hand them over to somebody else...’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘...when you’re dealing at a very one-to-one level with Jobcentre Plus advisers, their perception was that we were taking their jobs away from them...and they weren’t particularly happy about it.’

(EZ Manager)

NDLP advisers tended to accord with this view. Many felt usurped and feared losing their customers and potentially their specialist role to a competitor many regarded as inferior.

‘...we thought we were the professionals. We were doing the job, we’d been doing it long enough and getting the results, why was there a need for somebody else to come along and sort of be really stealing our customers?’

(NDLP adviser)

‘...if every lone parent we saw we referred over to the EZ, then we wouldn’t be meeting our personal targets and our office targets.’

(NDLP adviser)

That lone parent advisers were expected to ‘sell’ provision on behalf of EZs had served to compound the sense of unfairness and competition for customers. The assumption had been that EZs would market their services independently of Jobcentre Plus, reaching out to customers not participating in NDLP. However, in some areas, EZs were said to rely almost entirely on Jobcentre Plus for referrals:

‘My perception was that they were coming to help...[the] vast number [of lone parents] out there that still weren’t being reached.’

(NDLP adviser)

This reliance on Jobcentre Plus, combined with a perception that EZ services were largely indistinct from NDLP, had led to a heightened sense of vulnerability among some advisers, stemming from concerns that EZs may ultimately become the sole provider of services to lone parents:

‘They [EZ]...provide a similar service to ourselves...perhaps to some degree trying to take over the work that we are doing...in the future NDLP services may be hired out to the private sector...they’re seen as a bit of a threat.’

(NDLP adviser)

Many senior managers believed it was simply a matter of time before cultural, organisational and programme changes in Jobcentre Plus would serve to mollify adviser attitudes and behaviours. Proposed changes in the system of performance
measurement in Jobcentre Plus, for example, were expected to result in an increase in referrals generally:

‘[With] the job outcome targets...we can look at working on quality and helping people further and referring them to other organisations, whereas before...we were more inclined to try and keep hold of customers ourselves to see if we could get the points...so I think probably EZ will get more referrals as a result...’

(NDLP adviser)

As a group, NDLP advisers were generally less sanguine. For them, a key reason for low referrals to EZs was the perceived lack of differentiation between NDLP and EZ help.

‘...It is exactly the same as what we do.’

(NDLP adviser)

Compounding this was the poor quality of information reportedly coming from EZs about what they offered and how they worked with lone parents. This made it difficult for advisers to ‘sell’ to customers the benefits of moving to the EZ.

‘There’s nothing distinct to...sell...the customer can’t see the difference, doesn’t see it as different, can’t understand why they should go there.’

(NDLP adviser)

‘Some customers will say...“what do they do that you don’t?” and you can’t really tell them. They’ll say “well I’ll stick with you” and you can’t really argue with that.’

(NDLP adviser)

In fact, many advisers felt that NDLP offered more than EZs could. For example, Jobcentre Plus advisers could conduct Working Tax Credit (WTC) calculations and fast track applications on-line, whereas EZs could not. EZs were also said to be unable to access the range of job vacancies available to NDLP advisers via LMS (a Jobcentre Plus vacancy referral system).

The perception that there is nothing additional to sell in EZ provision was, to a degree, confirmed by EZs themselves. This was mainly attributed to differential funding within EZ contracts which was said to make delivery for lone parents less cost effective than for mandatory customers:

‘The...advisers...can’t see what we can do that’s different...they’ve got money for childcare, they’ve got the system set up, we can’t offer them any more. To some extent we couldn’t because the funding level for lone parents was a third of the main groups.’

(EZ Manager)
An alternative view of low referral was that it reflected the difficulty of engaging the lone parent client group generally, and the fact that building adviser expertise and customer trust took time:

‘Lone parents are a very difficult group to engage...it’s taken a long time for NDLP to get off the ground...’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘I don’t think that [the EZ] had the advisers with the skills...if I was to say “why are the referrals low?” they [NDLP advisers] would say “because customers prefer to deal with our advisers at this stage”.’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Others simply believed that lone parents, once engaged, liked to stay with the same adviser. This was felt to be the case, regardless of the particular service provider:

‘Whichever part of the organisation they are with, they’re likely to stick.’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Advisers, too, believed that, even if lone parents did not join NDLP, most preferred to stay with the same adviser at subsequent WFI:

‘A lot of lone parents are nervous when they come in...they don’t want to see a new face.’
(NDLP adviser)

Competition for lone parents from other Government- and European-funded employment and training initiatives (including NDLP), was another reason advanced for why referrals were low and engagement seen to be difficult. Competing provision offered by EZs and Action Teams for Jobs (ATJ), for example, was said to have created conflicting priorities not only in Jobcentre Plus, but also for EZ providers that held ATJ contracts:

‘One of the problems with lone parents is this conflict between the contracts...because they are a priority group within Action Teams and they’re a priority group within EZ. So it’s “where do you send them?”.’
(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘...We’ve not had any referrals from lone parent advisers at all because they prefer the Action Team side of things.’
(EZ Manager)

A key reason for the apparent preference for ATJ referral was said to be the fact that NDLP and ATJ advisers shared job outcome points, whereas for EZ referrals they did not:
'On our Action Team we’re allowed to work alongside NDLPAs, so we can provide additionality...Jobcentre Plus advisers, they are happier working with...the Action Teams...it’s a shared outcome...whereas on the EZ, they will still get the outcome results but it’s not an obvious one, their perception is that they’re giving it away and getting nothing back.’

(EZ Manager)

Viewing things strategically and in terms of efficient resource management, most District Managers were keen to see Jobcentre Plus referrals increase.

‘It would be great for me to refer as many as possible, then I could redeploy the lone parent advisers on something else...there’s plenty of work for us.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

With more flexibility and time to devote to customers and a different office environment, some even considered EZs to be better positioned to help lone parents into work.

‘It’s more somewhere to drop in, have a coffee...it’s got far better street cred than dropping into your Jobcentre for a coffee.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

That lone parent referrals remained low was thus a frustration experienced both by Jobcentre Plus and EZ managers.

In recognising that Jobcentre Plus could perhaps do more, some District Managers did feel that EZs relied too much on them and some were disappointed at EZs’ efforts to engage lone parents:

‘I was frustrated for quite a while that I didn’t think that they actively engaged with the lone parent client group and I was particularly keen that they did...I had to push and push and push [to] deliver better performance...It’s only recently that I’ve seen a difference.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Lack of specialist expertise among EZ advisers, together with limited marketing and outreach activity, were believed to have contributed to EZs’ apparent lack of success in recruiting lone parents independently of Jobcentre Plus. There was a perception too that, unlike Jobcentre Plus, EZs and EZ contractors were not well known in the local community or yet trusted by lone parents:

‘We’ve got [lone parent advisers] now that have done outreach work for a number of years who are now trusted in the community and I think probably with EZs it’s still very much “it’s another company that the Government’s just taken on to try and get us back into work when actually I want to be at home looking after my children”.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)
The EZ funding model was also felt to function in such a way as to incentivise mandatory referrals over voluntary customers:

‘They have to work more with [lone parents] so its more investment for less return.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Proposed changes in the level of contracted payments made in respect of lone parents were expected to result in an increase in marketing and outreach activity in the future.

### 6.2 Jobcentre Plus referral policies and procedures

Differences evident in the interpretation and local implementation of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) policy and guidelines, and in the working practices of NDLP advisers, appeared to be, at least in part, a reflection of attempts to boost lone parent referrals to EJs.

Some districts appeared to have applied a rather literal interpretation of the guidelines. Here, Jobcentre Plus advisers could work exclusively with lone parents on NDLP for the period between the first and second mandatory WFI. However, for lone parents who chose not to participate in NDLP during this time, at subsequent mandatory WFIs, only EZ provision could be discussed. Information about NDLP could only be provided if the customer specifically asked for it.

‘We will work with them for a period of six months...That’s an exclusive period for us when we can talk only about NDLP, but thereafter, once they’ve come into the process of six month...reviews...at that point...and all subsequent annual interviews, they are then supposed to strictly talk about EZ...they’re not supposed to mention New Deal at all unless the customer asks for it...’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

This particular interpretation was felt by advisers to be restricting the choices open to lone parents.

‘There is no choice, unless they specifically ask about something that we can help with.’

(NDLP adviser)

Few lone parents were said to specifically remember discussing NDLP after six months or a year, or to be able to differentiate between NDLP and EZ provision. Furthermore, not being able to discuss NDLP was also seen as artificial and potentially confusing for lone parents.

‘I think customers are...mystified as why you’re trying to hand them off, after trying to deal with them for so long.’

(NDLP adviser)
Some advisers were perplexed as to how lone parents were to be told they had the option of returning to NDLP at any time, if New Deal could not be mentioned. This had given rise to certain adviser behaviours at the second WFI, which allowed them to side-step local policy by asking the question:

‘Do you remember what we talked about in your last interview about NDLP? Then say, “well there’s this other option open to you now”.’

(NDLP adviser)

By using this tactic, advisers said they could then legitimately discuss NDLP, as well as EZ provision. The moratorium on NDLP discussion after the second WFI also served in these districts to reinforce feelings of unequal treatment and unfair competition among some lone parent advisers:

‘...It’s like working for Barclays bank and selling HSBC...I think it should be equal, I think we should mention them both really because I know it’s not reciprocated...I think if it were sort if equal, I wouldn’t mind so much.

(NDLP adviser)

Other districts had a policy of informing lone parents about the choice of NDLP or EZ provision at the first mandatory WFI, but that at the second WFI, only EZ provision was promoted:

‘At the initial WFI they’re told about both and they’re actively encouraged to participate in both. At the second trigger then it’s only [the EZ] who are mentioned, so it focuses solely on them at that stage.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

‘As I understand...they’re [NDLP advisers] allowed to talk them [lone parents] in the first interview about EZ, I think they can talk to them about our lone parent provision in one of the interviews but then after that it’s purely the Zone.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Where both options could be discussed, advisers seemed happier to ‘sell’ EZ provision and make referrals since the element of choice and decision making on the part of the lone parent was more evident. Also important was being able to get across to lone parents the key message that they could return to NDLP at any time if EZ support proved to be unsuitable:

‘We can swap provisions, they can come back whenever they want. So the way I sell it to them is that it’s another person that’s helping you to get into work and the more people on your side...the easier it’s going to be.’

(NDLP adviser)

It was apparent that, in practice, discrepancies existed between stated local policy and what lone parent advisers reported as happening during mandatory WFi's. For
example, advisers in one area said they did not specifically identify or discuss EZ provision other than in the context of the broad range of options and help available to lone parents:

‘They have to be told that things are available...there are other organisations who can help...we normally say this anyway because a lot...of the role is referring to other organisations.’

(NDLP adviser)

Other advisers said EZ provision was generally only discussed if a lone parent specifically requested a referral. Emphasising the voluntary nature of participation, these advisers felt strongly that lone parents should make their own decisions, free from any pressures. Placing too much emphasis on one particular provider could unduly influence some lone parents into joining the EZ simply to please their adviser:

‘People will agree to anything if they think that it’s pleasing you.’

(NDLP adviser)

‘Three way’ WFIs involving the lone parent and two advisers, one from Jobcentre Plus and one from the EZ sitting alongside, for example, were found by some NDLP advisers to be an imposition. Others said it confused the lone parent:

‘The [EZ] advisers have come over to the office...so they can see people that come into the Jobcentre and refer them to the [EZ] provision in that way. I don’t think that’s overly worked...because you’ve got set interviews and you haven’t got time for a third person to be selling something else.’

(NDLP adviser)

The use of ‘floor walkers’ to persuade lone parents attending a WFI to join the EZ had also had limited success. Some areas had tried all these methods and more:

‘We’ve done WFIs where we’ve had the Zone’s advisers in at the same time...Take up of that wasn’t good...We’ve tried having EZ Advisers floor walking whilst lone parents are doing interviews. The next stage that we were going to look at was...automatically refer them across as in “right now you can go and talk to somebody from EZ”, rather than giving them that get out clause.’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Joint efforts made by the agencies to increase lone parent referrals were reported to have had mixed results. Locating EZ lone parent advisers in Jobcentre Plus offices, for example, had reportedly improved relationships between the agencies and customer flows. Joint working in another area had not been sustained, apparently due to resourcing difficulties:

‘When EZ first came in, we had EZ Advisers actually working with us on our team so we could refer straight over and discuss any concerns but that was withdrawn very quickly, they said they couldn’t resource it...now, but the only contact we have is maybe once a month when they bring the paperwork over.’

(NDLP adviser)
However, advisers in this area admitted they had felt pressured by the EZ into working with lone parents in particular ways they disliked or knew from experience to be ineffective:

‘We were actually made to do group information sessions which we knew wouldn’t work because single parents have got a lot of issues that they wouldn’t want to discuss in a group.’

(NDLP adviser)

That the EZ was seeking to influence how they should work with lone parents was felt here to have undermined their independence, impartiality and professionalism. EZ methods were also be perceived by advisers as ‘hard sell’ and at odds with the more ‘softly, softly’ approach of NDLP, based on voluntary participation. These attempts to boost lone parent recruitment had thus served only to further distance them:

‘We’re experienced advisers and we feel that its up to us to...discuss with a customer what their needs are, not to be told, “well this person is eligible for [the EZ], you should be sending them to us”,...It is a voluntary option and they shouldn’t be bullied into doing anything they don’t want to do.’

(NDLP adviser)

6.3 Which lone parents are being referred by Jobcentre Plus and why?

Many NDLP advisers said that lone parents referred to EZ provision were mainly those for whom help was unavailable through NDLP or for whom Jobcentre Plus help had been exhausted. Generally, this tended to be customers wanting or needing expensive funding, specialist or ‘obscure’ forms of help, or who had longer-term career goals:

‘We normally don’t refer the lone parent. If we refer them over, we wouldn’t be working with them, so normally the only reason we would refer...is if there’s something they [the EZ] can do that we can’t do...so i haven’t personally referred anyone...for the last three months.’

(NDLP adviser)

‘It might be a situation where we can’t help them because we haven’t got any funding to help them in what they want to do.’

(NDLP adviser)

Lone parents who needed lengthy or specialist forms of training, and who insisted this was the only route into employment they were willing to consider, were thus a group said to be commonly referred to the EZ. Examples included lone parents who wanted to become qualified in nursing, estate agency work and teaching.
'If they seem adamant they want training...it's just not productive for the lone parent, or for us.'

(NDLP adviser)

Lone parents considered to require a lot of help or time, because of complex needs or circumstances, were another type of customer NDLP advisers said they would refer to the EZ:

‘Perhaps if they were exceptionally needy customers...that needed more time than perhaps we could afford to give them.’

(NDLP adviser)

Other NDLP advisers said they would refer if a lone parent specifically asked for EZ help. In some areas, this was said to account for the majority of referrals; word of mouth about the kind of additional help EZs offered (often driving lessons) being quick to get around. Recommendation from a friend or family member was thus said to be a key reason for a specific referral request.

EZs tended to agree that lone parents often acted in response to personal recommendation, rather than according to a strict choice between EZ and New Deal provision:

‘I think the ones we get they probably come to us because we’ve helped a friend or family member or somebody they know...I don’t think it’s because they’ve maybe chosen ourselves or New Deal. I think they’re maybe coming to us because they know...that we’ve helped somebody that they know and they know what we do.’

(EZ Manager)

Some also believed that self-referrals from Jobcentre Plus reflected the fact that EZs were perceived to offer something different to Jobcentre Plus. The perception that Jobcentre Plus services were insufficiently customer focused and could be viewed as coercive by lone parents, was advanced by some EZs in explanation of why certain lone parents chose the EZ rather than remain with Jobcentre Plus:

‘I think [they choose the EZ] because it’s different. Sometimes, they think they’re pushed into things with Jobcentre Plus that they really don’t want to do and...we say we’ll only find you something that you want.’

(EZ Manager)

For their part, NDLP advisers believed the greater availability of funding within EZs and the financial incentives on offer – for example help with driving lessons, business start-up costs or other large items of expenditure – could entice lone parents. While small amounts of Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF) funding were still available to them, this could only be used to help ease the transition to work. Recent reductions in the upper limits of ADF were also said to have restricted its flexibility and usage. EZs were perceived to have access to additional funding, together with more flexibility in terms of what the funding was spent on:
'We use [the EZ] if we can’t provide something for the lone parents...they have specific funding available for each customer, we don’t.'

(NDLP adviser)

Many EZs agreed that lone parents referred from Jobcentre Plus tended to be those requiring additional help or funding. A common perception was that many were not yet job ready or were harder to help.

6.4 Switching between NDLP and EZ provision

In the experience of most advisers, very few lone parents were consciously choosing to ‘switch’ from NDLP to EZ provision. The key perceived reason was that customers preferred to remain with the same adviser, having developed a rapport and trust:

‘They go through the WFI...build a rapport...and then usually stick with that adviser...it is to do with the rapport and...confidence building...the customer is more comfortable staying with the adviser that they’ve already seen, rather than moving to [the EZ]...’

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

Among lone parents that had switched provision, the majority reportedly did so for reasons previously given – to access additional funding or in-depth help when further progress had not been possible through NDLP:

‘I had somebody who was going to be a taxi driver and I didn’t help her out because the course needed some funding, so I passed her to [the EZ] and they were able to...help her into work whereas I couldn’t...do that within my job.’

(NDLP adviser)

Many lone parents that appeared to have switched from NDLP to join the EZ were said by NDLP advisers not to have made a conscious choice, or to have been unaware that a choice of provision had to be made. One specific example given was of lone parents calling into the local EZ office in response to a job advertisement in the window. Without realizing they were already on NDLP, they would be signed up for EZ help. The first any of these lone parents reportedly knew about having to choose between NDLP or EZ provision was when the NDLP adviser made contact to ask why they had decided to leave the programme:

‘We’ve had people on our caseload who have maybe just walked past [the EZ office], seen a job advertised in the window and have gone in and been signed up to the EZ without knowing and then all of a sudden we get this pink sheet that our customer is no longer our customer and we ring them to see...where have we gone wrong, and they’re not aware that they’ve actually signed up...’

(NDLP adviser)

For this reason, EZs with dedicated lone parent provision and premises and proactive marketing strategies reported a much higher proportion of lone parents joining the EZ who had previously been on NDLP.
EZs were more inclined to say that former NDLP customers had chosen to join the EZ in preference to NDLP. Reasons said to have been given by lone parents who had switched included a preoccupation in Jobcentre Plus with paperwork, the referral to job vacancies considered unsuitable and, more generally, insufficient customer focus.

The few customers reported to have switched from EZ provision back to NDLP, were mostly again in areas where EZs had engaged in proactive marketing, where lone parents were said to have joined ‘by mistake’. Having had the policy explained to them, some had apparently chosen to ‘return’ to their NDLP adviser. Other examples given of lone parents returning to NDLP included those who rejoined to have a benefit calculation confirmed or to have a WTC application fast-tracked. There were also some instances reported of lone parent rejoining NDLP when jobs obtained with EZ help had not been sustained. Other lone parents were reported by NDLP advisers to have returned to NDLP because they did not receive the type or quality of service expected or promised by the EZ.

Such perceptions tended to concentrated in areas where EZs had made the greatest efforts to market EZ provision to lone parents independently of Jobcentre Plus. As such, they may have been hampered by poor co-operation and information exchange between the agencies, together with negative feedback from customers returning to Jobcentre Plus who had not secured or sustained work.

As well as provoking a sense of competition between the agencies, the strict choice between either NDLP or EZ could, some advisers believed, work to the detriment, rather than to the benefit, of customers. Job-ready customers actively seeking work, they felt, should be able to access as much help as they needed and as was on offer locally. Allowing the two programmes to run in parallel was one suggestion put forward by a number of advisers for reducing competition and improving customer service and choice:

‘I think it would help if the programmes could run together so that we could work together with say an EZ adviser, for the good of the customer.’

(NDLP adviser)

‘...EZs would work if we weren’t seen as separate programmes...if we could work together and not say “no, you’ve got to go to EZ, you can’t see us then”. ...If we were given the chance to work together with EZ, I think that could possibly improve.’

(NDLP adviser)

6.5 Jobcentre Plus views of EZ delivery

Among NDLP advisers, views regarding EZ provision for lone parents were very mixed. Among those holding negative views, much appeared to stem from the belief that, at best, EZ provision replicates (even duplicates) and is largely indistinct
from NDLP. At worst, it was seen to offer less. EZ help was frequently characterised by advisers as lacking in client focus with too much emphasis placed on moving lone parents into jobs they did not want. Allusions were made to the commercial orientation of EZs, and on payments by results, by way of explanation:

‘[EZs are] much more money orientated...more likely to pressurise a customer into doing something they don’t want to do...than...the Jobcentre.’

(NDLP adviser)

‘[The EZ] is a profit-making organisation...We have the customers’ interests at heart...we help them rather than seeing [them] as a bit of money.’

(NDLP adviser)

‘EZ are privately funded, so they get their money on results, we tend to think that they just want to get the lone parent into work, rather than get them into something that they want to do.’

(NDLP adviser)

The recognized and long standing expertise of NDLP advisers, together with their access to a wide range of tools including benefits and WTCs systems, were believed to better equip them to deal with lone parents. The antipathy towards EZs was experienced all the more acutely given that most advisers believed they had been doing a professional job and getting good results. With greater flexibility and apparently greater access to funding, EZ provision for lone parents was seen as unfair competition:

‘They’re on secondment, they get more money than we do and they’ve been sharing clients. They get more money to spend on those clients than we can because we’re restricted. It’s just not fair, it’s unfair competition.’

(NDLP adviser)

Reference was also made to negative customer feedback regarding poor perceived job sustainability:

‘The feedback we’ve had is generally that they [lone parents] felt they’ve been pushed into a job rather than getting a job they want.’

(NDLP adviser)

Again, these views tended to predominate in EZ areas where lone parent provision operated in competition with NDLP.

Lone parent advisers with more constructive views of EZs were found in districts where conscious efforts had been made to promote joint working between the agencies. Here, relationships and perceptions were markedly better. For example, EZs that had introduced job shadowing, whereby advisers from the two agencies each spent time on each others premises, reported this initiative to have been
particularly helpful in improving rapport and mutual trust. Lone parent referrals were also said to have increased. More equanimulous views also arose in response to positive customer feedback, though because lone parent referral had been so low, examples were few and far between:

‘That particular person was fantastic, she’s gone into work brilliant, no problems. Had a couple of people that I’ve referred up and they’ve all had good feedback.’

(NDLP adviser)

6.6 EZ views and experiences

6.6.1 Lone parent marketing and engagement

EZs had adopted a variety of methods and strategies, and reported differing degrees of responsiveness and success, in seeking to attract and engage lone parents independently of Jobcentre Plus. Some had implemented comprehensive strategies which comprised marketing and publicity campaigns and included organising and participating in outreach events, often in partnership with other agencies, for example, Sure Start and NDLP. A few providers operated stands in shopping centres; another had advisers pounding their ‘feet on the streets,’ and another ran a regular market stall staffed by lone parent volunteers. Taking advantage of links with a sister or parent company operating as an employment agency, some providers attracted customers using job advertisements presented as being suitable for lone parents.

In spite of this activity, the largest proportion of self-referring lone parents were said to join having heard about the EZ through word of mouth. Collaborative working with agencies and initiatives such as Sure Start was also believed to be an important means of accessing lone parents in community settings. It was seen to be crucial to their ability to work constructively, rather than in competition, that the various agencies were each clear of their respective roles vis-à-vis lone parents.

Dedicated lone parent delivery from separate premises was reported to have been a successful method of engaging lone parents. Separate premises reflected the desire to appear more child-friendly and suited delivery based on informal drop-in. Casual drop-in was said to be an important factor in attracting lone parents and in differentiating EZ provision from NDLP. With hindsight, the siting of the lone parent office in a commercial centre was not felt to have been the best choice of location in terms of passing trade on which the EZ relied heavily for referrals. However, lone parents were said to particularly like the ability to have children accompany them and to drop in without an appointment. In spite of the service’s reported success, this provider, too, agreed that word of mouth and personal recommendation from former or existing EZ customers was probably the most important factor influencing lone parent take-up.

At the other extreme, on their own admission, a few EZs had made no more than token efforts to market their services independently from Jobcentre Plus. Some were...
unapologetic, believing that separate marketing and recruitment only served to reinforce the sense of competition between the agencies. Some had abandoned separate marketing in favour of collaborative approaches between EZs and NDLP, reportedly with some success. One EZ reported that as a result of joint working, 90 per cent of lone parent referrals now came from Jobcentre Plus. The remaining ten per cent voluntarily self referred, discounting, as they saw it, the need for independent marketing.

Other providers had expected lone parent referrals from Jobcentre Plus to be much higher and had initially been slow to respond. Some admitted their attitudes and behaviour towards lone parents were, to some extent, influenced by DWP contracts which incentivised mandatory over voluntary customers and favoured lone parents participating in ATJ provision.

Nevertheless, the difficulty of engaging lone parents appeared to be genuine; recent concerted marketing and recruitment efforts were said to have generated few additional referrals:

‘We’ve run our [back to work] courses...we also tried something called job dating on Valentine’s day where I invited them to do a manicure, talk about their appearance and then broached the idea of work, but that was quite a challenge.’

(EZ Manager)

Difficulties were believed to be largely the result of competition (mainly from NDLP and ATJ) combined with an ever shrinking pool of lone parents with latent employability. Reference was made to the fact that half of all lone parents were now in employment. Among the remainder, those interested in working would, many believed, be captured at their first WFI. A significant proportion of those left and with whom EZs could potentially engage were believed to have no immediate intention or realistic prospect of working:

‘The lone parent market has diminished here...50 per cent of them are in work, the remaining 50 per cent, of that...10 or 20 per cent really have no intention of working and then you drill down, you’ve then got NDLP trying to engage with them and us working alongside...it’s been...far more of a challenge.’

(EZ Manager)

‘Lone parents remain a huge challenge in terms of how we get buy-in and engagement onto the programme.’

(EZ Manager)

Persuading this group, many of whom had preschool-age children, of the benefits of working was considered by some EZs to be an uphill struggle.
6.6.2 Moving lone parents into sustained work

Most EZs’ were finding that the lone parents they had engaged had mainly high levels of motivation and job readiness, resulting in good job outcomes and sustainability. The main difficulty, as noted above, was in first engaging them:

‘Our lone parents, if we can get them, get into work and sustain!’

(EZ Manager)

‘With lone parents, once we get them, we keep them and they sustain. The issue we’ve got with lone parents is engaging them...Once we get them, we’re OK.’

(EZ Manager)

For some EZs, lone parents represented the group among whom job entry and retention levels were highest:

‘On lone parents...we’ve got a very good conversion rate [into jobs] and a very high retention rate, once a lone parent goes into work, a very, very good retention rate, it may even be higher than 75 per cent.’

(EZ Manager)

A few EZs reported lone parents to be much harder to help than anticipated. Around half the lone parents engaged by one provider were said to be at a considerable distance from the labour market or without any immediate plans or prospect of work. Often they were found to lack direction and motivation, and some had attitudes and behaviours not unlike mandatory customers. As such, they could be demanding and resource intensive:

‘Some lone parents...aren’t motivated shall I say like some of my mandatory clients.’

EZ Manager

In these EZs, there was a perception that mandatory WFls had served to reinforce rather than challenge attitudes about the benefits of working among some lone parents, particularly those with young children. Increasing customer workloads in Jobcentre Plus and the extension of WFls to other customers were perceived by some EZ managers to have reduced the amount of time NDLP advisers had available to discuss work and childcare options:

‘Work isn’t on their agenda.’

(EZ Lone Parent Manager)
6.7 Lone parents’ outcomes

6.7.1 Lone parents who sustained work

Twenty-one lone parents were re-interviewed during phase two of the research. Of these, 16 were working, three full time and 13 part time.

Half the lone parents who had sustained employment had qualifications, ranging from GCSEs and A levels to professional qualifications. The sustaining group was also defined by the fact that dependent children were likely to be aged four or over and engaged in full-time education, thus negating the need for formal childcare. The amount of time spent away from the labour market was not necessarily an indicator of the severity of barriers to employment other than the fact that many of these customers had remained at home to bring up children, often resulting in a considerable erosion of self confidence.

Despite the fact that prior qualifications featured strongly in the sustaining group, specific EZ interventions appeared to have been key in helping individual lone parents secure and sustain work. The content and effectiveness of different types of EZ help in enabling lone parents access and sustain work are explored in further detail in Sections 6.8.3 to 6.8.12.

6.7.2 Lone parents who did not sustain work

Five lone parents were not working at phase two. Of these, four had left the EZ without a job and had remained on Income Support in the intervening period. The fifth was engaged in full-time education.

Among the small number of lone parents who did not secure or sustain work, the research suggests that the contributory factors mainly appeared to be due to individual circumstances and the personal decision not to work, rather than significant failures on the part of EZ providers.

One customer with a poor history of sustaining work moved into employment but did not inform the provider or return to the EZ when the position was not sustained. Another customer seeking business start-up help was referred by the EZ to external business specialists, but made no material progression. A further customer had her EZ support withdrawn after informing her adviser that her partner, who was working, had moved in with her.

The only semblance of a trend was where customers’ children were under five and where, for personal or financial reasons, the stated preference was to wait until they started school before returning to work. Some EZs did, however, facilitate moves towards the labour market even here. One provider paid for a broadband connection which enabled a customer to complete a course in website design. Another paid for 30 driving lessons before the customer passed her test. She subsequently decided against work and opted for further education. A further lone parent with three children aged two, three and four was unable to countenance a return to work when difficult home circumstances were compounded by health problems. In all but
6.8 Lone parents’ views and experiences

6.8.1 Decision to join

Among lone parents followed up in phase two, the decision to join the EZ appeared mainly to be based on prior knowledge or experience of the provider, general word of mouth or following a personal recommendation from a friend or relative. Hearing that EZs could help to pay for driving lessons, training courses, personal computers or other such items of expenditure encouraged some lone parents to join.

A minority of self-referring lone parents had participated in courses run by the EZ provider (under a different contract) or had previously received their help and advice at a drop-in or outreach venue. Sometimes, this contact had been many months prior to them joining the EZ, while in other cases, an immediate referral was made, for example, from ATJ to EZ provision. Most of these lone parents were job ready and looking for work at the time of joining. A small minority had already had a firm job offer.

Among lone parents referred to the EZ by Jobcentre Plus, most had longer-term career goals, were interested in self employment or wanted to improve skills and qualifications prior to moving into work:

‘The [NDLP] adviser was desperately trying to find someway that they could offer me assistance with childcare costs to do the courses and she was drawing blanks...then...she rang me and said I have found a company that can hopefully may be help you out...At the time I wasn’t ready to work, I wanted to get some better qualifications under my belt.’

(Lone parent)

Many wanted to learn how to drive in order to combine work and childcare. A few lone parents were already working at the time of referral but wanted to train for a better job or career. One lone parent had given up a job in the weeks prior to joining the EZ, to gain skills and qualifications needed to access work with better pay and prospects. Another admitted she wanted financial help but had no intention of working until her children were in school:

‘My personal view is that the mother should be at home with the kids...I want to bring them up myself. Now they are getting to the age they are in September, I might think differently.’

(Lone parent)
6.8.2 Switching from NDLP to EZ

A minority of lone parents who were followed up had chosen to switch from NDLP to the EZ. They were persuaded to join the EZ by their NDLP adviser following concerns over their lack of success in obtaining work. One such lone parent joined the EZ to try a new approach:

‘[the NDLP adviser] asked whether I’d like to try a different approach...she hadn’t been successful – maybe a different way might be the answer.’

(Lone parent)

At the time, this customer was concerned that, rather than broadening her options, moving from NDLP to the EZ would reduce them:

‘I thought I was cutting my options down because I could have had two people trying to look for work and jobs for me...’

(Lone parent)

She was however successful in securing work and had sustained the same job for more than 12 months when phase two interviews were held.

Another customer with a professional background had been advised by her NDLP adviser to join the EZ to help her source specialist job vacancies:

‘[My Jobcentre adviser] said to me that [the EZ] were more likely to be able to deal with somebody who was a professional, that they would have more of an idea [of how to help me].’

(Lone parent)

In this particular instance, the EZ had been unable to help and the customer had returned to NDLP for a short period before leaving and subsequently finding her own job.

6.8.3 Friendly, accessible venues

Lone parents frequently stressed the importance of venue in explaining why they chose to join and what they liked about the EZ. Informality and a friendly, easy-going atmosphere suitable for children, was seen to characterise much of the support, more especially that delivered from separate premises or outreach venues such as family centres. The smaller size of EZ offices was also felt to be more welcoming:

‘When you go into [the EZ] they are all just dead laid back. Probably it will change if it gets bigger and bigger.’

(Lone parent)

Here, where customers were on first name terms with EZ staff, informality and familiarity led to good rapport. Customers could chat informally with advisers about their options, in some cases, while relaxing with friends:
‘Everyone is dead friendly. When you walk in, everyone recognises you and says hello.’
(Lone parent)

‘I don’t feel too...pressurised...you can just be yourself sat down with your mates and just have a word with her more casual.’
(Lone parent)

The absence of an overt job focus or sense of pressure to apply for jobs was welcomed by some lone parents particularly those who accessed EZ help via outreach or drop-in type provision.

Though customers readily acknowledged recent makeovers and improvements in the standard of decor, Jobcentre Plus offices were often described as impersonal and intimidating places where they felt inhibited and ill at ease. Some found that the new, more up-market image actually contributed to feelings of unfriendliness:

‘It just looks clinical in there now. It doesn’t look so friendly like it used to...If I haven’t got an appointment, I don’t like to go in.’
(Lone parent)

Not all lone parents expressing such views were female:

‘At the Jobcentre, sometimes you want to do or say something and you feel restrained...you don’t feel welcome...you feel that you are at arms length...’
(Male lone parent)

### 6.8.4 Encouragement of advisers

Many customers explicitly referred to EZ staff as friends, allies and counsellors – someone they could talk to, who listened and helped overcome practical problems:

‘I built up a good relationship with all the staff. I know them on a first name basis.’
(Lone parent)

‘They can actually talk you through your difficulties, so it’s almost as if they have turned it into a bit of a counselling service.’
(Lone parent)

‘I really found them friendly and helpful. When you are in that situation you need somebody who appears more like a friend than a taskmaster, which is what it felt like at the Jobcentre.’
(Lone parent)
Advisers’ friendly encouragement worked to increase lone parents’ confidence and motivation, assisting re-entry to the labour market. This was especially important in circumstances where lone parents were newly divorced or separated from partners and feeling particularly vulnerable:

‘They just give you that bit more confidence, that bit of a boost...I thought I want to get a job, they just gave me that push.’

(Lone parent)

‘No one’s ever praised me before...it feels like she’s got faith in the fact that I am going to be able to get work at the end of it.’

(Lone parent)

Lone parents who had been away from the labour market for lengthy periods of time liked the fact that the feeling of being alone in their employment endeavours was removed through engagement and regular contact with an adviser:

‘I think just the support and somebody being there to help you...you know that you are not by yourself.’

(Lone parent)

Perhaps because rapport was so important, lone parents generally preferred to stay with the same adviser. Those whose advisers had left their jobs or who had been referred to a different adviser for whatever reason, often found this unsettling.

6.8.5 Flexible and intensive contact

As with New Deal returners, lone parents broadly welcomed the flexible nature and intensive degree of contact at the EZ. Many found this was of a different order to that experienced through any previous Jobcentre Plus or NDLP intervention. Of particular importance for lone parents with young children was the ability to drop in to see their adviser at times which suited them. Often they would be seen several times a week, at short notice, and without an appointment:

‘Sometimes I would see them three to four times a week...the door was constantly open.’

(Lone parent)

The greater amount of time advisers had to spend with customers, together with their ease of access, was frequently contrasted with reference to Jobcentre Plus where advisers were said to be difficult to speak to, other than during a diaried appointment:

‘With [the EZ] you can ‘phone up and ask them they are always there...you can hardly get through to the Jobcentre...it’s always, rush, rush, rush...they just haven’t got time...You can hardly get through to the Jobcentre, the ‘phone will just ring and ring and ring. It’s more convenient and easier.’

(Lone parent)
6.8.6 Focus on quality jobs and longer-term goals

There was good evidence from the interviews that EZs enhanced sustainability through supporting lone parents’ access to better jobs which, in turn, had led to improved job prospects. A number of lone parents reported that they were encouraged by the EZ to broaden their horizons and target better quality work than had been their background and original goal. Some were now in more secure jobs and above the minimum wage levels they had previously earned:

‘Perhaps if I hadn’t gone with [the EZ], I probably would have just applied for a job in the paper...and been in a sandwich bar or somewhere small and been in and out of jobs.’

(Lone parent)

‘I really just wanted to do like a shop job...they said I could achieve better than that...they made me look at my potential and the things that I could do, rather than putting me in a dead-end job...’

(Lone parent)

‘...Rather than go for the minimum wage...I thought I would go for like £7 or £8 an hour type job and that is what I ended up with.’

(Lone parent)

The longer customers stayed in work, the more they said they gained in confidence and self-esteem. A number of lone parents had secured new jobs under their own steam, having initially needed EZ help to complete application forms and attend interviews. One customer who had only ever worked as a cleaner had, with EZ assistance, become a qualified nursing auxiliary and was considering taking steps towards midwifery:

‘I did cleaning, that’s all I did was clean, clean, clean...it’s given me more confidence...more self worth...self esteem...and it’s lovely, I do feel important...it’s nice to feel like that.’

(Lone parent)

Some customers had been supported in achieving longer-term career goals, even though this may have required their buy-in through initially sustaining work that did not interest them. In spite of initial resistance to the adviser’s advice and direction, one customer was able to pursue her long-term aim of moving onto a degree level nursing course, with the aid of paid caring work achieved through EZ persuasion and practical help:

‘[At first] I refused, I just said no, sorry, I’m not going to do it, because it wouldn’t have been beneficial, it would have just basically got me in a rut.’

(Lone parent)
A part-time job in a nursing home had led onto a job offering more hours and pay in a hospital, from which the customer moved onto a full-time nursing course. As a result of sustaining her first job, she had also received driving lessons paid for by the EZ, enabling her to accept the offer of better-paid work further afield. After twelve months EZ contact and support, she realised her long-term goal:

‘...It gave me the confidence to go in there. Instead of saying “I don’t know anything about this job [nursing], I haven’t done this before” it gave me the back up...If I hadn’t worked in the nursing home and managed to get the job in the hospital, I wouldn’t have got on the course...I wouldn’t have got the first job if it hadn’t been for [the EZ]...so it’s like a domino effect...’

(Lone parent)

EZ help was strongly differentiated by lone parents from that experienced by Jobcentre Plus in terms of their being able to pursue their own agendas, particularly where they had a clear idea of what they wanted to do and the help they needed. One lone parent had the possibility of a job as a road digger but needed to train for a specific qualification, which the EZ agreed to pay for. His NDLP adviser had been unable to help and could only offer courses in computing. Eighteen months later, he was still in the same job and his hours of work had increased:

‘The [NDLP adviser] seemed to be pushing you onto a course...wanting to get me to do stuff I didn’t want to do...courses that I didn’t feel was relevant to me...whereas [the EZ] wanted to help me...I couldn’t have done it without them. I wouldn’t have been able to afford the course. I would have been unemployed, it’s as simple as that.’

(Male lone parent)

A minority of lone parents did complain that the EZ had pushed them to consider working before they felt they were ready, or to apply for a job they did not want. However, in most cases, this appeared to have been after receiving financial help and failing to make any firm commitment to returning to the labour market.

6.8.7 Holistic help

The approach of the EZ was regarded by lone parents as more holistic insofar as interventions sought to address both specific employment-related barriers as well as the broader household economy and personal circumstances on which a return to work was premised.

‘She went through a lot more of my personal life...and my outgoing expenses, and...generally had a look at the whole picture, not just that I needed a job.’

(Lone parent)

Within this, the In Work Benefit Calculation (IWBC) appeared to be a key tool in overcoming perceived financial barriers:

‘It helps...because you think it’s not going to be worth it...but when you actually see it written down...it does help you a lot.’

(Lone parent)
Many lone parents took confidence from an IWBC which showed them to be better off than they had imagined, even in jobs paying less than they would have liked or expected to earn. Some were persuaded to take a different job, different hours or a different hourly rate, than they had been aiming for because of a favourable IWBC:

‘We did every scenario possible to work out how low I could go. Hence why I’m here, because I would not have gone for this salaried job because it’s much lower...than when I started work...that’s how much difference the tax benefit makes to me.’

(Lone parent)

Taking part in a motivational-type course prior to joining the EZ was found by some lone parents to be a useful preamble to intensive job search, helping to boost their confidence in preparation for work. This had been particularly effective in providing continuity of support where the provider running the work preparation course was also contracted to deliver EZ support.

6.8.8 Financial support used flexibly

Financial support, used flexibly, appeared to have been an important aspect of the whole package of EZ help and instrumental in contributing to sustained outcomes among lone parents. Financial support had been used to remove transport barriers, for example, by funding the purchase of a car or driving lessons. In more isolated rural areas, being able to drive was an essential prerequisite to getting work and driving lessons were a common purchase by EZs:

‘...[The car] was very important. I would have lost the job if I hadn’t had that.’

(Lone parent)

Some EZs had paid for lessons on trust, prior to the lone parent accessing work:

‘There’s nothing like she can do – she can’t really push me to do anything until I’ve actually made some steps...with my driving...The work that is available isn’t...available...unless I can drive.’

(Lone parent)

Holding a licence was often key to opening-up opportunities to better paid and more sustainable work in many areas. It could also be crucial to lone parents’ ability to juggle work and childcare responsibilities. Advisers also used the purchase of driving lessons as a confidence booster and incentive to sustain work for 13 weeks.

Financial help had also been used imaginatively to increase confidence and help overcome practical and domestic problems getting in the way of job search:

‘[The EZ] paid my electricity bill...which was a great relief...paid for me to have a haircut...got me a suit for an interview, a new blouse and a pair of shoes...just to give me a boost.’

(Lone parent)
'The difference was they were interested...in things that are really weighing you down – “can we help, can we lift that off your shoulder?”'

(Lone parent)

Another customer received funding to pay for childcare for a period of four weeks until her Childcare Tax Credit payment came through.

A few examples were given where EZs were said to have reneged on promises of financial help and where EZ interest had apparently waned after a few months of contact:

‘[The contact] has dwindled away and I have not had a letter...or anything to confirm whether I wanted to stay with them or move.’

(Lone parent)

These appeared mainly to be cases in which lone parents had received financial help but had since been unable or unwilling to make any firm commitment to returning to work.

6.8.9 Specialist help

Lone parents with special needs found EZs able to offer practical and specialist help towards securing employment. One customer chose to refer from NDLP to the EZ to get additional help with an appeal against a criminal conviction he was seeking to have regarded as spent. The EZ adviser provided practical help with paperwork associated with the appeal as the customer moved into initial employment. The customer later received further support and ultimately succeeded with his appeal, allowing him to return to his original goal of becoming a driving instructor.

6.8.10 Childcare

Childcare issues did not feature strongly in the narratives of lone parents, perhaps due to the fact that the sample was dominated by those with children of school age and above. A few lone parents were persuaded by an EZ adviser to use paid childcare when they had initially been reluctant to do so, but they were in a minority:

‘Its absolutely great...she has become more socialised. I do wish perhaps I’d done it before and not left it so late, I think it was a confidence thing really...was so protective over her...with the split up of my marriage.’

(Lone parent)

Even with help towards the cost of childcare, with IWBCs, some lone parents found they would be little better off in work and decided to wait until children were older:

‘I found out that I wasn’t going to be that much better off. It was mainly down to...the child care that you have to pay, but once he’s at full-time school and she is at nursery every morning, I would only have childcare costs for her, so I would be better off.’

(Lone parent)
Among lone parents who wanted to work, there was evidence from the interviews of the way in which they would seek to use informal childcare networks, such as family or friends, before resorting to other, more formal (and costly) childcare channels. Where necessary, customers were able to arrange childcare with EZ help or financial support to pay for up to a month’s childcare before salary and Child Tax Credit payments were received. However, most coped by seeking part-time work they could fit around their children’s school hours and were supported to this end by targeted job searches. Indeed, the vast majority of lone parents either only wanted part-time work or did not envisage working full time until children were old enough to leave school:

‘...I’m comfortable and I’m happy doing the learning bit...and with the hours [of work] I’ve got, so I don’t really want to move beyond that I would say, to be honest, until she is at least 15 or 16.’

(Lone parent)

6.8.11 Employer links

EZ employer links and contacts, both formal and informal, often proved invaluable in helping lone parents secure jobs they would not otherwise have considered or had access to. EZ programmes were tailored to meet customer and employer needs through combining paid work experience and placement opportunities with short, job-specific training courses, for example in first aid, health and safety and food hygiene. Financial help to pay for clothing, travel and other work-related expenses often completed the package of support.

A number of lone parents had secured sustained outcomes in this way. One customer who had previously tried unsuccessfully to secure work in the health sector attributed getting her part-time job to EZ contacts and help she received:

‘When I tried myself...they advertise [in] the Jobcentre...and...in the paper and write to them and I did do a number of times...sometimes I didn’t get a reply and sometimes [I was] unsuccessful...You needed someone more to be on the inside...or you know like the [EZ]...It’s the connection they had with the hospital...’

(Lone parent)

Sustaining this job, with increasing confidence, she had participated in further training and increased her hours of work from 16 to 20 per week.

The EZ provider had, on occasion, also turned direct employer and placement provider. A few lone parent customers were employed as EZ administrators and had sustained their employment, while the EZ office had served as a work experience destination for others.
6.8.12 Aftercare and in-work support

Most lone parents who sustained work struggled in the first few months of employment, some for longer, and many had found the transition to work to be more difficult than expected. Financial difficulties often arose with the arrival of rent demands and Council Tax bills, usually in the first month after benefit run-on had ceased. For some, monthly budgeting proved a difficult skill to master and some had concerns over possible WTC overpayments. EZ financial help in this transitional period was a huge boon and some lone parents said they may have quit work without it.

A surprising number of lone parents’ in-work problems were employer related and did not immediately become apparent. Many employers were said to be inflexible and unsympathetic to the circumstances of lone parents. Some had increased the hours of work or changed working patterns from those agreed at the outset. Others put pressure on employees to work overtime and some were said to be reluctant to give parental leave:

‘I had an awkward boss and I didn’t find her very sympathetic towards my situation as a single parent. I was constantly asked to do overtime, and she certainly wasn’t sympathetic that the summer holidays were coming up and... I wasn’t allowed any time off.’

(Lone parent)

Specific EZ interventions on behalf of lone parents had helped some to sustain work when problems arose early on. One lone parent almost lost her job when a medical revealed she was prescribed anti-depressants. By contacting the employer’s representative, with whom the EZ adviser had strong personal links, the job was re-offered:

‘I was upset about something...and they...sorted it all out...I was on an anti-depressant...it might delay me they said...the work is stressful...I rung [my EZ adviser] and he said “don’t worry”...then...I seen another lady and...she was fine.’

(Lone parent)

Support would however often wane once the customer had settled into work. Some lone parents remarked that EZ support and interest noticeably dwindled at this time, yet, for many this was the time help was needed most. Several lone parents experienced difficulties but received no support in helping them adjust to full-time work.

Among some lone parents, there was an apparent reluctance to seek further help when problems arose. Most struggled on, some finding alternative employment, others left work to reclaim benefits. One lone parent gave up her job because she was unable to cope with the training her employer required her to do during the evenings:
'It was tough having to come home and study...sometimes I would just want to go in...and relax...I did find it quite tiring.'

(Lone parent)

Another customer left her job following a minor personal disagreement with her employer, soon after starting work. Motivational gains achieved while receiving intensive EZ help were quickly lost and the customer returned to claiming Income Support. Disappointed at this outcome, she felt she may have stayed in work or could have found an alternative job had the EZ made efforts to contact her:

‘It would [have been] nice...for them to ring up and say “what are you up to”...if they make the contact, you make the contact...you know what I mean?’

(Lone parent)

Another lone parent gave up her job after four months because her employer insisted she worked overtime and at weekends.

‘The overtime situation, that was my biggest thing, I just didn’t want to do horrendous amounts...’

(Lone parent)

Her adviser could do little other than sympathise. Though she found another job, she would have liked and felt she would have benefited from further EZ help, had it been available:

‘I did ring up my adviser, but it had gone over the three months and she could do nothing, so I was devastated. I just wanted that support again, because it was quite a bad time for me...I just felt so alone I wanted her to support me. She was really supportive over the ‘phone, she was very nice, and she said “I’m really sorry...I wish you had ‘phoned me before”.’

(Lone parent)
7 Conclusions

There seems little doubt that sustainable outcomes are the ultimate goal of Employment Zone (EZ) providers and that this maxim is enshrined in practice; there was little evidence of ‘creaming’ job ready customers or of customers systematically being ‘parked’ or ushered into employment they did not want or would be unlikely to sustain. Virtually all customers who were followed up had received an appreciable level of EZ support and investment which, for those who had sustained work, had in some way contributed to this outcome.

On the evidence to date, the extension of EZs to new clients thus appears to have begun to make important inroads in terms of assisting a group of disadvantaged customers for whom Jobcentre Plus and New Deal has been less successful in the past. Regardless of the specific nature of the intervention, be that with the particulars of the job search process, financial help or further support once customers are in employment, what comes through clearly is the way in which the EZ approach seeks to improve the customers’ labour market position by motivating, encouraging and improving confidence through one-to-one interaction, the mantra of positive customer comments throughout. The nature of discourse is conciliatory and a holistic and sustained approach to intervention which follows through into work is often required.

It should be said that EZs are not a panacea to the problems of unemployment or of labour market disadvantage. EZs, like customers, operate within the restrictions of local labour markets and are unable to redress failures at the educational level. EZs deal with what is achievable in the here and now. The model only works when customers are convinced of the benefits of working, whether because they genuinely want to work or through EZ efforts to motivate and persuade them. Although multiple employment barriers can be addressed and longer-term goals supported, success is very much dependent upon the customer providing an initial sustained job outcome.
7.1 Sustained outcomes

Not unexpectedly, individuals with qualifications and recent work experience were well represented among customers who sustained work, although the research pointed up that the EZ was still able to add value here with the specifics of job search. Qualifications were usually indicative of the fact that the customer did not suffer from basic skills problems, a characteristic which featured strongly in the non-sustaining group. Nevertheless, regardless of prior qualifications or skills, customers who were flexible and realistic about employment objectives had a greater chance of success. Successful outcomes were often achieved where adviser and customer agreed to broaden the job-search objectives to include activities both related and unrelated to their original goals. With targeted and sustained EZ help, some customers made a successful transition from the least desirable reaches of the labour market into decent, well-paid work. Jobs were often in sectors or with employers customers were not familiar with, or would not ordinarily have access to.

Customers with a clear idea of what it was they wanted and arrived with a firm and realistic proposal could represent relatively quick wins for the EZ. Where this involved requests for funds, EZs were able to respond quickly and with flexibility. Sustained outcomes were invariably easier to come by where the customer had been proactive prior to joining the EZ, particularly where they had sourced a job prior to involvement. Those with recent work experience were at a further advantage as the EZ adviser did not have to address this vacuum with potential employers and the customer could be regarded as job ready. Paradoxically, regardless of apparent job readiness, those with too firm an idea of what they wanted and an unwillingness to expand job search, necessarily reduced their potential for sustained employment.

Though there was good evidence of the way in which EZ advisers had improved customers’ job-search skills and confidence, this was usually where the customer presented with a genuine desire to work. It was evidently more difficult where poor motivation had become chronic and the customer needed to be convinced of the whole rationale behind work.

Customers without qualifications were strongly represented among those less likely to achieve sustained work. A lack of qualifications was often an indicator of more severe underlying problems, including poor basic skills or drug or alcohol problems, which may have made finding or keeping work difficult in the past. Successful job outcomes could be achieved but often took much longer and required co-operation from specialist partners to source suitable employment.

Customers with low skills and qualifications had frequently sourced work through employment agencies. Solving a financial or transport barrier may have resulted in work but did not necessarily lead to qualitatively different opportunities or assist progression in areas where this kind of employment predominated. Here, vocational or work-related basic skills training, which only a minority of EZs offered, may be required if better quality jobs are to be successfully targeted.
Of greater difficulty for EZs were customers for whom a longer-term intervention was required, for example those who wanted or required long periods of training or career development, or needed help to manage a mental health condition or recover from drug or alcohol dependency. Also included here were lone parents, many with children of preschool age, who were unwilling or unable to make any firm commitment to returning rapidly to the labour market. The EZ approach was less able to respond to these circumstances as the financial model on which they operated was very much dependent upon customers being willing and capable of work within a relatively short period.

Sustained outcomes were less likely where the customer had been involved with the EZ on several previous occasions. Where barriers included a mental health condition, EZs may be ill-equipped to help customers tackle these issues and may need to refer to external specialist agencies. It could be that some such customers should not be part of the job-seeking regime.

7.2 What is working for New Deal returners

For the New Deal returner group, the importance of being able to exercise personal choice in job search cannot be overstated. The perception of choice not only influenced the degree to which customers were willing to co-operate, but strongly affected views of the service received. If compelled to pursue a course of action other than what they considered to be right for them, customers were more likely to resist help and be negative about the service, regardless of the efforts of individual advisers. This helps to explain why adviser support provided through Jobcentre Plus was often poorly perceived. Where customers were not compelled into activity, they became more willing partners in negotiations around jobs and support. Customers who secured jobs they wanted were more likely to retain them. New Deal returners were often willing to change tack where their initial employment objective had been supported by the EZ but had failed to produce an outcome.

When engaged with the real needs and aspirations of young people, the impact of one-to-one, intensive and customised support was that much greater. Both parties could work together towards a shared goal, potentially doubling the effort and impact. New Deal returners also responded well to rewards and financial incentives. Most EZs had learned the lesson of making these conditional on jobs being sustained for 13 weeks.

In some EZ areas, unskilled work contracted out to employment agencies was characteristic of many of the opportunities available to young people. While EZs were able to help some customers find better quality work, for others they were not. Young people with few qualifications and poor basic skills are more vulnerable in exposed labour markets and EZs were unable to help some New Deal returners break out of the pattern of moving in and out of jobs. EZ interventions may help to mitigate the worst effects of exposed labour markets, but with a funding mechanism geared towards jobs secured within a maximum of 12 months, they are unable to address underlying educational failures such as low levels of literacy and numeracy.
At phase two, most EZ providers had only recently introduced a specialist in-work or aftercare adviser role. Early reported evidence suggests this may also be an important factor in helping customers to sustain work, especially where they have limited prior experience of employment. It remains to be seen whether the apparent success of in-work help can be evidenced and sustained. Further research may be needed to establish whether success is due to the provision of one-to-one support, reflects the payment of financial incentives at 13-weeks employment or is due to other factors.

7.3 What is working for 18-24 early entrants

Of all new customers, 18-24 early entrants were most positive in their assessments of EZ help and its role in helping them to secure or sustain work. They, above all others, appeared to appreciate and benefit from the practical help EZs provide. Being mostly young, lacking in qualifications, basic skills and confidence and with little or no work experience, many in this group were highly disadvantaged in the labour market. Nevertheless, because many were genuinely motivated to work, practical help with tailored job search sustained over a long period and which resulted in an interview or work placement, made all the difference to their employment prospects. This is where EZs were most able to add value and make their input keenly felt.

Though the sample was small, the fact that all seven 18-24 early entrants re-interviewed in phase two had had paid work, with four sustaining their employment, gives an indication of how, at their best, EZs can provide additionality and impact upon a disadvantaged group whom New Deal and Jobcentre Plus services had been unable to help. Again, what EZs cannot do is address the underlying basic skill problems which many early entrant customers present with, but as long as they are motivated to work, EZs can help to overcome some of the barriers these problems create.

7.4 What is working for 25 plus early entrants

25 plus early entrants comprised a more heterogeneous group than other new customers, representing both ends of the spectrum of what may be termed ‘easier’ or ‘harder’ to help. For those who were job ready, had recent work experience and arrived with a firm idea of the help they wanted, one-to-one, targeted job search could be highly effective in moving them into sustained work. Rather than taking the first job that came along, some benefited from adviser interventions designed to build confidence and broaden work horizons.

Success was often dependent on the extent to which customers wanting expensive or lengthy training were willing to be flexible. Customers with too long a time horizon for moving into work could represent a challenge for EZs as the financial model is very much dependent upon payment drawn down at the 13-week stage of a job. Here, EZ advisers’ handling of negotiations around job search and the use of
financial incentives and rewards appeared to be key. Again, one-to-one interaction between customer and adviser characterised and determined the effectiveness of the intervention.

With EZ help, some customers were able to transcend years of accommodation to living on benefits. Even those with multiple barriers and who had participated in an EZ two, even three, times previously had succeeded in getting and keeping jobs. If they could be persuaded of the benefits of working, the EZ could usually help them. However, the inability of certain customers to secure or sustain work may be indicative of serious underlying issues such as deeply entrenched benefit dependency (including the possibility of undeclared work) and mental health conditions. For the latter group in particular, short of referring customers to agencies specialising in helping people with these conditions, it is difficult to see how an EZ adviser can intervene to any lasting effect.

7.5 What is working for lone parents

For lone parents, the importance of what could be termed ‘softer’ issues cannot be overstated. Feeling relaxed and at ease in their surroundings, viewing their adviser as a friend, not being rushed and moving at a pace that suited them, were all factors of importance in helping them to open up and engage. Informality and familiarity often led to good rapport. Outreach delivery in more family-friendly settings and away from Jobcentre Plus offices better suited some lone parents. For others, the delivery venue was less important. The majority valued and benefited most from one-to-one, personalised job search supported by a single adviser.

For job-ready lone parents interested in securing work, there was nothing in the evidence to suggest that EZ help was any better or any worse than help available through New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). However, lone parents with more complex barriers to overcome often benefited from the availability of more holistic and intensive help in EZs. In these circumstances, the greater flexibility and discretion available to EZ advisers could add value to NDLP. As with other customer groups, even complex barriers could be overcome as long as lone parents wanted to work. Customers with longer-term and career goals could be accommodated too, though this often required a willingness and ability to sustain some other work in the interim.

Some EZs may have underestimated the extent to which new barriers and issues could present themselves once lone parents were in employment. Often these involved employers changing work patterns agreed at the time of the job offer. Such problems did not usually manifest themselves in the transition to work, or even in the first few weeks of employment, but would only become apparent after two or three months of working. Not all lone parents actively sought further EZ assistance when such difficulties arose. As voluntary customers, EZs would be unaware if lone parents left work and returned to benefits, unless customers themselves chose to re-establish contact. Proactive aftercare may therefore be needed to provide continuing support and assistance to help lone parents find alternative work if jobs prove unsuitable.
The divergent views and experiences of EZs regarding perceived degrees of difficulty in dealing with lone parents may reflect their different approaches and methods of engagement, and therefore the different barriers and circumstances they found. For many lone parents, caring responsibilities put real constraints on the type of jobs and hours of work they could consider. Others had no interest in working until children were at primary or, in some cases, secondary school. Faced with these types of difficulty, EZ approaches which sought to incentivise work could have little effect. As voluntary customers, lone parents were at liberty to delay work until a time of their choosing.

Some EZs responded to this dilemma by effectively disregarding lone parents until such time as they were job ready and chose to self refer. Others made use of pre-employment support and confidence building courses funded through Action Team for Jobs (ATJ) provision or run by other service providers to deliver job-ready customers to them at the point they were looking for work. It is not surprising that those EZs which engaged lone parents through dedicated outreach and in community settings found that many customers reached in this way often had low levels of job readiness. Under these circumstances, EZs needed to work more intensively and for longer, with less likelihood of a job outcome. Similarly, lone parents referred to EZs whom NDLP had been unable to help often required more support and took much longer to move into sustained work.

It would thus seem to be not so much the number or complexity of any barriers which lone parents can face that have presented EZs with their key challenge, but the lengthier time horizons many of them have for securing work. Where the difficulty comes is in EZs determining how or indeed if they should be helping lone parents who have no immediate interest in or sensible prospect of work. Under these circumstances, it needs to be questioned whether the needs of these lone parents can realistically be met within the strict parameters of the EZ funding model, or whether other community-based agencies may be better suited to fulfilling this role.

7.6 What do EZs do that is different?

It is worth asking why, for many individuals, the EZ approach was apparently more successful or satisfying than previous involvement with Jobcentre Plus or New Deal. Getting customers on-side appeared to be the first important lesson. In this regard, the particular context and circumstances of engagement were key. The feeling of being compelled to take jobs or participate in training they did not want to do, a key feature of the narratives of former Jobcentre Plus customers, undermines co-operation and trust and is unlikely to result in meaningful rapport. Customers want to be listened to and to feel that they can exercise some semblance of choice.

While adviser skills and expertise are clearly at a premium in terms of packaging successful interventions, for customers, the empathetic and accommodating approach of advisers is what mattered most, particularly at the outset. The research highlighted
the way in which customers’ willingness to be flexible grew immeasurably by the act
of advisers getting them ‘on-side’. Advisers spending quality time getting to know
their customers and discovering their job aspirations was crucial to this.

High customer-satisfaction levels which largely sustained into phase two were
generally unrelated to levels of spend or even to successful job outcomes. Customers
who did not secure or sustain work still had mainly positive views of the EZ.
Fundamentally, satisfaction rested on the quality and content of the customer-
adviser relationship. Customers consistently highlighted the one-to-one interaction
at the EZ, despite the fact that this was also likely to have been the model of
interaction at the Jobcentre Plus office. What differs is the way in which EZ advisers
are empowered to provide practical, hands-on support throughout and through the
specifics of the job-search process.

In EZs, the Jobcentre Plus model is turned on its head: rather than matching
customers to existing vacancies, the approach is to seek to uncover ideal or second
best jobs, motivating and supporting customers to undertake proactive job search
to this end. A better fit here will clearly improve the chances of the customer
sustaining work longer term. EZs’ active employer links helped to build bridges into
areas of the labour market from which disadvantaged customers would ordinarily
be excluded. A robust model of aftercare may also be fundamental, especially where
customers have limited work experience or have been away from the labour market
for significant periods of time.

Sustainability in the EZ model is thus a composite of engaging with customer
aspirations within the confines of local labour markets, access to an intensive and
highly customised intervention which, where necessary, supports and shields
individuals from exposure to external labour markets, and an approach which is
responsive to the fact that some customers and employers are susceptible to
terminating employment in the first few months.

An important element underlying all these facets is the greater ability of EZs to
change, innovate and adapt. Linked to this is the sensitivity and responsiveness of
their behaviours to the result-based funding model. As commercial entities, EZs are
highly dependent on achieving sustained job outcomes if they are to continue
operating as businesses longer term. This kind of impetus, when combined with a
greater flexibility to respond to changing circumstances, gives them a clear and
unambiguous focus on helping customers secure work they want and that is likely to
be sustained.
Appendix

Employment Zones early entry criteria

Early entry criteria as described in the Employment Zone contractor guidance document, are as follows:

‘Some people have particular circumstances that make it harder for them to get work. They may be able to start an Employment Zone early if they are already getting Jobseekers Allowance. Once they start the Employment Zone programme, they must continue.

This may include people:

• with a physical or mental disability that need help with reading, writing or numbers
• whose first language is not English, Welsh or Gaelic
• who are lone parents that do not live with a partner and are responsible for at least one child living in their household (by partner we mean a person somebody is married to or a person they live with as if they are married to them)
• who have served in the regular armed forces
• who were looked after as a child by a local authority
• with a criminal record
• with a drug problem
• who have participated in Progress2Work
• that have been told by the Home Office that they are officially a refugee that have been given exceptional leave to enter the United Kingdom by an immigration officer.’
References


