DELIVERING BENEFITS TO UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE

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and
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A report of research carried out by the Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University, on behalf of the Department of Social Security

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Val Carroll and Jenny Dibden at the DSS Social Research Branch and members of the Steering Group, whose comments and advice proved invaluable.

We would also like to acknowledge our colleagues at CRSP for their assistance in preparing the report, with particular thanks going to Sharon Walker, Nicola Croden and Nigel Bilsbrough.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to all of the respondents who took part in the group discussions and to the recruiters who ensured their safe arrival.
ABBREVIATIONS USED IN TEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Benefits Agency</td>
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<td>BMRB</td>
<td>BMRB Limited</td>
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<td>CAB(x)</td>
<td>Citizen's Advice Bureau(x)</td>
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<td>Child Poverty Action Group</td>
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<td>CRSP</td>
<td>Centre for Research in Social Policy</td>
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<td>DfEE</td>
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<td>DSS</td>
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<td>LMS</td>
<td>Labour Market System</td>
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<td>PAS</td>
<td>Public Attitude Surveys Ltd</td>
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<td>Remote Access Terminal</td>
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The Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) was commissioned by the Department of Social Security (DSS), on behalf of the Benefits Agency, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and the Employment Service, to conduct qualitative research on claimants' experiences of contacts with the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency. This qualitative research is one of a number of studies designed to contribute to the evaluation of Jobseeker’s Allowance, which was introduced in October 1996 to replace the Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime for unemployed claimants.

At the time of the research, claimants dealt with both Agencies: the Employment Service for Unemployment Benefit, signing on and job-search matters; the Benefits Agency for Income Support queries. Under Jobseeker’s Allowance, unemployed claimants should only need to deal with the Employment Service Jobcentre, where in most offices Benefits Agency staff will be located to administer and process claims.

The research (Chapter 1) Eight group discussions were conducted in four geographical areas. The areas represent the following different arrangements between local Benefits Agency offices and Employment Service Jobcentres:

- offices located in the same building (co-located) (Area 1);
- those located within a mile of each other (Area 2);
- those located between one and five miles of each other (Area 3); and
- those located more than five miles apart (Area 4).

The respondents were selected to ensure that there was a representation of: postal signers, clerical claimants, first-time and experienced claimants as well as a mix of sex and age. The groups were stratified according to the length of the current claim (less than 12 months, or 12 months or more).

A total of 45 respondents participated in the study.

2 Literature review A literature review was also conducted to collate existing information (Chapter 2) about the Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime.

Overall, previous research shows:

- claimants can be unclear about the differences between Income Support and Unemployment Benefit;
- claimants can be confused about Agency functions, although most are aware that the Benefits Agency deals with money matters and the Jobcentre with employment issues and getting claimants back to work;
providing benefits information in Jobcentres can reduce the number of contacts with the Benefits Agency, although this reduction is most likely to be in telephone contacts;

where Benefits Agency and Employment Service offices were located within easy reach, Employment Service staff were more likely to refer customers to the Benefits Agency;

• claimants’ satisfaction levels with the Employment Service Jobcentre are linked to waiting times and service, as well as numbers of contacts with the Benefits Agency;

• checking of claim forms is a needed and valued service for claimants;

• many claimants see the New Claim Interview as having a variety of purposes, including providing information on training, benefits and job vacancies;

• for most claimants making a claim for benefit is relatively straightforward;

• those claimants new to the benefit system and those without a telephone are more likely to make more visits to the Agencies;

• friends, relatives and fellow claimants are the main source of (non-specific) information and advice for claimants. The Agencies are generally perceived as not very forthcoming with most information;

• unemployed claimants are most likely to report changes in circumstances to the Employment Service rather than the Benefits Agency;

• the Jobcentre is not seen as a primary source of possible employment and therefore job-search activity is not affected by office procedures;

• most claimants do not report difficulties in dealing with two Agencies, but they may expect to have to deal with both;

• those claimants who do report difficulties in dealing with two Agencies give a variety of reasons including confusion, delays in benefit and the extra expense incurred in contacting them both; and

• some claimants prefer to contact Employment Service Jobcentres with their queries/enquiries rather than the Benefits Agency.

3 Claimants’ understanding of the organisations and benefits involved (Chapter 3)

Whilst the respondents could be unclear about the Agencies’ ‘proper names’, the functions of the two Agencies were more clearly although simply defined.

The role of the Jobcentre, according to respondents, centred around employment issues. The respondents’ overall opinions of the Jobcentres were generally positive.

The Benefits Agency local office was seen as having more authority, as it was believed that they ultimately decided on benefit eligibility and benefit amount. Contacting the Benefits Agency was seen as a ‘last resort’ and involved mainly payment issues, such as late arrival of Giro cheques or reduced benefit payments.
Claimants were generally confused or unsure of the differences between Unemployment Benefit and Income Support. There was awareness amongst some that Unemployment Benefit receipt was dependent on National Insurance contributions, and for this reason several respondents perceived it as more ‘acceptable’ than Income Support.

The evident confusion about these two benefits is significant because it is possible that claimants were unclear about which benefit they had applied for or were receiving, and whom to contact with related queries.

4 Contact with Agencies: All respondents were claiming Income Support, or Income Support and new claims (Chapter 4) Unemployment Benefit, although some respondents had made their claim some time ago, and this may have coloured their recall of their experiences.

Initial contacts were generally made in person to the Jobcentre, although some claimants in the rural area (Area 4) found it advantageous to telephone for an appointment, and received claim forms by post.

Claimants were required to complete two forms: a B1 which was the claim form for Income Support for unemployed people; and an ES461 which was used to assess Unemployment Benefit entitlement as well as gathering information about claimants’ job-search behaviour and availability for work.

Respondents reported that form completion was a lengthy but straightforward process. Difficulties could occur where the respondent was a first-time customer, had basic skills difficulties, or complex personal circumstances. There were also some criticisms of certain questions on the ES641. These included the questions on the type of work wanted, the hours they were willing to work and the lowest wage they were willing to accept.

Respondents gave several reasons for the purpose of the New Claim Interview. Checking forms and clarifying job-search plans were mentioned most often by respondents.

For most respondents, making their claim for benefit was not problematic, although successful outcomes were judged in terms of the prompt payment of benefit rather than the development of an effective job-search plan. A few respondents had to chase their first payment.

Some respondents had no direct contact with the Benefits Agency. The different location of the offices did appear to be a factor, in that respondents in the co-located area (Area 1) were more likely to have had direct contact with the Benefits Agency than, for instance, those in the area where the offices were some considerable distance away (Area 4).
Any difficulties encountered in claiming were attributed by respondents to administrative inefficiencies by the Agencies. Furthermore, the process was ‘smoothed’ by some respondents ensuring that claim forms were fully and accurately completed and, for more experienced claimants, by ensuring that the responses to questions met the Agencies’ requirements.

5 Other reasons for contacting the agencies

There is a general requirement that changes in circumstances should be reported. Under the Unemployment Benefit/Income Support regime claimants were required to report their change to one organisation only, which then had responsibility for informing others. Most changes in respondents’ circumstances were reported to the Employment Service.

**Changes in circumstances**  
*Section 5.1*

There was some evidence of non-reporting, notably of temporary absences and small amounts of income (typically under the disregards). The principal reason given for non-reporting was fear of disruption to benefit payments.

**Benefit payment queries**  
*Section 5.2*

Queries about benefit payment can be of two types: those surrounding the arrival of a payment; and enquiries about the payment amount. The former were generally directed to Jobcentre staff, who were able to obtain the information either from the computer system or by telephoning the Benefits Agency. Queries regarding the amount of benefit were more likely to involve claimant contacts with both Agencies (initially with the Jobcentre, who then might refer to the Benefits Agency), or with the Benefits Agency only.

**Seeking information and advice**  
*Section 5.3*

Seeking information or advice from an Agency was often combined with other business, such as attending a signing-on appointment. General enquiries were usually directed in the first instance to the Jobcentre. Very few respondents were aware that better-off calculations could be obtained from the Employment Service. Respondents claimed that staff in both Agencies appeared to be reluctant to offer information or advice, other than printed matter, although some respondents recognised the work pressures on staff.

Few respondents reported seeking information or advice from third parties such as welfare rights or advice agencies. Respondents gained much information from peers, including friends, family and casual encounters with other claimants.

**Cross-referrals**

There was some evidence of cross-referral between Agencies, although it was usually limited to only two contacts. Different levels of cross-referral were evident in the four areas. High levels of cross-referral generally occurred where staff appeared to be less experienced, and complex or unusual circumstances were associated with the claim.
6 Dealing with two Potentially having to deal with two Agencies did not appear to affect the agencies (Chapter 6) intensity of claimants' job-search behaviour or their motivation to leave unemployment. This is partly because several respondents had no or very few direct contacts with the Benefits Agency: that is, they dealt almost exclusively with the Jobcentre.

However, distance between Agencies had an effect on contact behaviour. There was a preference expressed for the Agencies to be located close to one another. The further apart the Agencies, the more likely respondents were to visit the one that was nearest or most convenient to them.

7 Communication Respondents reported receiving far more correspondence from the (Chapter 7) Benefits Agency than from the Employment Service. The widespread use of standardised and lengthy computer-generated letters received criticism (Section 7.1.3), and such correspondence was rarely read thoroughly. Some respondents reported receiving contradictory or duplicated correspondence, but these were generally from different departments or individuals within one Agency, rather than from both Agencies, sending conflicting information.

Written correspondence from the Agencies (Section 7.1)

Telephone communication A few respondents reported receiving telephone calls from the Employment Service, advising on job vacancies or appointment times, and from the Benefits Agency to resolve a particularly complex situation. Such telephone calls were appreciated.

Telephone communication from the Agencies (Section 7.2)

Inter-Agency communication The Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime involved a considerable amount of communication between the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service. The respondents tended to be unaware of this, and only easily recalled communications breakdowns. There were, however, only a few such incidents.

Inter-Agency communication (Section 7.3)

8 Moving off Income Although dealing with two Agencies did not appear to have an effect on leaving unemployment or on the intensity of job-search, other factors were identified, such as lack of suitable employment.

A main role of the Employment Service is to offer assistance, advice and help to unemployed people about finding work or appropriate training. Respondents reported that staff were generally helpful but other aspects of the ‘system’ were not very helpful. These included the perceived poor quality of job vacancies displayed at the Jobcentre and doubts about the usefulness of the Back-to-Work Plan.

There was a widespread lack of knowledge about what courses or job-search schemes were available, or indeed which ones respondents had actually undertaken.
9 Changes to service Respondents made three basic recommendations for further improvements: delivery (Chapter 9)

- the need for more and better information;
- more front-line staff; and
- more help with job-search.

The overall impression is that recent developments in service provision were warmly welcomed.

The respondents knew relatively little about the introduction of Jobseeker's Allowance and tended to have negative views about the new benefit regime.

10 Conditionality Most respondents were aware that there were some conditions attached to (Chapter 10) benefit eligibility and believed that this was appropriate. Nevertheless, some respondents found some of the obligations futile or difficult to adhere to. These included applying for a specified number of jobs per week and visiting the Jobcentre a certain number of times in a given period. Not surprisingly, most of the respondents attempted to adhere to the conditions for fear of loss of benefit. Some, however, had 'learnt' how to comply by ensuring that they answered questions about their job-search or availability in a way that would not call into question their eligibility.

11 Conclusions This chapter considers some of the issues which the research raises for the (Chapter 11) delivery of Jobseeker's Allowance.

- With claimants dealing only with the Jobcentre under the Jobseeker's Allowance regime, any confusion over the roles of each Agency should be lessened.

- Some claimants, such as those new to the benefit system, may benefit from information about the process, including the stages of a claim, and more information about Employment Service Jobcentre services.

- Claim forms were reported to be straightforward, although help with completion was seen as an important and integral part of the service provided by Jobcentres. However, other printed material might warrant further attention, particularly the computer-generated standardised letters that respondents reported receiving, both in terms of the length and the use of jargon.

- Respondents had a strong desire for help and advice about job-search and training opportunities at the start of their period of unemployment.

- There is also a need for clear information about claimants' responsibilities, including the purpose of signing on and claimants' responsibilities for reporting changes of circumstances. There was a lack of awareness about the range of initiatives available to assist movement into employment, such as the Work Trial scheme and other more recent
initiatives. Respondents believed that the Agency had a duty to provide such information to them.

The respondents commonly wanted the information provided by the Agencies to be more accessible and freely available.

Changes in circumstances were often reported to the Employment Service and this should assist Jobseeker's Allowance administration. However, claimants may benefit from assurances that their payment will be adjusted quickly and without complications. Furthermore, some respondents might have had fewer contacts with the Agencies if the correspondence sent to claimants contained clearer explanations of the changes in circumstances being acted upon by the Agencies.
1 INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) was commissioned by the Department of Social Security (DSS), on behalf of the Benefits Agency, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and the Employment Service, to conduct qualitative research on claimants’ experiences of contacts with the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency. This qualitative research is one of a number of studies designed to contribute to the evaluation of Jobseeker’s Allowance, which was introduced in October 1996 to replace the Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime for unemployed claimants.

This qualitative research forms part of the Jobseeker’s Allowance evaluation and was designed to provide information about the Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime before the introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance. It is one of a series of qualitative studies which have been commissioned on various aspects of the Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime. The research will also assist in the interpretation of a large-scale claimant survey. (See Annex C for a listing of other research being carried out as part of the Jobseeker’s Allowance evaluation.)

1.1 Background At the time this research was undertaken unemployed claimants who were in receipt of Unemployment Benefit and Income Support or Income Support only, dealt with both Employment Service Jobcentres and local offices of the Benefits Agency. The Employment Service Jobcentres provided the first point of contact for unemployed people by providing the necessary claim forms and conducting the New Claim Interview. Claims for Income Support were administered and processed at the Benefits Agency, and claims for Unemployment Benefit were administered and processed by the Employment Service. Once a claim was established, most claimants then attended the Jobcentre fortnightly to sign on as unemployed, and to attend Reviews and Restart Interviews at stages throughout their period of unemployment. In addition, Jobcentres displayed vacancies and other job-search-related information, including details of training courses. However, as their Income Support processing and administration was dealt with by Benefits Agency local offices, claimants might also have had (direct) contact with the Benefits Agency.

Under the Jobseeker’s Allowance regime, Jobcentres will provide a single point of contact for Jobseekers. Benefits Agency staff will be located in

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1 The New Claim Interview was a key stage in making a claim for unemployment-related benefit. At the interview the claimant’s availability for work and the extent to which he/she was seeking employment were discussed. A Back-to-Work Plan was also issued, which outlined the measures the claimant was advised to take to find employment.
Jobcentres and will advise on benefits alongside the existing Jobcentre services to assist claimants to find work.

1.2 Research issues The research was designed to enhance understanding of the services provided by the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency under the Income Support and Unemployment Benefit regime. The key issues to be addressed include exploration of

- the range of reasons for claimants contacting both Agencies regarding their claim;
- claimants' knowledge of which Agency to contact for particular issues;
- the advantage or difficulties of having to deal with two offices;
- experience of communications between the Agencies and the claimants;
- duplication of information or requests from both Agencies;
- impacts of Employment Service and Benefits Agency arrangements on claimants' awareness and understanding of the organisation and processes involved in the delivery of services for unemployed people;
- claimants' understanding of where to claim other benefits (than Unemployment Benefit or Income Support);
- the impact of dealing with two Agencies on claimants' motivation to leave unemployment, including the effect on job-search; and
- the impact of information received from third parties.

1.3 Research design The research involved two elements: a review of existing relevant literature, and group discussions with unemployed claimants from four areas. The recruitment of respondents and the discussion groups were carried out in July 1996.

In addition, brief telephone interviews were conducted with Employment Service and Benefits Agency staff in the four areas in September 1996, to enable the researchers to gain insight into Agency liaison and procedures in each area prior to the introduction of Jobseeker's Allowance. As the aim of these interviews was to inform interpretation and analysis, details of the interviews have not been reported.

1.3.1 Literature review An important part of this project was a review of literature to establish what was already known about the Employment Service/Benefits Agency interface under the Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime. This is reported in Chapter 2.

1.3.2 Group discussions Group discussions or interviews are a well-established qualitative research method. They involve a group of respondents discussing a topic guided by the researcher. The reasons for using this method were that groups

2 It was not possible to conduct interviews with Benefits Agency staff in Area 2 and Area 3.
generate a broader discussion of topics than individual interviews, as participants contribute their own experience and views and respond to points and views aired by others. Group discussions enable issues of common concern to emerge arising from participants’ shared experiences, in this case dealing with the two Agencies. Differences of view are also generated.

Eight group discussions were held: two in each of the four areas. The groups consisted of claimants currently signing on as unemployed and were stratified by duration of claim. Four groups were with claimants whose current spell of Income Support/Unemployment Benefit was less than 12 months, and four where it was 12 months or more. This group consisted of Income Support claimants only, because Unemployment Benefit entitlement ended after 12 months. However, it transpired that the duration of claim was not critical in shaping respondents’ experiences, but whether a respondent was a first-time claimant or not was significant and, where appropriate, these differences have been highlighted in the report. A total of 45 respondents participated in the group discussions.

The discussions were conducted with the aid of a topic guide (see Annex A.2). During the discussions claimants were asked to complete a contact history grid (Annex A.3), which provided details of a recent `piece of business’ involving one or more contacts with the Agencies (see Section 1.5). The contact grid provided a means for respondents to collect and order their experiences for the subsequent discussion, as well as providing the researchers with a written record of contacts with organisations.

However, discussions of this nature rely on respondents' recall of events. For some respondents, particularly those who had been claiming for 12 months or more, the recollection of early events, such as experiences of making a new claim, might have faded. Furthermore, recall of the New Claim Interview by respondents who had made their claim more than 12 weeks previously may have been affected by their experience of more recent advisory interviews.

1.3.3 Recruitment

Respondents were recruited by two means. The majority were recruited as they visited an Employment Service Jobcentre in the four research areas, by professional recruiters using a recruitment questionnaire (see Annex A.1). The questionnaire was designed to ensure that our criteria were met, including: representation of claimants who had reported a change in circumstances; inclusion of both male and female respondents; and claimants of different age groups.
A representation of clerical and postal claimants was also required. Therefore, following an opt-out procedure, the Employment Service forwarded to CRSP a list of names and addresses of clerical claimants from two Jobcentres (Areas 1 and 2) and of postal signers from another area (Area 4) to enable the recruiters to obtain a small number of respondents for inclusion in the group discussions.

1.4 The geographical areas

The four geographical areas were selected jointly by the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service. The areas were selected to represent different office arrangements because it was believed that the distance between a Jobcentre and a Benefits Agency office could have an impact on service delivery to unemployed claimants. In one area the Employment Service and Benefits Agency shared the same building (co-located); in another the offices were within a mile of each other; in a third offices were located between one and five miles apart; and in the final area the offices were located more than five miles apart (in actual fact, these offices were over 25 miles apart). Areas where Jobseeker’s Allowance pilots or trials were in progress were avoided, as these may have affected the response of claimants. A summary of the areas is given below, together with an area number, which is used to identify areas in the text:

Area 1 Employment Service Jobcentre and Benefits Agency offices co-located in a medium size town in the south of England
Area 2 Employment Service Jobcentre and Benefits Agency offices within one mile of each other in an inner city location in the south of England
Area 3 Employment Service Jobcentre and Benefits Agency offices between one and five miles apart in a suburb close to a large city in the north of England
Area 4 Employment Service Jobcentre and Benefits Agency offices more than five miles apart in the border area of Scotland.

1.5 Analysis

During the discussions, respondents were asked to complete a contact history grid detailing their last contact or contacts with the Benefits Agency and/or the Employment Service Jobcentre (see Annex A). The form was designed to collect information on the sequence of contacts respondents had had with the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency regarding a recent ‘piece of business’.

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3 Clerical claims are non-standard or complex cases, such as when a claimant does not know his/her National Insurance Number and are processed manually. ‘Postal signers’ are not required to sign on in person at their Jobcentre because of the distance from their home to the Jobcentre.
The group discussions were tape recorded, and the tapes then transcribed. The transcripts were analysed using the NUD*IST qualitative data computer package. Verbatim quotes are used in this report to convey respondents' experiences and views. Quotations are followed by a respondent identifier, which includes sex, geographical area and respondent number. The quotation annotation also includes either 'first-timer' or 'repeater', where 'first-timer' indicates someone who was experiencing their first spell of claiming as unemployed and 'repeater' means they had claimed at least once before. The table in Annex B gives further details about each respondent, identified by their unique number.

Although the quotes used are given as verbatim, to assist the reader they have been 'smoothed' where natural discourse makes it difficult to understand the quote. Where speech has been removed this is signified by three dots (...) and, less frequently, we have inserted some of our own words, enclosed in square brackets [ ]. However, we have not altered the sense or meaning of the respondents' statements.
The research includes a review of the literature to identify what is already known about claimants’ experience of the Employment Service/Benefits Agency interface.

The findings below are drawn from published and unpublished qualitative and quantitative research. They have been grouped into:

- claimants’ awareness and understanding of the Employment Service and Benefits Agency, and of the benefits available (Section 2.1);
- the new claims procedure (Section 2.2);
- seeking information and advice (Section 2.3);
- reporting a change in circumstances (Section 2.4);
- job-search (Section 2.5); and
- dealing with two offices/agencies (Section 2.6).

2.1 Claimants’ awareness

Research shows that ignorance and misinterpretation of the distinction and understanding of between Unemployment Benefit and Income Support is widespread relevant organisations and amongst claimants (Cragg Ross Dawson, 1996; Shaw et al., 1996a). As a benefits consequence, claimants can be confused about whom they should visit regarding Unemployment Benefit queries or claims, and which benefit they had applied for (Dibden, 1994).

Claimants can also be confused about the organisation involved in the delivery of services to unemployed people. Qualitative research conducted with claimants as part of the Remote Access Terminal (RAT) evaluation (Dibden, 1994) (see Section 2.3 for further details about this evaluation) found that the majority of respondents thought of the two Agencies as the same organisation operating from different locations. However, they recognised that the Employment Service dealt with ‘getting people back to work’ and signing, whereas the Benefits Agency dealt with ‘money’.

2.2 Contact with

The Benefits Agency and Employment Service had introduced a number Agencies: new claims of ‘Closer Working Initiatives’ designed to improve co-ordination of procedure procedures and services to unemployed people. One strand involved revisions to procedures for Employment Service staff in the issue, checking and return of the Benefits Agency B1 form (application for Income Support), and a second strand involved the provision of advice on in-work benefits as a routine part of the New Claim Interview

A qualitative study of claimant experiences of these changes to the New Claim Interview found that most claimants who had queries about the
form reported that Employment Service staff were able to help them (Bryson and Grey, 1994).

A postal survey of claimants suggested that Employment Service staff were checking most B1 form; however, qualitative interviews with staff showed that whilst most were ensuring that the form was signed, they were not checking for full and accurate completion. Some staff were concerned that time spent checking forms in the New Claim Interview could erode the time devoted to job-search activities. The postal survey also indicated that around a quarter of respondents chose to return their form to the Benefits Agency rather than leave it with the Employment Service.

Claimants perceived the New Claim Interview as having a variety of purposes. Around a half of customers felt that the New Claim Interview covered all their information needs. The remaining half said they would have liked more information, mainly on other benefits to which they might be entitled, jobs and career options, and education and training. In addition, four-fifths of the customers surveyed had asked questions about Income Support during their New Claim Interview, and most reported that staff were usually able to answer these.

Any subsequent queries were mostly directed to the Benefits Agency rather than the Employment Service, although some contacted other bodies or did not bother to get the query resolved. Across all of the initiatives examined, 45 per cent of customers had been in contact with the Benefits Agency at some point during the course of their claim.

The Closer Working Initiatives report also identified some of the factors that influence customer satisfaction. One of those was the number of contacts with the Benefits Agency, the implication being that the fewer contacts a claimant has with the Benefits Agency, the more likely they are to be satisfied. Staff were more likely to refer claimants to the Benefits Agency with an Income Support query that they could not resolve if the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service were located within easy reach of each other.

Analysis of the first wave of a claimant survey conducted as part of the Jobseeker’s Allowance evaluation (Bottomley et al., 1997) found that 70 per cent of respondents required two visits or less to the Agencies in order to receive benefit successfully, implying that, for most, it was a fairly straightforward procedure in terms of number of contacts. However, Shaw et al. (1996b) found that 73 per cent of respondents believed that making a claim could be a ‘big hassle’. It is possible that this may reflect their perception of the experience of others, rather than their own experiences of dealing with the two Agencies. In the Jobseeker’s Allowance claimant survey, only amongst claimants who made four or more visits were a significant proportion of visits (43 per cent) made to the Benefits Agency.
as well as the Employment Service. The evidence in the report suggests that respondents without a telephone, or those new to the benefit system and unemployment, may be more likely to make many visits than were others. Nevertheless, the authors state:

'The problem of customers being forced to trample endlessly between offices in order to gain benefit, a problem that Jobseeker's Allowance is intended in part to address, is less prevalent than past research or popular opinion would lead one to expect.' (Bottomley et al., 1997, p. 4)

One possible explanation for this may be the Agencies’ long-term reduction in these types of ‘hassles’: for example, via earlier Closer Working Initiatives. However, those claimants who do stand to gain from the convenience of locating support for both benefits in one office are likely to be (the comparatively small number of) those claiming both Income Support and Unemployment Benefit under the old system.

2.3 Seeking information For claimants of all benefits, the role of Benefits Agency offices in and advice providing advice and information appears to be secondary to the administration and processing of claims (Kempson and Bryson, 1994). Very few claimants report contacting the Benefits Agency about non-specific benefits advice. Rather, it is more likely to be with regard to a specific benefit (Public Attitude Surveys Ltd (PAS), 1996), or a specific stage in the benefit process. Williams et al. (1995) reported that 40 per cent of first-time Income Support customers obtained further information about Income Support from the Benefits Agency before applying for it. Where claimants approach the Benefits Agency for generic benefits advice, they are generally given printed matter rather than personalised, oral information (Kempson and Bryson, 1994). It may be for this reason that benefits’ customers in general choose to obtain information about social security issues from third parties, such as advice agencies (Vincent et al., 1995) and/or friends or relatives (Kempson and Bryson, 1994; Shaw et al., 1996a). Furthermore, a number of studies have indicated that there is a belief amongst claimants that some information, for example regarding entitlement, was deliberately withheld by staff (see, for example, BMRB Ltd, 1996; Cragg Ross Dawson, 1990; Hedges, 1988).

In order to improve information and advice services to unemployed people, projects involving the location in Employment Service offices of Benefits Agency staff with direct on-line access to the Agency’s client database via a Remote Access Terminal (RAT) were piloted. The evaluation of the pilots included a survey of Employment Service staff which found that the most common reasons for using the RAT operator was to obtain information or advice for the claimant about Income Support, including payment or deduction queries (Dibden, 1994). Almost 90 per cent of staff thought that more customers were calling in to the Employment Service Jobcentre especially to see the RAT operator. However, the RATs
qualitative study of claimants found that most information about the
benefit system and entitlement came from informal sources, such as
friends, rather than from official sources (Dibden, 1994).

Receiving conflicting information or advice from the Agencies was given
by only a few respondents as causing difficulties in dealing with the two
Agencies (PAS, 1992).

Independent advice agencies can clarify a customer’s benefit situation, act
as advocates for customers and, in some instances, offer a money advice
service. However, advice centres tend to be used disproportionately by
people who are dependent on social security for all or part of their income
(Kempson and Bryson, 1994) and social security enquiries are reported to
be one of the main areas of work for all advice centres. Moreover, geogra-
phical location appears to affect usage, and if there was not an advice
centre locally or within easy access, customers might not seek further
advice.

Quantitative research conducted to examine the contacts customers have
with the Agencies and other parties in order to complete a ‘piece of business’
(Stafford et al., 1997) found that customers made limited use of advice agen-
cies or friends and families. A possible explanation given by the authors is
either that such contacts are less frequent than previously thought or (and
more likely) that such contacts are so numerous and often informal that they
are too difficult to recall and record quantitatively in chronological order.

2.4 Reporting a change Claimants should only need to report a change in circumstances to either
in circumstances the Benefits Agency or the Employment Service, who then take
responsibility for notifying each other. Research examining the nature and
effects of changes in circumstances for Income Support claimants
(Sainsbury et al., 1996) found that the number of cases where changes
were reported to places other than the Benefits Agency were too small to
allow reliable analysis. However, customers most likely to report changes
to the Employment Service were unemployed claimants, which is as
expected given their (at least) fortnightly attendance.

The same study also found that the changes in circumstances most
commonly reported included house moves, household member leaving,
births and changes in earnings. The research also found that a large number
of changes that claimants are expected to report are not actually reported (for
instance, temporary absences from home), and that, conversely, there is a lot
of apparently unnecessary reporting (for example, of changes in Income
Support, rent levels, health and when children start school).

Further, staff said that responding to customer enquiries about computer-
generated letters about changes in circumstances was difficult because staff
had not always seen the letter.
With respect to job-search behaviour, the literature suggests two possible effects arising from the provision of information during the claiming process. It might produce an increase in job-search behaviour if information about benefit entitlement was provided so that claims were sorted out quickly. Alternatively, the presence of benefits advice and information in an Employment Service Jobcentre could lead to claimants focusing on their benefit entitlement at the expense of jobseeking. There is little empirical evidence to test either view. However, the RAT evaluation (Dibden, 1994) found that having a Benefits Agency on-line terminal located in Employment Service pilot offices did not increase or decrease claimant job-search activity.

Walker's qualitative study of barriers to movement off Income Support (Walker et al., 1994) found that Jobcentres were seen as 'benign' by claimants, and staff perceived as well-intentioned. Respondents suggested that it would help if the Jobcentre could alert customers to appropriate jobs as they became available. This will partly be addressed by the new Labour Market System (LMS) under the Job Seekers' Allowance regime.

Most unemployed people do not use the Jobcentre as the main source of possible employment. Indeed some rarely use it, other than when signing on or attending an appointment at the Jobcentre (Shaw et al., 1996a). A survey of barriers to movement off Income Support found that only 12 per cent of respondents who had moved off Income Support had found employment through a Jobcentre (Shaw et al., 1996b). The reasons for this centre around the limited range of vacancies advertised, the predominance of poorly paid jobs and the same jobs being displayed week after week.

Moreover, the Employment Service National Customer Satisfaction Survey 1994 (PAS, 1995) found that the most significant drop in satisfaction ratings (five per cent) was with job-seeking services, the main reason being the perception of Jobcentres having too few suitable jobs available.

The Employment Service/Department of Social Security Overlap Survey (PAS, 1992) shows that 38 per cent of the Employment Service Jobcentre claimants surveyed had had contact with a Benefits Agency office during their current spell of unemployment. The reasons for contacting the Benefits Agency included: fresh claim (33 per cent); payment issues/queries (26 per cent); seeking advice on benefits (17 per cent); reporting a change in circumstances (14 per cent); Social Fund matters (13 per cent); and to provide further evidence or information as requested (four per cent). Thirty-seven per cent of respondents who had contacted the Benefits Agency during their current spell of unemployment regarding their claim had contacted them only once, with a further 24 per cent contacting them twice, and 16 per cent contacting them three times. The remaining 23 per cent had contacted them four or more times about their claim. The mean number of visits to the Benefits Agency regarding a claim was 3.1.
Quantitative research was conducted as part of the RATs evaluation\(^4\) to establish whether their use reduced the number of claimants needing to deal with both Agencies. The evaluation found that two-thirds of Employment Service staff referred fewer people directly to the Benefits Agency and that four in five Employment Service staff could answer client queries more fully, which implied that claimants might be less likely to contact the Benefits Agency for further information.

A separate study of one of the RAT pilot offices (PAS, 1994) found a drop in the proportion of claimants who contacted the Benefits Agency local office following implementation of the RAT (from 35 per cent to 27 per cent). Of those contacting the Benefits Agency, the type of contact changed, in that there was more contact in person following the introduction of the RATs. Thus the RAT pilots appeared to have reduced the need for telephone contact with the Benefits Agency. This may be because claimants' simpler queries could be dealt with by the Benefits Agency's representative at the Employment Service, but more complex queries still required a personal visit to the Benefits Agency.

Both the Overlap Survey (PAS, 1992) and the RAT evaluation (Dibden, 1994) show that the majority of customers did not find dealing with two Agencies problematic. In an evaluation of one of the RAT pilot offices (PAS, 1994), it was found that only a minority (around nine per cent) thought that dealing with both Agencies caused difficulty. The reasons for the difficulties included confusion about which Agency to go to for what, the extra expense and time incurred travelling between the two and, to a lesser degree, receiving conflicting advice and a perceived lack of liaison between the Agencies. However, the authors point out that there may be a degree of conditioning involved and:

> `. .. that clients' expectations will take into account the present benefit system where the two benefits are dealt with at separate offices, that is, the fact that they always have had to deal with two separate offices may lead to acceptance of any inconvenience.'  

(PAS, 1994, p. 14)

In the Overlap Survey, claimants were asked whether dealing with the Benefits Agency for all benefits other than Unemployment Benefit caused difficulties (PAS, 1992). A similar proportion to the RAT pilot (ten per cent) said that it did. Of this ten per cent, the most likely causes of these difficulties, again, were confusion over where to go for what (34 per cent), delays in benefit receipt (24 per cent) and the extra expense of the journey (22 per cent). These reasons are similar to those outlined above for the RAT pilot. However, 20 per cent of the respondents experiencing difficulties gave the reason as a `waste of time'.

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\(^4\) For further details of the RAT evaluation see Section 2.3 page 16.
Many claimants dislike visiting Benefits Agency local offices, notably because of the physical surroundings and problems caused by some other claimants (Shaw et al., 1996a; Stafford et al. 1997). Some customers prefer to sort out matters without visiting the Benefits Agency office: that is, by telephoning or writing, or by contacting the Employment Service instead.

2.7 Overview

Overall, previous research shows:

• claimants can be unclear about the differences between Income Support and Unemployment Benefit;

• claimants can be confused about Agency functions, although most are aware that the Benefits Agency deals with money matters and the Jobcentre with employment issues and getting claimants back to work;

• providing benefits information in Jobcentres can reduce the number of contacts to the Benefits Agency, although this reduction is most likely to be in telephone contacts;

• where Benefits Agency and Employment Service offices were located within easy reach, Employment Service staff were more likely to refer customers to the Benefits Agency;

• claimants’ satisfaction levels with the Employment Service Jobcentre are linked to waiting times and service, as well as number of contacts with the Benefits Agency;

• checking of claim forms is a needed and valued service for claimants;

• claimants see the New Claim Interview as having a variety of purposes, including providing information on training, benefits and job vacancies;

• for most claimants, making a claim for benefit is relatively straightforward involving only one or two visits, although the process could, possibly as a result of the experiences of friends and relatives, be perceived as a ‘big hassle’;

• those claimants new to the benefit system and those without a telephone are likely to make more visits to the Agencies;

• friends, relatives and fellow claimants are the main source of (non-specific) information and advice for claimants. The Agencies are generally perceived as not very forthcoming with most information;

• unemployed claimants are most likely to report changes in circumstances to the Employment Service rather than the Benefits Agency;

• the Jobcentre is not seen as a primary source of possible employment and therefore job-search activity appears not to be affected by office procedures;

• most claimants do not report difficulties in dealing with two Agencies, but they may expect to have to deal with both;
• some claimants prefer to contact Employment Service Jobcentres with their queries/enquiries rather than the Benefits Agency; and

• those claimants who do report difficulties in dealing with two Agencies give a variety of reasons including confusion, delays in benefit and the extra expense incurred in contacting them both.
To provide a context for the discussions, respondents were asked how familiar they were with the organisations involved in the delivery of benefits to unemployed people, and about their understanding of Income Support and Unemployment Benefit. If, as other research has indicated (Cragg Ross Dawson, 1996; Shaw et al., 1996a; Stafford et al., 1997), claimants are unclear about these aspects, it may affect the dealings they have with the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service Jobcentre. For example, it will impact on their understanding of their benefit entitlement, and which Agency to approach with different queries or enquiries.

Section 3.1 explores respondents’ understanding of the organisations involved in the delivery of services to unemployed claimants, including the terms used to describe the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency, and the roles they believe each Agency perform.

The respondents’ understanding of the purpose of and differences between Income Support and Unemployment Benefit is considered in Section 3.2. The recruitment stage of this research was designed to include claimants of both Income Support and Unemployment Benefit, and Income Support claimants only. However, in this report no distinction has been made between these two groups because, as Section 3.2 shows, claimants were unsure about which benefit(s) they had applied for or were receiving. Some respondents gave conflicting information on the recruitment questionnaire and during the group discussions (held around two weeks later) about the benefits they were receiving. Therefore, we felt unable to explore whether the experiences of these two groups were different.

3.1 Agencies The respondents did not refer to the two Agencies by their ‘proper’ names. Many respondents often referred to an organisation according to the name of the building or the road in which it was situated, or sometimes by a more generic term: for example, the ‘Dole’ or the ‘Social’. Despite the use of specific address details and/or general names, terms relating to the two organisations were often transposed during the group discussions. A few saw the Benefits Agency and the Jobcentres as parts of one large organisation. These respondents were also less likely to distinguish clearly between the functions of the two.

It was sometimes difficult to establish which Agency respondents were referring to because of the interchange of terminology. For example, in the contact history grid, several respondents reported signing on at the
DSS, when in fact signing on took place at the Employment Service Jobcentre.

Notwithstanding these problems over the use of terminology, respondents were generally clear about the main functions of the two Agencies. The Employment Service Jobcentre dealt with work-related issues, and the Benefits Agency dealt with financial matters. In other words, most respondents were clear about the roles of the two Agencies, but were less knowledgeable about their formal titles and which name applied to which Agency.

3.1.1 Employment Service

Employment Service Jobcentres were known by most respondents as the `Jobcentre’. Other respondents were likely to refer to the Jobcentre as the `Dole’ or as the location of the building or street where the Employment Service Jobcentre was situated. A few respondents referred to them as Unemployment Benefit Offices, which presumably relates back to when Jobcentres and signing offices (Unemployment Benefit Offices) were often located in separate buildings. The Employment Service was also a familiar term to most respondents, although there was some confusion over its relationship with Jobcentres.

The role of Jobcentres was more clearly, if narrowly, defined. According to most respondents, Jobcentres provided signing on facilities and helped claimants move back into employment. Some respondents expanded this rather narrow definition to include displaying job vacancies and ensuring that claimants were fulfilling their job-search obligations by checking at interviews what claimants had done to look for work:

“Well, basically their responsibility is to make sure that you're looking for work, innit?” (Male repeater, Area 3, 2)

However, further probing by the researchers of the specific duties of Jobcentres, for example, Restart Interviews and drawing up Back-to-Work Plans, revealed respondents’ awareness of the Jobcentre’s role in ensuring that the conditionality requirements for benefit were met (see Chapter 10 for claimants’ understanding of conditionality). Nevertheless, this ‘conditionality’ role was defined more implicitly than the others highlighted above.

A few respondents said that Employment Service Jobcentres had provided them with assistance in claim form completion. In fact, most respondents cited this as one of the purposes of the New Claim Interview, although they did not necessarily need such help with their own claim (see Chapter 4). There were no reports of this service being received outside of New Claim Interviews.
A few respondents in the inner city area (Area 2) believed that Jobcentres were losing sight of their role of assisting people into work because too much staff time was spent sorting out benefit queries:

`... great amount of staff working on paying people who are unemployed. I don’t know whether they have lost sight of the fact that it’s a Jobcentre rather than a benefits centre ... There is never any discussion of getting work. The only discussions are to do with paying your benefit ... It’s a total misnomer, Jobcentre is now. It’s benefits exchange, that’s what it is ... I think it’s the fact that they haven’t got the time ...' (Female repeater, Area 2, 44)

Nevertheless, overall opinions of Jobcentres were generally positive in all of the groups. In particular, respondents in most of the groups felt that the open-plan offices created a more relaxed and user-friendly environment than Benefits Agency offices:

`... it’s all open plan now ... They’ve taken all the screens down, you don’t queue up against the big screen. It’s like going into Barclays, you know, sort of personal bankers, same sort of atmosphere.' (Female repeater, Area 2, 44)

`It’s sort of all open-plan and there’s little desks and it’s a lot more civilised ... instead of it being like conveyor belt signing on ... it’s more civilised surroundings [compared to the Benefits Agency].' (Male first timer, Area 3, 13)

The advantages of this were thought to benefit both staff and claimants. However, as one respondent pointed out, this relaxed environment might also be because of the nature of the reasons for visiting the Jobcentre, compared to those for visiting the Benefits Agency. Contacts with the Benefits Agency tended to occur when a respondent had a major problem, a particularly complex set of circumstances and/or was in severe financial hardship:

`... it is more relaxed ... a lot of people are just looking at the boards, looking for jobs, so they haven’t got the big problems. I mean if they’ve got big problems they go round to the DSS.' (Female first timer, Area 1, 31)

It was evident that Jobcentres with smaller caseloads were generally seen as better, both in terms of the physical surroundings and the quality of service received, than those with large caseloads, particularly in cities.

### 3.1.2 Benefits Agency

Previous research has indicated that many of the Benefits Agency’s customers were unaware of the existence of the Agency, or unclear about its role (for example, Dibden, 1994; PAS/Cragg Ross Dawson, 1994 Shaw et al., 1996a; Stafford et al., 1997). It was for this reason that the group discussions in this research were conducted using the more familiar term ’DSS’. Although many respondents had heard of the Benefits Agency, or recalled its logo on printed matter, almost none were able to articulate exactly its wider role in benefit administration. They were, however, able
to express more clearly the Benefits Agency’s role in delivering unemployment-related benefits.

It was apparent that respondents saw the Benefits Agency as having more authority in terms of benefit eligibility and sanctions. The Agency was defined using terms such as ‘paymasters’, ‘the ones that pull the strings’ and the body that ultimately decides on benefit eligibility and benefit amount. Although the Employment Service was seen as responsible for ensuring that a claimant fulfilled their job-search and availability obligations, it was believed that ultimately the Benefits Agency made benefit-related decisions:

M1 ‘... the DSS dunnay interfere at all unless you get their backs up in [Employment Service Jobcentre] ... that’s how it works, as long as you satisfy the [Employment Service Jobcentre] Dole that you’re doing what they want ...’

M2 ‘then your claim will just run smoothly and you’ll never have any dealings with them [Benefits Agency].’

(M1 = Male repeater, Area 4, 24)
(M2 = Male repeater (Postal signer), Area 4, 21)

Furthermore, contacting the Benefits Agency was seen as the ‘last resort’ by respondents:

‘... when you’ve really got a problem, that’s where you go ... a real problem go to the DHSS.’

(Male repeater, Area 1, 32)

Such problems centred around payment issues: for example, non-receipt of benefit, delays in payments or reduced payments. Consequently, some of the visitors to Benefits Agency offices might be under a degree of emotional stress due to their adverse financial circumstances. Many respondents felt that this might be the reason that tensions could be high, and why the Benefits Agency office environment compared unfavourably with the Jobcentre.

Although respondents in each group discussion were registered at the same Employment Service Jobcentre, in some of the groups respondents dealt with different Benefits Agency offices. However, the issues raised were common across all Benefits Agency offices. The most common complaints were the long waiting times and environmental factors, such as the presence of screens and furniture being fixed to the floor. Some respondents commented that customers waiting in Benefits Agency offices could be abusive, argumentative or even drunk. For these reasons, most respondents avoided visiting the office if at all possible, choosing either to telephone or write, or to resolve their problem via the Jobcentre:

‘... it is frustrating, it’s so depressing. I don’t like even going in that place [the Benefits Agency local office] - I’ll do anything I can to stay out that place, I really would ... You feel like a down and out; you feel like you’re no good,'
you're useless when you walk in there. That's the kind of atmosphere that it is - it's terrible.' (Male first timer, Area 2, 39)

Some respondents spoke of an `us and them' attitude that was exacerbated by the presence of screens. In addition, a few said that they felt inferior: for example, by having to ask the security guard for the key to use the toilet facilities.

Some respondents who were claiming for the first time spoke of their initial adverse experiences of Benefits Agency offices. One female repeater recalled her very first visit as follows:

`it's a shock to walk into some of these places. It's really dreadful, it's like another planet.' (Female repeater, Area 4, 20)

There was less criticism of staff than of the offices, although again it was evident that the respondents perceived differences between individual members of staff working in the same office. In most of the areas, there were respondents who recognised the pressures that staff and the administrative system were under.

The respondents' opinions about these offices does depend partly on previous experiences, and it may be that bad, rather than good, experiences are more memorable.

3.2 Benefits

Respondents were asked how clear they were of the differences between Unemployment Benefit and Income Support. Although not all of the respondents had been in receipt of Unemployment Benefit, responses indicate that those who had were unclear or vague about what specifically differentiated it from Income Support. For example, very few respondents said that Unemployment Benefit was administered by Jobcentres and Income Support by local Benefits Agency offices.

A few respondents had asked Jobcentre staff about the differences, but were still unclear:

* M4 'I don't even know what the difference is . . .
* F1 'I couldn t understand . . . When I asked someone to explain I just got a load of stuff and I was still none the wiser when I come out.'

(M4 = Male repeater, Area 1, 32)
(F1 = Female repeater, Area 1, 28)

The majority of respondents, however, were aware that entitlement to Unemployment Benefit was dependent on National Insurance contributions paid whilst in employment, but were generally unclear about the duration and timing of the qualifying employment period, and how long Unemployment Benefit was paid for. Some respondents believed that there was no difference in the level of benefit paid under Income Support
and Unemployment Benefit, although some thought that Unemployment Benefit was very slightly more than the equivalent Income Support scale.

The evident confusion over the differences between these two benefits is important. It is possible that when respondents first approached the Employment Service to make a new claim, they might not have realised which benefits they were applying for - Income Support only, Unemployment Benefit only, or both (although our sample excluded those who were applying for or receiving Unemployment Benefit only). Furthermore, it may mean that they were unsure of whom to contact with queries about their benefit.

A few respondents said that being on Unemployment Benefit was 'better' than being on Income Support, because there was less stigma attached to a benefit whose entitlement depended on being previously employed:

'. . . you got it 'cos you'd worked long enough to get credits up. It was like a bonus because you'd worked long enough . . . You were nae . . . on social security again, you were sort of better than them.'

(Male repeater, Area 4, 24)
4 CONTACT WITH AGENCIES: NEW CLAIMS

All of the respondents had, at the time of the group discussions, an ongoing claim for benefit. The respondents were asked to describe the process that they went through when making a claim, in particular the contacts they had had with the Agencies and their experiences of completing the claim forms.

The research involved four group discussions with claimants whose current spell of Income Support/Unemployment Benefit was less than 12 months and four groups where it was for 12 or more months (see Section 1.3.2). For some respondents the events explored in this chapter occurred a considerable time ago, and this may have affected their recall. From the recruitment questionnaire we can calculate the spell length for the respondents' current claim for Income Support\(^5\). This shows that for respondents in the `less than 12 months' groups, the median claim was made one month prior to the fieldwork. Furthermore, six out of ten of those respondents in the `under 12 months' groups had made their claims within 12 weeks of the group interviews. Therefore their recall of the New Claim Interview will not have been influenced by any other advisory interviews at the Jobcentre. However, in the `12 or more months' groups, the median claim was made two years before the discussion groups: the full range was from one to nearly 17 years.

The discussion groups also included clerical and postal signers, who might have had different experiences of the claims process.

The process of making the claim is explored in Section 4.1. Having become unemployed, the respondents’ first contacts with the two Agencies are described in Section 4.1.1. The completion of the necessary claim forms is then considered in Section 4.1.2. The submission of supporting evidence and home visits are briefly considered in Sections 4.1.3 and 4.1.4 respectively. The New Claim Interview is considered in Section 4.1.5. Section 4.1.6 examines the respondents’ views of the outcome of the claim process.

Section 4.2 examines claimants’ overall perceptions of their contacts with the Agencies, and an overview is given in Section 4.3.

\(^5\) We have valid data for 42 of the 45 respondents.
4.1 Making the claim

Claimants making a new claim for unemployment-related benefits were required to make an appointment at their local Employment Service Jobcentre for a New Claim Interview. They also completed two forms, a B1 to claim Income Support and an ES461 to apply for Unemployment Benefit and to provide details of their availability for work and jobseeking behaviour. This section examines the respondents’ experiences of the claims process.

4.1.1 First contact

Most of the respondents knew that they had to contact an Employment Service Jobcentre to make a claim for benefit and to register as unemployed. The minority that initially contacted the Benefits Agency were:

- those first-time claimants who did not know the system (most first-time claimants knew they had to contact the Employment Service Jobcentre);
- a few respondents who had been under 18 and were in non-advanced education;
- ‘complicated’ cases, for example, one respondent moved out of the marital home and made a claim as a single parent; and
- one respondent went to the Benefits Agency because it was nearer than the Employment Service Jobcentre.

Those who contacted the Benefits Agency were referred to the local Employment Service Jobcentre. None of the Benefits Agency’s staff telephoned the Employment Service Jobcentre to make an appointment on behalf of a respondent:

“So they just tell you to go away and go back to your local Jobcentre.’

(Male repeater, Area 3, 4)

Typically, the respondents’ first contact with the Jobcentre was by visiting the reception or the ‘fresh’ or ‘first’ claims desk. The purpose of the visit was to make an appointment for a New Claim Interview. For those using the inner city Employment Service Jobcentre (Area 2) this initial contact had to be by visit or by telephone. Respondents within this area reported different opinions about the mode of contact they were expected to use:

‘... you can’t phone through for an appointment no more, ... you’ve actually go to go there ...’

(Male first timer, Area 2, 43)

‘I had to phone and make an appointment ... you can’t just walk in ...’

(Female repeater, Area 2, 44)

All of the claimants in the discussion groups were aged 18 or over. However, a few of the respondents were entitled to Income Support when they were aged under 18 years and were in non-advanced education and estranged from their parents. They had correctly contacted the Benefits Agency.
The reason(s) for this difference are unclear. Possible explanations are that these respondents were misinformed by friends, relatives or other people about how the Jobcentre should be contacted; or different members of staff might have advised the respondents of their own dissimilar preferences as to how customers should contact the Jobcentre.

Some other respondents, especially those in the rural area (Area 4), telephoned the Employment Service Jobcentre to make their New Claim Interview appointment. There were two advantages to using the telephone. First, it minimised travel costs, for those in Area 4 especially:

> 'otherwise it would cost me a fiver to come in and see them just to be told . . . [to] . . . come back on Thursday.'  
(Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)

Secondly, those who knew that claims would be backdated only to the initial contact date realised it was important to notify the Jobcentre of their unemployment as soon as possible.

Usually, the New Claim Interview was held a few days later. Only one respondent objected to this delay because, on his initial visit, staff were not interviewing other customers:

> '.. there wasn't another soul in the building apart from me ... I wasn't very impressed.'  
(Male first timer (postal signer), Area 4, 18)

None of the other respondents objected to the time lapse, perhaps because they realised the claim was backdated to the initial contact:

> '.. I had to wait for an appointment, but they back-date your claim anyway so you can't so very well grumble about that - to me that's fair enough.'  
(Male repeater, Area 3, 7)

Only one respondent had a New Claim Interview at their first contact. This was because of a cancelled appointment.

### 4.1.2 Claim form completion

When making their New Claim Interview appointment most of the respondents were given a claims pack consisting of the B1 and ES461 forms (together with forms for Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit). The forms were completed, usually at home, and the B1 was posted to the local Benefits Agency office or taken with the ES461 to the New Claim Interview. This respondent’s experience was typical:

> 'As soon as you go down to the . . . [Employment Service Jobcentre] they give you the forms and tell you to fill 'em in and bring 'em back with your appointment. Then when you go to your appointment they stamp it, either they give it back to you to post off, or they'll do it for you.'  
(Male repeater, Area 3, 4)
There were, however, four main variations on this process. Firstly, if the respondent had initially contacted the Employment Service Jobcentre by telephone then either they received their claims pack by post if they lived in a rural area or they collected the forms when they attended their interview if they lived in an urban area.

Secondly, some respondents in Area 1 who did not telephone for an appointment also collected their B1 form at the New Claim Interview. This was because the Jobcentre piloted handing out the B1 forms at the interview rather than when the appointment was made. The pilot, however, was not successful and staff reverted to giving out the forms at reception.

Thirdly, some respondents had been asked to arrive 20 minutes early for their New Claim Interview in order to complete their claim forms. In other words, they completed their forms at the Employment Service Jobcentre rather than at home.

Finally, a few respondents took their uncompleted or partially completed forms to their New Claim Interview. These respondents either needed help with completing their forms or wanted to ensure that the forms were completed properly. In addition there were two respondents who visited their local Benefits Agency offices in order to obtain help with completing their B1 forms. Typically, help with completion of the forms was sought from the Employment Service Jobcentre or the Benefits Agency because no other source of advice and support was seen as being available. The respondents requiring help with form completion appeared to have no difficulty in obtaining it from the staff and were appreciative of the support given. There appears to be little use of independent advice agencies.

The majority of the respondents found completing the two forms straightforward:

‘Wasn’t too bad filling out the form.’ (Male first timer, Area 2, 47)

‘I didn’t have any difficulties at all.’ (Male repeater, Area 3, 15)

There were various reasons for this:

• some claimants acknowledged that the design of the forms had improved and as a result they were easier to complete:

  ‘It’s much better than what it was.’ (Female repeater, Area 4, 20)

• former claimants could draw upon their past experience of benefit form filling when making their current claim:

  ‘Ifound it very difficult the first time I signed on, . . . but the second time, because I’ve done one before obviously, it was no problem.’ (Female repeater, Area 2, 44)
for some, many of the questions in the B1 form were not applicable and so they just ticked the relevant box, although other respondents found that having to tick these 'not applicable boxes' meant that the form was too complex for them.

The forms were not straightforward:

• for a few first-time customers - the forms could appear to be 'daunting', even 'impossible'; or

• where the respondent had basic skills difficulties:

   'I had difficulty in filling it in with not being able to write, so, luckily . . . there were someone there to fill it in for me.' (Male repeater, Area 3, 7)

   or

• for the respondents with complicated circumstances and/or memory recall problems. One respondent who had severe difficulties remembering dates had, over a number of claims, given different answers to the same questions:

   'As soon as I see a form I get this, this wall comes up and I don't want to do it ... I've got a bad memory . . . I've written different things, answered the same question differently over the years ...' (Male repeater, Area 1, 32)

For a few respondents, completing the forms - especially the B1 - was emotionally demanding because it required them to record major events in their lives at a time when they were feeling vulnerable:

   '... you're under a lot of strain, you're not your most confident and . . . you've been given a few knocks . . . I found it quite disturbing to fill it in' (Female first timer (clerical claimant), Area 3, 9)

The main criticisms of the forms were their length, and the repetition of questions on household details, although one respondent did not mind repeating information on the forms as it ensured that both Agencies had the necessary details.

Some of the respondents were highly critical of some of the questions posed. These centred on the ES461 and concerned:

• the type and location of work sought (questions 17, 18 and 19)

A number of respondents were willing to accept any sort of work within a wide geographical area, and they could not understand why they had to be specific about the type of work they were prepared to accept:
\textendash; it says to be specific, not to say \textit{"anything"}, so you do that, \ldots but then they turn round and say that they want you to apply for \textit{anything}, so the point of [not] putting \textit{"anything"} on that form is a waste of time.

\textit{(Male repeater, Area 3, 12)}

\begin{itemize}
  \item hours willing to work each day (questions 25 and 26)
  \end{itemize}

Respondents objected to not being able to put \textit{`ditto'} for the hours they gave for Monday for the rest of the week. Some respondents also felt it was not worthwhile to ask people why they could not work on any particular day of the week.

\begin{itemize}
  \item lowest wage willing to accept (question 27)
  \end{itemize}

This question caused three main problems. First, respondents, especially first-time customers, were uncertain about what was a realistic figure. Secondly, some respondents maintained that their previous job had been badly paid. They required a higher wage, yet they were being asked to state their previous wage:

\begin{quote}
\textit{``I was only earning £45 a week \textit{[doing a part-time job], and I finished there. I went to sign on, they says, \textit{``How much do you want a week?''} I says, \textit{``120.\ldots}} But [they say], \textit{``This wage you were getting was only 145 a week.''} I says, \textit{``Aye but I'm no working for that again! I was just sort of needed to work\ldots''} She says, \textit{``You've gotta. I'll let you put down 50. If a job comes along you've gotta take it.'''}}
\end{quote}

\textit{(Male repeater, Area 4, 24)}

Thirdly, respondents were aware that they could not put too high a figure, but if they gave too low a figure and a job became available at that rate they felt that they would have to accept it and by implication would suffer financially.

What is not clear from the group discussions is whether the respondents having difficulties with this question were taking into account any in-work benefits that they might receive had they accepted a job with a low income. It is possible that advice at an early stage on in-work benefits and \textit{`better-off'} calculations would have allayed the concerns of some of the respondents about this question.

In some instances the Adviser at the Employment Service Jobcentre amended the answers in the ES461 and then asked the claimant to initial the changes. This happened principally with the question on what wage the respondent was willing to accept. In all cases the respondents felt obliged to initial the changes; they did not see themselves as able to negotiate.

Having completed the B1 form some respondents posted it, others delivered it by hand to the Benefits Agency, and some took it to the New
Claim Interview for checking. Those delivering their B1 form by hand to the Benefits Agency did so because they feared it might get lost in the post. The respondents taking their B1 forms to the New Claim Interview to be checked needed the reassurance that their form had been completed correctly. In some instances they had learnt that incomplete forms can be returned by the Benefits Agency and this could delay the payment of benefit:

'... but you always got them sent back to ya because you hadn't filled it in properly so I learned to get it checked first... 'cos I mean you can cock your Dole up by another week or so, 'cos they always send your letters back on a Friday when the Jobcentre's shut... so you've got a full weekend to wait and fester over it...'

(Male repeater, Area 4, 24)

One respondent reported that at the co-located office (Area 1), a member of staff from the Benefits Agency had come through to the Jobcentre and checked his B1 form. It is possible that this respondent was interviewed by a Benefits Agency member of staff in the Jobcentre. Under the Closer Working Initiative there was a good working relationship between the two co-located Agencies, and Benefits Agency staff did, on occasion, walk through to the Employment Service Jobcentre to see claimants.

Return of incomplete B1 forms was relatively common. In all but two of the discussion groups, one or two respondents had experience of an incomplete B1 form being returned to them. For some this had happened some time ago, a one-off event, whilst a few respondents seem to have had forms returned on several occasions.

The respondents taking their B1 form to the New Claim Interview usually got the Jobcentre to send the form to the Benefits Agency.

Three respondents had had experience of the Benefits Agency losing their B1 claim forms. Two of these respondents said that the Agency had lost their forms on more than one occasion. This was not, however, the experience of the majority of the respondents.

4.1.3 Evidence to support claim
Only a few respondents could recall having to submit any supporting evidence with their claim for benefit. Two respondents handed in past pay slips (one for a partner working part-time) and one respondent a P45 form. Generally, therefore, the submission of documents to support claims was not an issue for the respondents.

4.1.4 Home visits
Only a few respondents had a home visit from Benefits Agency staff in connection with a claim for Income Support. Respondents who were postal signers also occasionally received home visits:

'They just turn up... and, if you are not in, then they assume that you're out working... I think they called twice, and it was ten o'clock on a Monday,
and two o’clock on a Wednesday, and it just so happened that both the times I was out, and so I got back at like ten past two and there was a note put through the door saying they called at two o’clock. So I quickly phoned them to say that I was down at the shop . . . so they said we’ll arrange another appointment but then they just turn up on spec and luckily I was in . . . just ‘cos you’re unemployed doesn’t mean you’re sitting round the house all day . . .

(Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)

A number of those receiving home visits were annoyed that the visits were unannounced. Although one respondent believed that his unannounced home visit was ‘fair enough’. Others were unsure about the reason for the home visit. Some of the single respondents felt that a check was being made on whether or not they were co-habitating. There was a general acceptance that home visits were necessary to combat fraudulent claims.

4.1.5 The New Claim Interview

The New Claim Interview was held at the local Jobcentre and was conducted by an Adviser. Respondents reported the interview tending to last between ten and 15 minutes, the shortest reported time being five minutes and the longest three-quarters of an hour. The estimated length of the interview did not vary by area or by claimant characteristics, although new claimants were more likely to report a longer interview than repeat claimants. These estimates, however, are based on respondent recall and for most respondents the interviews took place over a year before the group discussions.

The respondents had a number of views on the purpose of the interview. Most respondents gave only one, and sometimes two, reasons. The following were mentioned:

- to ensure that the B1 and ES461 forms were completed correctly;
- to specify the type of work sought;
- to outline the claimants’ job-search plans;
- to check whether the claimant was available for work;
- to give the claimant their dates to sign on; and
- to establish how the claimant became unemployed.

‘I think it’s just to check that your forms are all filled out properly . . .

(Female first timer, Area 1, 31)

‘They want to know what you’re sort of like trying yourself to ... find work like . . . And she write it all down and she, she stamps it, staples it in your, your signing on card.’

(Male repeater, Area 3, 7)

Only one respondent (in Area 1) reported that the Adviser used the computer system to identify possible jobs for the claimant. Although none
of the jobs were suitable, she found the Adviser ‘pretty good’. It was this respondent’s interview that had lasted three-quarters of an hour.

The respondents did not report any difficulties or problems with their New Claim Interviews. The interview itself appears to have been a relatively straightforward event.

4.1.6 Outcome of claim

Claimants may be entitled to Unemployment Benefit and/or to Income Support. Some respondents in the discussion groups reported having been turned down for Unemployment Benefit because of insufficient National Insurance contributions, but no-one had been refused Income Support, although a few respondents had not yet heard the outcome of their claim.

For most of the respondents their claim for benefit was unproblematic:

‘... I've not had no trouble. My money's come through all right...’

(Female repeater, Area 1, 28)

‘I've found them very helpful actually - I didn't have a... lot of aggro - just got the B1, filled it in, which they issued me at the unemployment office, filled it in, but it takes a while for... it to come through, but you do get back pay ...’

(Male repeater, Area 3, 7)

These respondents judged a successful outcome in terms of the prompt payment of benefit, rather than, say, the development of an effective job-search plan. The respondents’ primary aim in making a claim appeared to be obtaining benefit rather than seeking help or advice on jobseeking.

Respondents were notified of the decision on their claim by means of a computerised standard letter. Some respondents received separate letters about their Unemployment Benefit and Income Support, and others a single letter. A few respondents reported receiving contradictory letters either on the same day or a few days later about their benefit entitlement. (It is possible that these were separate letters giving decisions on Unemployment Benefit and Income Support but which the respondent found confusing.) Written communications from the two Agencies are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

Where respondents were notified within a fortnight of making a claim, they tended to be impressed at the speed at which the claim was processed.

Whilst the process of claiming was straightforward for the majority of respondents, a few did encounter problems. A few had to chase their first payment:

‘... they forgot to put me on the computer so I didn’t get the Giro and I rang them up ...’

(Female repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 27)
The respondents concerned attributed these delays in benefit payments to administrative inefficiencies at the Agencies, rather than due to any action (or inaction) on their part. Indeed a respondent who had not filled his form in correctly blamed the Benefits Agency for not informing him quickly enough.

The respondents differed as to which Agency they contacted in order to obtain their ‘delayed’ payment. The Benefits Agency was contacted because they were seen as responsible for the payment of benefit, whilst the Employment Service Jobcentre could be contacted by those who preferred not to queue at the Benefits Agency. There was also a chance that Jobcentre staff would be able to sort out any payment query by contacting the Benefits Agency on behalf of the claimant.

One respondent received a standard letter stating he was entitled to full benefit only to discover subsequently that it was ‘suspended’ because of the circumstances under which he left his previous employment. Another was believed not to have signed on, and so did not receive any benefit, when in fact he had signed on. Only one respondent claimed to have ‘appealed’ against a benefit decision. However, from the respondent’s account it is unlikely that a formal appeal was made. Instead the claim was probably delayed by his former employer not promptly returning forms to the Benefits Agency.

4.2 Claimants' overall Some of the first-time claimants, especially the older respondents, recalled adverse perceptions and expectations of Employment Service contacts with the Jobcentres. Indeed, one respondent did not register for four weeks after losing his job because he found the thought of going to a Jobcentre ‘depressing’. However, the expectation could be worse than the reality:

> I think it's quite horrific the first time you go because of the perception you've got of it, having seen all the Alan Bleasdale films and all that sort of thing... I felt quite timid the first time... [However] you discover [that the staff are]... all right and they're not going to give you a hard time...

(Female repeater, Area 2, 44)

Some of the respondents from the rural area (Area 4) also thought that they benefited from knowing and being known by the staff at the local Jobcentre. They felt that the staff were probably more helpful than those in a large town or city where a higher caseload meant that Jobcentre staff were less able to establish a rapport with claimants.

Generally, the process of making a claim was seen as relatively straightforward. Even first-time customers who could be initially confused by the claiming process could quickly learn what was required and expected of them:
When I went in for my [first] interview . . . I . . . didn't really know where I was supposed to be going or anything like that, but it's fairly straightforward when you know what you're doing.’ (Female first timer, Area 1, 31)

However, it was acknowledged that this did not mean that there were not, on occasions, minor problems:

Just getting a claim’s no problem but you are gonna get little, little hiccups here and there occasionally, you know, through computer failure or somebody in an office makes a mistake and somebody doesn't get to know something . . . just minor things though ...’ (Male repeater, Area 3, 15)

The process was seen as more difficult by those with `complicated circumstances, such as a single parent who had been self-employed.

Some of the respondents complained about the amount of form-filling that a claim entailed. For some this made the process stressful, whilst other respondents were more sanguine.

There was a feeling that claimants had to tell the Agencies what they want to hear. Repeat claimants in particular believed they had learnt what responses were expected on the claim forms:

‘Once you've done it a couple of times, you know what answers they want you to put, if you put anything different it confuses the system.' (Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)

They had also learnt that the forms must be completed properly. Some had discovered that if they had problems with the forms they just `act stupid and dumb', so staff will check or complete forms for them.

For some the system was more efficient (at processing their claim) than they had imagined.

4.3 Overview Respondents’ experiences of making a claim varied. For some respondents the pre-Jobseeker's Allowance system had provided a one-stop service. They had no direct contact with the Benefits Agency, particularly if they had handed in their forms to the Jobcentre or posted the B1 form to the Benefits Agency. The process of claiming and receiving benefit could appear to be seamless.

There was, however, an `area effect' in terms of the balance of contacts with the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service Jobcentres. The contact history grids, which recorded the number of contacts for a new claim, show that there were more contacts with the Benefits Agency in Area 1 compared to Area 4. In Area 1 the offices were co-located, and the respondents typically had two contacts with the Benefits Agency and two with the Jobcentre. Whilst in Area 4 the two offices were over 25 miles
apart, and the respondents typically had four contacts, often by personal visit, with the Jobcentre rather than the Benefits Agency. (For Areas 2 and 3 most of the respondents had direct contact with the Jobcentre when making a claim.)

Although some respondents found the process straightforward, others found it more problematic. For some the process of claiming generated a degree of uncertainty. They needed advice about the process itself, possibly help with completing the claim forms or some reassurance that the forms were completed correctly. This implies that there is a need for support and advice services and more information about the process of claiming (and not just information about the benefit itself). These services need to be provided throughout the claiming process.
Aside from new claims, claimants might have had other reasons for contacting one or both of the Agencies. These other main reasons include: reporting a change in circumstances (such as a temporary absence, a change of address or finding work); benefit payment queries; and seeking information, help or advice.

This Chapter explores respondents’ beliefs and experiences concerning reporting changes in circumstances (Section 5.1) and benefit payment queries (Section 5.2). Section 5.3 examines their experiences of seeking information or advice from the Employment Service (Section 5.3.1), the Benefits Agency (Section 5.3.2) and from third parties (such as Citizen’s Advice Bureaux or friends - Section 5.3.3). Section 5.4 briefly considers contacts for claims for other welfare benefits.

5.1 Reporting a change There is a general requirement that recipients of Income Support should of circumstances report changes that may affect benefit entitlement. The same applied to Unemployment Benefit although, as it was not means-tested, there were fewer changes that need to be reported. Previous research has shown that Income Support recipients in general are most likely to report their changes to the Benefits Agency (Sainsbury et al., 1996), but that unemployed Income Support claimants are most likely to report their change to the Employment Service.

This research reflects those findings, as most changes of circumstances were reported to the Employment Service, either solely or as well as the Benefits Agency. Most changes were reported to the Jobcentre for reasons of convenience: firstly, as claimants were obliged to visit every fortnight to sign on, it was easy to inform the Jobcentre of changes at the same time; and secondly, the relative locations of the two offices, particularly in Area Four where the local Benefits Agency office was some considerable distance away, meant the Jobcentre was often more accessible. As Chapter 3 reported, the Employment Service Jobcentre was the preferred point of contact for most respondents.

Respondents appeared to be aware that certain changes in their lives whilst receiving Income Support needed to be reported to the Benefits Agency, the Employment Service, or both. The changes in circumstances discussed by respondents fell mainly into three areas: temporary absence (because of holidays, sickness, family crisis, etc.); finding work (including one-off jobs and full-time employment); and changing address.
Details of the duty to report such changes were provided in correspondence and other general benefits information and leaflets. However, only one respondent recalled having been given a specific change of circumstances form, which she had retained for future use. The research suggests that many respondents were unaware of the detail of the benefit regulation relating to reporting changes of circumstances. This, combined with their uncertainty about the impact of any changes on the amount of benefit received, meant that changes could go unreported. The reasons why claimants could be unaware of the benefit regulations are less clear from the research.

Under the Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime, jobseekers were required to report their change to either Agency, which then had responsibility for informing the other.

Respondents in at least three of the discussion groups said that reporting a change of circumstances could occasionally be more complex than making a new claim:

‘Reporting changes I find difficult, but making new claims I find quite easy.’
(Male repeater, Area 1, 34)

Possible explanations for this are: that claimants were unclear about the rules surrounding the reporting of a change of circumstance; it would involve direct contacts with both Agencies as opposed to contacts with possibly only the Jobcentre; and/or they were over cautious because they were worried about losing benefit if they reported the `wrong’ information.

In reporting a change of circumstances the level of rapport between staff and claimant was perceived as important to some respondents - how the claimant interacted with the staff member, and vice versa:

‘.. it differs from person to person. It's how you actually relate to the person behind the counter.’
(Male repeater, Area 3, 8)

5.1.1 Temporary absence
Temporary absences, such as holidays or sickness, were permitted under certain circumstances for up to two weeks in a year by the Unemployment Benefit/Income Support Regulations, provided the claimant satisfied the availability condition. (Even if not `actively seeking' work claimants must still be deemed as `available' for work.) However, the Employment Service had to be notified in advance, and evidence produced to show that the claimant was available for work, for example, by providing a telephone number or address of their location during the absence. Most respondents appeared to be unaware of these regulations, and believed that any temporary absence could possibly affect benefit entitlement. For example, one respondent’s father had been involved in a serious accident some miles away, and the respondent consequently missed a signing-on appointment.
When he returned a week or so later and informed the Employment Service of what had happened, he found it was easier to `write off’ those weeks and reclaim, forfeiting the benefit:

`... explained all of this to them [Employment Service Jobcentre] and they just caused so much aggravation I just wrote those three weeks off and said, “Well, can I start my claim again from today?”.’ (Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)

Another respondent in a different area had a similar experience with a family tragedy. She notified the Jobcentre beforehand and was told that she had to continue to search for work whilst away:

`... I had to say that I’d be looking for work while I was down there and give my sister’s phone number in case they found me a job - and this was a tragedy . . . I just couldn’t believe it!’ (Female first timer (clerical claimant), Area 3, 9)

A few respondents stated that they would not report temporary absences. The main reasons were related to worries that their benefit payment might be affected. Some of these respondents had learnt from previous experience that reporting temporary absences could cause such problems:

`. all the time they’re looking for an excuse to stop your money.’ (Male repeater (clerical claimant), Area 1, 35)

Short periods of sickness (up to two weeks in any 12-month period of unemployment) did not generally affect a claimant’s entitlement to Income Support. Longer periods might have affected entitlement, and it might have been more appropriate for a claimant to be on a sickness-related benefit. Many respondents believed that it was necessary to report periods of temporary sickness to the Employment Service, particularly if a signing-on appointment would be missed. However, very few respondents would actually report such periods (unless the illness prevented them from signing on), primarily because of fears of losing their benefit payment and the `hassle’ of amending their claim. One respondent had been moved on to Sickness Benefit temporarily, and then moved back on to Income Support. Both moves entailed reapplying for benefits (including Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit) a process which the respondent found inconvenient:

M6 `... they made me wait seven days till I caught up from my dole to my sickness benefit because I’m paid on different weeks . . . my dole . . . was due on the Friday. I had to go the following Friday before I had my sickness benefit . . .

F4 ‘If you were sick again, would you tell them?

7 Claimants could not claim Unemployment Benefit for any period of sickness.
Other respondents agreed that they would not report short-term sickness at all:

I  ‘Why wouldn’t you report it?’

M6  ‘Because you’d lose money.’

M5  ‘You have to go through all that system again, just for that week [of sickness].’

M7  ‘Never rock the boat!’

5.1.2 Finding work

Claimants were obliged to report any periods of employment to the Employment Service, even if earnings or hours fell within the disregarded amount. Claimants were also obliged to inform the Employment Service when they found full-time paid work enabling them to move off unemployment-related benefits. All of the respondents appeared to be aware of these regulations and of the reporting procedure to the Employment Service. However, some respondents had learnt from previous experience that reporting periods of employment could be problematic.

One respondent had been offered a ‘dubious’ job, which he had accepted but he had been unsure whether it would work out. He had informed the Employment Service about this, asking whether he could continue to sign, so that if the job did not work out, he would not have to reapply for benefit. There were also deductions for outstanding fines being taken from his benefit. Having spoken to the Jobcentre, he believed he was able to continue ‘signing on’, only later to receive a letter saying that his Income Support had been stopped. The job did not work out, with the result that he had had to reapply for everything, which included visiting the Benefits Agency to reinstate his fine deductions to prevent him being called to court for non-payment.

Another respondent, who was self-employed, also appeared not to have understood fully the implications of reporting work, although in this instance it concerned a temporary period of work

‘. . . the 16-hour rule wasn’t too clear. I done two-and-a-half days work - I think it was about 75 quid. They weren’t interested in the amount, but me hours. They stopped everything there and then, this bloke . . . hit this button on his computer and it scrubbed the lot . . . This was in the Jobcentre . . . [I] got bounced to the DSS - they didn’t want to know - Jobcentre’s problem. Went back there for five hours, got no-where . . . £350 I was out.’

(Male repeater (clerical claimant), Area 1, 35)
As a result the respondent was offered a £60 Social Fund crisis loan to assist with his mortgage payment. He was informed about a year later, at an Employment Service interview, that he could avoid the need to reapply for benefits if the contract for the temporary work was for less than an eight-week period.

Other respondents preferred not to declare small amounts of paid work, such as one-off payments of £10 or £20, because of the disruption it could cause to their claim. In other words, the process of re-claiming could deter them from reporting small amounts of paid work. Furthermore, respondents in several groups wished to avoid doing anything that might attract attention to themselves:

- **M4** `... you just think . . . it's not worth filling out the form for, like, a tenner.
- **F5** `Your benefits could be . . . delayed as well, couldn't they, by filling out them and sending them away?
- **M3** `Plus you think if you fill in the form you might have them watching you all the time . . .

(M4 = Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)
(F5 = Female repeater, Area 4, 19)
(M3 = Male repeater, Area 4, 24)

The final statement above came from a respondent who had in fact previously reported a one-off short period of voluntary work which he had done for an elderly neighbour. He was worried that somebody might report him to the Employment Service or the Benefits Agency for working, so he declared it to the Employment Service. However, he then found that the computer system recorded him as being in part-time employment for ten weeks.

Of those reporting part-time earnings, only one respondent (a clerical claimant) found that her Giro cheque was adjusted accurately and quickly:

- `... when I've done that they've been very good about taking the amount . . . They've done it really quickly and they've . . . adjusted the Giro OK.’

(Female first timer (clerical claimant), Area 3, 9)

In summary, a concern over loss of, and/or disruption to, benefit payment appeared to act as a disincentive both to taking temporary work or to reporting it:

- `... 'cos I did two days' work for Reed Employment Agency, and they stopped everything but a fiver from it ... Yeah, you can easily understand how it would put people off reporting] because, you know, I mean you go and do your bit of part-time work, you think you're helping yourself ... but if you don't declare it then you're in trouble, and if you declare it they take it from you.’

(Female first timer, Area 1, 37)
"Because paperwork really isn't a hassle, it's the money at the end of the day. Most paperwork isn't a hassle if you keep a record of what you're doing - it's not a problem.' (Male first timer, Area 3, 13)

The Back-to-Work Bonus, introduced with Jobseeker's Allowance, aims to tackle this perceived disincentive to take temporary or part-time work whilst unemployed.

Some respondents, mostly those with more experience of the benefit system, would not report finding permanent work, but would instead stop attending their fortnightly signing-on appointments, which would ultimately end their claim automatically. Others expected to report that they had found work shortly before they actually began the job. A few reported that they had been advised by friends not to sign off until they had actually begun work, to ensure that any job offer did materialise.

5.1.3 Change of address Reporting a change of address was perceived as being relatively straightforward, particularly if the move meant that the claimant remained registered at the same Employment Service Jobcentre:

`. . . I've changed my address three times in a year and I can't remember, so it couldn't have been very traumatic!' (Male repeater, Area 1, 32)

There was no distinctive pattern for whom respondents reported the change to, although respondents claiming benefits other than Income Support (such as Housing Benefit) tended to report their move to all organisations concerned, including the Jobcentre, the Benefits Agency and the appropriate Local Authorities, as they were required to do.

5.2 Benefit payment Benefit payment queries fall into two basic types - queries about the arrival or timeliness of a payment and those about the benefit payment amount.

Queries concerning the late arrival of payments usually appeared to be resolved by contacting the Employment Service. For example, staff at the Jobcentre were usually able to check on the computer system whether a payment had been sent or when it was due, and Employment Service staff were usually able to telephone the Benefits Agency if necessary. This avoided the need for claimants to visit the Benefits Agency and join any queue. In fact, one or two 'experienced' claimants appeared to use the Jobcentre to avoid or minimise contacts with the Benefits Agency.

`M6 'I would rather go to the Jobcentre . . . I Why is that? M6 'Otherwise it just takes ages, sitting in a grim office. F5 'I mean the Jobcentre's much more appealing, on the whole.' (M6™Male repeater, Area 1, 33) (F5™Female first timer, Area 1, 31)"
Around the time that the group discussions were held, there had been a series of postal strikes, which might have affected the receipt of Giro cheques and generated contacts with Jobcentres:

F4 `... [Giro] didn't arrive so I just borrowed some money off a friend to keep me going ... After it hadn't arrived for three days, went down to the Jobcentre ...`

I `What made you decide to contact the Jobcentre about that rather than phoning up Belfast?`

F4 `... because I sign on there ... and it's easier than ringing Belfast.’

(Female repeater, Area 2, 44)

Queries about benefit payment amounts often required contact with both Agencies or directly with the Benefits Agency. Even if the respondent was in receipt of Income Support only, both Agencies could be contacted. For example, in Area 3 one respondent had asked the Employment Service for an explanation of his benefit amount, and why he was not entitled to more money for his dependants:

I asked down at the Employment Services [sic] and two of 'em, they couldn't answer. They said, "You'll have to get in touch with your DHSS [sic]." ... That's the only criticism I have of 'em down there (Employment Services Jobcentre) ... either they're loath to tell you or they're unwilling to tell you ... without going through the whole process of going to X House [Benefits Agency].’

(Male, Area 3, 1)

Some of the queries arose because the respondents did not understand why the amount of their benefit had changed. One respondent realised that his Giro cheque was less than expected, and he did not know why. Staff at the Jobcentre were able to tell him only that a previous overpayment was now being collected, so he telephoned the Benefits Agency remote processing centre to find out why:

'So I went to the Jobcentre and the fellow ... he looked a bit confused ... he said, "Well, we can't do anything about it]. We just get informed off the DHSS, off the Social ... to stop your money." He said the only way to find out is to go to the Social. So I went to the Social - had to sit there for a few hours - said, "Can you come back tomorrow I'll look into it." I went back the next day. Then they asked me to ring Belfast, and I rang Belfast. I had an argument with them on the phone and never got it solved 'cos they're still taking the money out and that's the way it goes.’

(Male repeater, Area 2, 42)

Another respondent, from the same inner city area, also had difficulties in ascertaining why monies were being deducted from his benefit. He had received a letter from the Benefits Agency mentioning a third party which he asked the Employment Service to explain. They were unable to, and referred him to the Benefits Agency. (It was actually a Child Support Agency deduction.)
It was only by querying their benefit payments that these respondents claimed to have understood why deductions had been made from their benefit and, in both cases, it had required contacts with the Employment Service Jobcentre and the Benefits Agency. The respondents’ misunderstanding might have been because they had not read, or understood, letters from the Agencies (see Chapter 7).

The issue of who was responsible for sorting out a benefit payment query arose with one respondent. He had his Income Support paid directly into his bank account by Automated Credit Transfer, and had not received a payment. He telephoned the Jobcentre, who asked him to call in. When he arrived at the Jobcentre, he was informed that he should obtain a letter from his bank confirming that the payment had not been credited. In the event, he received a counter payment to cover the missing payment, and the whole process took from 10.00 am until 3.00 pm:

`... their mistake, ... yet I had to do the running around for them - why couldn't they ring the bank, get a fax ... to confirm the money wasn't paid into my account, but they didn't. I've had to go.'

(Male first timer, Area 2, 39)

Some respondents with benefit payment queries had approached the Jobcentre first. However, few queries were resolved at this initial contact, and many were referred to the Benefits Agency. Other respondents, mostly those with more experience, would directly contact the Benefits Agency, in the belief that the Agency was more likely to resolve their problems.

Those who had not experienced any difficulties with the amount of benefit imagined that if they did, it would require dealings with the Benefits Agency:

ML `Well, presumably because I'm receiving Income Support I'd have to get in touch with DSS.
I `Would anyone get in touch with the Jobcentre if they had a query about the amount of money?
ML `Well, if you did you'd probably be told to refer yourself to the DSS.'
(M1 =Male first timer (postal signer), Area 4, 18)
(M2 =Male first timer, Area 4, 26)

Under Jobseeker's Allowance, all benefit queries relating to unemployment should be dealt with at the Employment Service, either by an Employment Service member of staff or by Benefits Agency staff located at the Employment Service Jobcentre.

5.3 Seeking information Much of the information sought was in relation to receipt of Income and advice Support and has been discussed in Section 5.2 above. However, very few respondents reported approaching the Benefits Agency or the Employment Service solely to obtain information or advice. More likely, they would
combine it with other Agency business, such as attending an interview or signing on at the Employment Service Jobcentre or contacting the Benefits Agency about another matter.

5.3.1 Obtaining advice from the Employment Service

Most general enquiries would be directed initially to the Jobcentre. The reasons for this include:

- a more pleasant environment including the absence of screens;
- shorter waiting times; and
- the knowledge that the Employment Service dealt with unemployment/work-related issues.

Furthermore, as one claimant pointed out:  

_They do call themselves "client advisers"._  
(Male repeater, Area 1, 34).

Most respondents were unaware that better-off calculations could be obtained from the Employment Service. Others were reluctant to enquire about in-work benefits for a specific job, as they thought that, having shown interest in a job, they would then be obliged by the Employment Service to take it:

*Just have to apply for it, [whether it will] make you worse off or not. As soon as you show them that there's a job you can apply for, you've just got to apply for it!*  
(Male repeater, Area 4, 24)

Only one respondent reported seeking and obtaining better off calculations from a Jobcentre. Others who had not yet enquired about in-work benefits stated that they would approach a Jobcentre about these benefits, as it was commonly known that they dealt with all unemployment/work-related issues.

Some respondents said that obtaining information from the Agencies required perseverance. Staff were not always forthcoming with information. Other research examining the provision of information from advice agencies and the Benefits Agency confirms this claimant perception that Benefit Agency staff are reluctant to volunteer information (Vincent et al., 1995):

*When you do make any queries about any . . . benefits or anything that you might be due, I get the impression that they feel it's coming out of their own back pockets - they do their best to try and discourage [you] from asking for anything.*  
(Male repeater, Area 4, 22)

*... we all know that they'll not tell you anything unless you ask.*  
(Female repeater, Area 4, 20)

Ignorance of the system, particularly for inexperienced claimants, meant that they did not know which questions to ask. Several respondents said
that staff would not normally offer information unless requested. A few respondents said that they felt that even when staff were checking claim forms and it became apparent that there might be other benefits they could claim for, or that a section on the form was filled out incorrectly, the staff would not necessarily notify the claimant.

Furthermore, when information was requested, claimants were often given leaflets or booklets. Some respondents expressed a preference for information and explanations to be given verbally by staff. (This issue is discussed further in Section 9.2.)

However, not all respondents had such negative views. Others recognised the pressure that staff and the ‘system’ were under at Jobcentres. This was particularly apparent in city areas. Although the quotation below refers to the Employment Service Jobcentre, other respondents gave similar observations about the Benefits Agency:

‘... they explain as little as possible normally. I think one of the reasons is ‘cos they’re so overworked. It’s always chaotic isn’t it? The places are absolutely jam-packed with people.’ (Female repeater, Area 2, 44)

A few respondents had enquired about training courses, and if they were eligible they were given relevant information. These enquiries were usually combined with other business, for example, whilst attending a Restart interview or another appointment at the Jobcentre.

5.3.2 Obtaining advice from the Benefits Agency

Few respondents had sought advice related to their Income Support/Unemployment Benefit claim directly from the Benefits Agency. This appears to be because they were able to obtain the information they required from a Jobcentre. Of those that had sought advice or information from the Benefits Agency, most had encountered some difficulties, either with obtaining the information needed, or having to wait a considerable time in the office before being able to discuss the matter with a member of staff.

One respondent, a young female, was due to attend University and was required by a Local Authority to obtain evidence of her independent status, presumably for grant purposes. As she had been receiving Income Support since she was 16, she approached the Benefits Agency for confirmation. She was told after several telephone conversations that the information would be sent to her in the post. When she did not receive it, she telephoned again, only to be told that the information was not available. Eventually, her social worker obtained the required information from the Benefits Agency for her. On another occasion, on reaching 18, the same respondent was not informed by the Benefits Agency that she needed to contact the Employment Service to reclaim Income Support. Fortunately, she was advised to do so by a student adviser.
Waiting times were problematic at the Benefits Agency - the more complex the query, the longer the waiting time. Handing in a form, for example, could be done at reception, but other queries involved taking a ticket and waiting until called. Furthermore, appointment times which could have reduced waiting times were not always adhered to. One respondent who was making a Social Fund application whilst his Income Support claim was being processed reported waiting for over a hour and a half:

and there was only three people in that room, yet on the board [for] Customer Services, it's meant to be something like within 20 minutes of you sat down ...’ (Male repeater, Area 3, 4)

In the rural area (Area 4), respondents were less likely to contact the Benefits Agency at all because of the distance involved. Because of this distance, staff at the Employment Service Jobcentre had always been closely involved and relatively familiar with the claim process, including claim form completion and eligibility regulations. However, if there were queries that they were unable to resolve, they would usually telephone the Benefits Agency on behalf of the customer or allow him/her to use their telephone. Furthermore, they were able to deal with Social Fund applications (up until the introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance) to avoid a claimant having to visit the Benefits Agency office (over 30 miles away).

Furthermore, in Area 4, up until mid-1996 a mobile Benefits Agency bus had made weekly visits to the area. Not all of the respondents were aware of this service, particularly those new to the benefits system. However, those that were aware and had used it on occasions found it very useful. It avoided a visit to the Benefits Agency office and yet allowed face-to-face contact with a Benefits Agency member of staff, who were generally perceived to be more helpful than staff in the Benefits Agency office. Unfortunately, this service was withdrawn.

5.3.3 Obtaining advice from third parties

Friends and relatives who had experience of the benefits system proved to be a useful source of information for many respondents. Some respondents said they would discuss their situation with friends before approaching the Benefits Agency or the Employment Service with a query. Other respondents reported obtaining useful information from other claimants when waiting in the Agencies’ offices or from fellow participants on training courses. Other research has found that other claimants were also common sources of information (Vincent et al., 1995). One respondent had found out about the Jobfinders Grant from a friend who had been offered it by the Employment Service when he found work. Another respondent, new to unemployment, had found out from her friends that an Employment Service Jobcentre was the first place to go to make a claim:
from friends - the only advice I've been given about signing on and finding jobs. Somebody said you go in, you do this, you take a card, you go to the desk, but other than that I wouldn't have known..

(Female first timer, Area 1, 30)

Unemployed people perhaps do not often have the opportunity to discuss their experiences together, and casual encounters with other unemployed claimants prove useful. The group discussions themselves provided useful information for some respondents: for example, awareness of the permitted period.

A couple of respondents in the groups had received assistance from professionals’. One young female respondent (the student mentioned in Section 5.3.2) had sought assistance from her social worker when she encountered difficulties in obtaining information about her claim from the Benefits Agency. Another, who was attending a government training course, had received help from one of the trainers regarding a back injury she had which might have meant that it would be more appropriate for her to be on another benefit. One other respondent had sought free advice from a solicitor, who had obtained eligibility information from the Benefits Agency on his behalf.

Citizen’s Advice Bureaux (CABx) were mentioned in all but one of the eight group discussions as a source of information or advice. (Although, as other research has found, claimants may not distinguish CABx from other advice agencies such as Local Authority services and other independent or voluntary bodies (Vincent et al., 1995)) Whilst respondents were aware of the existence of such bodies, only a few had actually used a CAB. The reasons for its use were:

• help with form completion (albeit few sought such help);
• advice on benefit entitlement (one respondent found via the CAB that she was owed three years’ One Parent Benefit);
• ascertaining eligibility criteria (one respondent had been turned down for Unemployment Benefit because of a shortage of National Insurance contributions but had not realised he could also apply for Income Support until after a visit to his local CAB); or
• support for appealing against a Benefits Agency decision.

The advantages that CABx offered included independent advice and a wider range of information. Furthermore, they were able to act as advocates in certain situations. However, the quality of the service provided by CABx appeared to vary from area to area. In Area 2 in particular, the CAB was open at irregular hours, and was reported to be exceptionally busy.
5.4 Claiming other benefits

Many respondents in receipt of Income Support will be entitled to other benefits, such as Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, which are not administered by the Benefits Agency or the Employment Service. Furthermore, claimants may also be entitled to apply to the Social Fund for a loan or grant, which is usually administered at Benefits Agency local offices. (This will continue under the Jobseeker's Allowance regime for those aged 18 or over.)

Claim forms for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit were included with the claim form pack for Income Support. Claimants were instructed to return them to their local Benefits Agency office. Most respondents appeared to be aware that contacts regarding these benefits should be directed to the appropriate Local Authority. However, there was some evidence that a few claimants had in the first instance contacted the Benefits Agency with queries about their Housing Benefit claim and were referred on to the appropriate department. This was mostly in Area 1, where the Local Authority, Benefits Agency and Jobcentre were all located in the same vicinity, which might have caused a little confusion about the respective organisations' responsibilities.

Those respondents who had applied to the Social Fund for a grant or loan had all contacted the Benefits Agency.

One respondent had contacted the Benefits Agency about obtaining a school uniform grant for his child. After being transferred to several different departments within the Benefits Agency, he was advised to contact his Local Authority.

5.5 Overview

In all of the geographical areas, there was evidence of cross-referral from one Agency to another. This was more apparent in some areas than others and appeared to depend on the level of co-operation between the Agencies in that area, for example, whether they telephoned the Agency on behalf of the claimant, or whether they generally referred the claimant on. In one area in particular the apparent higher level of cross-referral might partly relate to the amount of short-term contract staff employed at the Employment Service, who had limited knowledge and experience of the benefits system and consequently were less likely to telephone on behalf of a claimant. In Area 1, where the Agencies were located at the same site, along with other organisations such as the Local Authority, it was not uncommon for respondents to be referred to the Benefits Agency by the Employment Service. However, one respondent recalled a Benefits Agency member of staff being available in the Employment Service for

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8 The use of casual workers in the Jobcentre and the difficulties this caused was mentioned in one of the telephone staff interviews.
assistance or queries. (This development was part of the Closer Working Initiative.) In Area 3, some respondents reported that staff would telephone the other Agency on behalf of the claimant, but only if requested.

A lack of understanding about the benefit system and whom to approach with a query might explain some cross-referrals. For example, a few respondents reported being referred to the Local Authority by the Employment Service or Benefits Agency regarding a Housing Benefit enquiry. Some of these respondents seemed to be unaware of their Local Authority’s role in administering Housing Benefit, as their contacts with the Agencies were after they had made their initial claims for benefit.

However, cross-referrals were generally limited to only two contacts. Continued referral appeared to occur only in particularly unusual or complex circumstances.

Some respondents had learnt through experience that some members of staff were more helpful than others. After a time, staff were recognisable, and respondents would attempt to direct their queries to those staff that they knew were more approachable.

Some respondents commented that reporting a change of circumstances could be more complex than making a new claim.

Whom respondents contacted about changes in circumstances or other queries, therefore, was dependent on a number of factors:

- convenience (e.g. geographical location or combining several issues at one visit, such as signing on and querying a payment);
- the respondents’ knowledge of who dealt with what; and
- the respondents’ past experience (e.g. the previous reporting of a change of circumstances leading to difficulties).

There were very few reports of respondents receiving conflicting information from the two Agencies.
The four geographical areas selected for this research were in part chosen to represent different Agency arrangements, and to establish whether the distances between Employment Service and Benefits Agency offices influences service delivery. This section considers whether or not distance was a factor in claimants’ interactions with Jobcentres and local Benefits Agency offices. It includes a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages that respondents’ perceived in the way the offices were geographically located.

Another of the research questions to be addressed was whether dealing with two Agencies had any impact on claimant motivation to leave unemployment or remain unemployed, and whether it affected the intensity of their job-search. This is considered in Section 6.5.

6.1 Area 1 - co-located In Area 1, the Employment Service Jobcentre and the Benefits Agency offices were located in the same building. In addition, other services such as the Local Authority, the Courts and a Post Office were located nearby. Respondents found the set-up favourable and could see no disadvantages to the present office arrangements. Several respondents had experience of ‘signing on’ in other areas where the Agencies had not been co-located, and they and other respondents in this area indicated that they preferred the two Agencies to be at the same location:

‘It makes it easier, if you've got to go from one building into another, instead of one . . . side of town to the other.’ (Female first timer, Area 1, 36)

6.2 Area 2 - offices within one mile Not all of the respondents in this area used the same Benefits Agency local office. Which one they contacted depended on their surname and on where they lived. However, all of the Benefits Agency local offices mentioned by the respondents were serviced by the same Benefits Agency remote processing centre. Although the majority of respondents were aware of this remote processing, one respondent who had recently moved off Unemployment Benefit on to Income Support was unaware that there was either a local or a remote Benefits Agency office - his only dealings were reported to have been with an Employment Service Jobcentre. Furthermore, another respondent was unaware that there were local Benefits Agency facilities and had only contacted the Benefits Agency local office.

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9 Remote processing offices primarily serve some inner London offices, where much of the administrative processing is done in offices outside London. There are remote processing offices in Belfast, Glasgow and Makerfield.
remote processing centre by telephoning or writing. Telephoning the remote processing centre appeared to be straightforward for most respondents - calls were charged at local rates, and the telephones appeared to be answered fairly quickly. There were also link telephones available for customer use in Benefits Agency local offices, should they wish to discuss a matter with a member of staff located in the remote processing centre. There was no charge for the use of these telephones.

6.3 Area 3 - offices As with Area 2, although all respondents used the same Jobcentre, one or between one and five two respondents reported using different Benefits Agency offices because miles of the area in which they lived. Some respondents reported that they used more than one Employment Service Jobcentre for job-search, because although the Jobcentres were in the same area they often had a different selection of vacancies.

Claimants in Area 3 also had the use of a Benefits Agency caller office which was open two days a week up until the introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance, when it was closed down. Although it was for enquiries only, some respondents had visited it and found it of use.

Most respondents did not report any problems related to the geographical location of the two offices, except for the inconvenience of travelling (both in terms of time and cost) if referred by one Agency to the other. For this reason, several respondents thought that it would be better if they were located together:

'.. `cos then if there’s any problems you can just square it up there and then instead of having to travel all over t’place, then back again.'

(Male repeater, Area 3, 12)

6.4 Area 4 - offices over The nearest Benefits Agency local office for claimants in Area 4 was five miles approximately six miles away from the Jobcentre. However, because this Benefits Agency office was in England rather than Scotland, legislative differences meant that claimants registered at a Scottish Jobcentre were obliged to use a Scottish Benefits Agency office. In this case, the relevant Benefits Agency office was located over 25 miles away. This was a source of frustration for some respondents, although others said that there should be no need to visit the Benefits Agency anyway.

The large majority of respondents had never visited the Benefits Agency, because of the distance involved and the time it would have taken to get there. Public transport was poor and expensive, with only one bus service a day so that a visit to the Benefits Agency would have taken a whole day. In addition, the Jobcentre was reported to be able to access certain information on their computer system, such as confirming a payment date, and Jobcentre staff could telephone the Benefits Agency if required. For some, the difficulty of visiting the Benefits Agency was partially alleviated
by a travelling Benefits Agency bus. (However, this service had recently been withdrawn.)

For those who had visited the Benefits Agency, the reason was always to collect an overdue payment. One respondent who had waited three weeks for her benefit, having been assured by telephone on several occasions that it would arrive in the post, eventually visited the Benefits Agency to collect the payment. The Jobcentre assisted by finding out bus times for her and paying her travelling expenses. However, another respondent said that most people, because of the distance and ‘hassle’ involved in visiting the Benefits Agency, would probably try a different option, such as borrowing the money from a friend until the payment arrived:

‘I think if there’s something . . . you want to know, something you want to query, the thought of having to go to [Benefits Agency local office] maybe makes you, you know, try a different route.’

(Female repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 27)

Many of the respondents had also used the Jobcentre in a nearby larger town across the border because it often had different vacancies on display from those at which they were registered. These respondents do not appear to have used this Jobcentre for purposes other than increasing their choice of job opportunities: for instance, for making benefit enquiries.

6.5 The Impact of The distance between the Agencies was important (see also Sections 4.3 Distance and 5.4). Those respondents served by the co-located offices in Area 1 found it advantageous and had contacts with both Agencies. Other respondents, for example in Area 3, would have preferred the Agencies to be closer together and had fewer contacts with the Benefits Agency. In Area 4, the distance to the Benefits Agency (plus the inadequacy of public transport) acted as a deterrent to visiting the Benefits Agency, and this in turn may have led to increased contacts with the Jobcentre. However, geographical distance did not appear to be an issue in Area 2, where the Benefits Agency local office was primarily a front desk only, with Income Support processing being done remotely. This is possibly because of the availability of telephones installed in the local office to enable claimants to contact the remote centre at no charge. Furthermore, private telephone calls to the centre were charged at local rates.

Distance was, therefore, a factor that could influence the respondents’ interactions with the two Agencies. Respondents typically contacted the local Employment Service Jobcentre, but levels of contact with the Benefits Agency were dependent upon the distance between the offices as well as other factors (such as having complex personal circumstances).

In all of the discussion groups the respondents said that they wanted to find employment. The research does not reveal any hard evidence that
having to deal with two Agencies impacted upon the respondents’ motivation to find work or the intensity of their job-search. This is partly because several of the respondents dealt only with the Jobcentre (cf. Section 4.3), that is, with only one Agency. Other respondents actively sought to minimise their number of contacts with the Benefits Agency. Of those dealing with both Agencies, most lived in Area 1 and/or had complex personal circumstances, did not understand fully the respective roles of the two Agencies, or preferred to deliver any forms to the Benefits Agency by hand. None of these reasons appeared to affect adversely their willingness, or the effort deployed, to find work.

Indeed, some claimants used more than one Jobcentre for their job-search purposes. However, for Benefits Agency business, they were obliged to use a specific Benefits Agency office. This could be inconvenient, particularly in Area 4 where some respondents would have appreciated being able to use a more local Benefits Agency office.
During the duration of their claim, all claimants had some kind of communication from the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency. At the very least, they received written correspondence from the Benefits Agency concerning the outcome of their claim. Other correspondence might concern changes in benefit amounts (for example, deductions or upratings) or requested information regarding a change in circumstances. Some might also have had telephone calls from the Employment Service or the Benefits Agency, perhaps seeking further information to substantiate a claim or to advise of an appointment.

This chapter explores the respondents' experience of communications from the Agencies. Section 7.1 looks at their experience of written correspondence, in particular incidences where, for various reasons, the communication was not transparent and might have resulted in unnecessary contacts with one or both of the Agencies. Respondents' experiences of telephone communications from the Agencies were rare. The Employment Service had telephoned a few respondents to let them know about vacancies (Section 7.2).

The Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime involved a considerable amount of communication between the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency. Respondents' awareness and opinion of this liaison is given in Section 7.3.

7.1 Written All respondents recalled receiving written correspondence from the Correspondence Benefits Agency. The reasons for the communications included:

- advising the outcome of a claim;
- giving a breakdown of the benefit amount (this was included with the Giro cheque);
- notifying deductions to benefit;
- notifying benefit increases or upratings; and
- confirming a change in circumstances.

Reports of receiving correspondence from the Employment Service were far fewer. Of those that did, it was mostly to advise of an appointment time, for example, for a Restart Interview, or to confirm training course arrangements. Some respondents reported receiving letters by hand when they went to sign on, although this appeared to occur only in Area 4, where correspondence from the Benefits Agency to customers was often sent via the Jobcentre:
"You don't usually get any correspondence at all from the Employment Services [sic]. Very very rare . . . unless you've got to go for an interview or something.' (Male, Area 3, 1)

Respondents said that it was generally clear whom the correspondence was from - some recalled the Benefits Agency or DSS logo on the letterhead, and others noted that there was a telephone number should there be any queries:

"there's the Social Security emblem, possibly the Unemployment Service [sic] one as well, Benefits Agency, just all in the header at the top of the page.' (Female first timer, Area 1, 30)

A few said that the letter was often from the "adjudication officer, whoever he is" (Male repeater (clerical claimant), Area 1, 35).

The frequency of correspondence from the Agencies varied. Some reported receiving letters only at the initial claim stage; others reported receiving numerous items of correspondence throughout the duration of their claim. However, the latter was more likely if there were deductions to their benefit, or changes in circumstances, such as a child reaching 18.

7.1.1 Contradictory correspondence

A number of respondents had received several letters giving contradictory information.

One respondent had been advised by letter from the Benefits Agency that her circumstances had changed, with a subsequent Benefits Agency letter saying that her circumstances had not changed. As her circumstances had in fact remained the same, she took the letters to the Jobcentre when she next went to sign on, and asked them for an explanation:

"... I said, "Can you explain this to me? What does it mean?" ... They said, "Oh, they're always doing this. Doesn't mean anything . . . throw 'em away." ' (Female repeater, Area 2, 44)

Another respondent had been told during a telephone conversation with the Benefits Agency that she would not receive full benefit because she had left her job voluntarily. She then received a letter from the Benefits Agency stating that she would be receiving full benefit:

"... of course I had to phone up and say, "Well, what's going on here? This is wrong." And they said, "Oh, that's just a standard letter we send out." ... What a waste of money in the first place - sending out a standard letter which is wrong, and you get your hopes [up] . . . because it's going to the adjudicating officer ..." ' (Female repeater, Area 4, 20)

One respondent who was an absent parent had received a letter saying there would be no deductions for child support from his Income Support.
However, he later found that deductions were being taken by the Child Support Agency, and there followed a lengthy process, initially with the Employment Service and then with the Benefits Agency, to establish why.

Another respondent described a "bizarre chain of events" including contradictory correspondence from the Benefits Agency about his benefit eligibility. After querying it, it transpired that the Employment Service had incorrectly reported him as failing to sign on, and his claim had been terminated.

A respondent who did declare part-time work whilst claiming Income Support had received contradictory letters regarding this employment on several occasions:

'I keep getting contradictory letters, 'cos they keep sending me ones 'cos I work part-time . . . saying, "Oh, we're stopping your Income Support . . ."'

She was asked whether she had ever queried these letters:

'No. I would do at first but now I just ignore the letters they send me really, 'cos I know they'll say they're stopping it, but everything's fine when I go to sign on, so I just ignore them.' (Female first timer, Area 3, 11)

Yet another respondent who had received letters from the Employment Service about appointment times was given two different times in letters signed by different people. He had not yet decided what to do, but he had presumed it was a duplicate and would probably attend the first appointment and query the second appointment then:

'. . . I get the feeling that in some instances the one hand doesn't know what the other one's doing.' (Male first timer, Area 4, 26)

A few respondents reported receiving contradictory letters at the start of a claim regarding their eligibility for benefit. However, as this and other research has indicated (Shaw et al., 1996a), this is probably because claimants were not aware, or were confused about, the two unemployment-related benefits and which one they had actually applied for (Income Support or Unemployment Benefit). They were probably confused by the receipt of separate entitlement letters for these two benefits (see Section 4.1.6):

'Every time I make a new claim they . . . send one letter saying, "You're not entitled," and then a couple of days later another one saying that I am. They do it every time.' (Male first timer, Area 3, 3)

7.1.2 Incorrect correspondence

A few respondents reported receiving correspondence from the Benefits Agency which they knew was incorrect. Some respondents chose to ignore such correspondence. For example, one respondent received a letter asking him about his part-time job, although he did not have one. He ignored
the letter until he received another one asking for the same information, so he wrote to the Benefits Agency explaining that he did not have a part-time job. Another respondent had received correspondence informing him that he was still eligible for Income Support, even though he had started work. He too chose to ignore it.

### 7.1.3 Unclear or confusing correspondence

Many respondents said that they found correspondence from the Benefits Agency difficult to read and understand. The widespread use of standardised correspondence produced automatically by computer systems has been criticised by claimants in other research (Stafford et al., 1997). These criticisms, which focus on the wording of letters and the use of jargon, were repeated by respondents in this research. Respondents in all groups said that the correspondence was generally computer generated rather than being personally directed at them. Some perceived such correspondence as akin to 'junk' mail, and this may partially explain why they were not always read thoroughly.

Others found the length of the letters off-putting. A few had learnt only to read the last few lines, which confirmed the benefit amount due:

- **M5** ‘... they’re a bit difficult to read.
- **M4** ‘I just go to the last few lines.
- **F3** ‘Yeah, there’s about half a dozen pages when really a few lines on one page would have said it all in one.’

(M5 **Male repeater, Area 1, 38**)
(M4 **Male repeater, Area 1, 34**)
(F3 **Female first timer, Area 1, 37**)

‘The wording of ... the letters is ... sometimes quite difficult, you know, even for people that are supposed to be literate it’s ... gobbledygook.’

(Female repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 27)

One respondent reported receiving a letter from the Employment Service asking her to attend an appointment, but giving no details of the purpose, other than ‘helping you get back to work’. However, she had not queried it:

‘... I have got a letter to go in next week and it’s not the normal time for me to go in and I ... just assume that it’s because I’ve been on this Jobclub Workshop or whatever, I don’t know ..

(Female repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 27)

Several respondents commented on correspondence received about a change in circumstances, but the change itself was not given or explained fully, and this could cause confusion:

‘... when they send you a letter with change in your circumstances, they never tell you what it is, and nine times out of ten I can’t think what it is either.’

(Male repeater, Area 3, 15)
However, few respondents reported querying the content of the letter. Rather, they would wait until they received their benefit and, if the amount was not as expected, they would raise the matter. Sometimes this would be when they next signed on. More likely, the query could only be resolved by contacting the Benefits Agency.

7.1.4 Unnecessary correspondence

From the perspective of the respondents, there were two types of unnecessary correspondence. The first was duplicated correspondence, and the second was correspondence that the respondent believed to be unnecessary.

Claimants often complain about the amount of duplicated correspondence that they receive from the Benefits Agency (see, for example, Stafford et al., 1997) or the Employment Service. Many respondents in this research reported receiving the same letter on more than one occasion, which they deemed as unnecessary and wasteful, particularly because most letters were usually several pages long. Indeed, identical letters could arrive on the same day in different envelopes or a couple of days apart:

`. . . that's happened to me many a time in the past, where they've sent out information for one reason or another, and then a couple of days later another letter arrives with exactly the same information, I mean that's just a waste.'

(Male repeater, Area 4, 22)

Other respondents noted that the same letter accompanied their fortnightly Giro cheque, which was thought to be unnecessary and the perceived wastefulness was resented by some.

One respondent thought that the reason for the Benefits Agency or the Employment Service sending out correspondence twice was to ensure that it was received:

`. I've often had the same form twice, bits of information. I think they do that just to make sure you get it.'

(Male repeater, Area 1, 32)

There was little evidence of the same information being received from both Agencies. However, one respondent reported receiving several letters confirming his move from Sickness Benefit to Income Support from both the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency:

`. . . when I came off the sick, I went back on to Income Support. I got a letter from [Benefits Agency] telling me exactly what I was going to get, I got a letter from [Employment Service Jobcentre] telling me exactly what I was going to get, I got another letter from [Benefits Agency], another letter from [Employment Service Jobcentre] and I got six letters in three days, all telling me basically that I was back on to Income Support and I was off the sick. Now, that to me is absolutely crazy.'

(Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 16)
Another respondent believed that he was unnecessarily advised twice of a forthcoming uprating to his benefit:

"... I think it was the beginning of February, got a letter through saying that your Income Support was going up by a princely sum of whatever it was ... then just before it happened in April, I got another one telling me exactly the same thing. You know, the waste within these government departments is just ridiculous." (Male repeater, Area 4, 22)

A few respondents said correspondence they had received was unnecessary because it only confirmed information they already knew. For example, one respondent who was continuing to sign on whilst doing temporary work had received a letter saying that he would not be eligible for Income Support during that period, which he was already aware of:

"(They] ... send you a load of paperwork saying you're not entitled to it when you know fiul well what the score is ..." (Male repeater (clerical claimant), Area 1, 35)

Some respondents were able to recall the content of regular correspondence fairly fluently:

"... it confirms their decision, on another page it tells you how much you get, how much they're going to stop off you and how much you're going to have left. ... Then it's got . . . about the appeal, and then it says, on another sheet of paper it tells you if you wanted to let them know any changes. It's the same." (Female first timer, Area 1, 36)

7.2 Telephone Few respondents reported receiving telephone calls from the Benefits communication Agency or the Employment Service. In Area 4, however, a couple had received a telephone call from the Employment Service advising them of a possible suitable job vacancy, which was appreciated:

"... it was just that this job came up and she wondered if I'd applied for it ... thought I was suitable. I was quite pleased .." (Male repeater, Area 4, 24)

One or two respondents in Area 3 also reported that the Employment Service had telephoned them on occasion to advise of an interview appointment. A few other respondents, notably those who had particularly complex circumstances had received calls from Benefits Agency staff.

7.3 Communication Respondent recall was more likely to focus on breakdown or failure in between the Employment communication between the two Agencies than on those occasions when Service and the Benefits it had been effective. Indeed, effective communication was less likely to be Agency apparent to claimants because the piece of business was processed efficiently.
Some respondents reported specific incidents of breakdown in communication between the two Agencies. One woman, for example, was told by the Benefits Agency that her first Giro cheque would be available for collection from the Employment Service, but it was not when she arrived to collect it, as it had been sent by post to her home address. Another example, cited earlier in this report, concerned the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service’s apparent disagreement over whether a claimant should be receiving Income Support or Unemployment Benefit, which involved the claimant liaising between the two Agencies in an attempt to get the matter rectified.

Other respondents said that they thought communication between the two Agencies was poor. However, respondents in Area 4 perceived the liaison between the two Agencies as fairly reasonable, with information they had given to one Agency filtering through to the other:

M2 'It seems to be reasonable.
M5 'It must happen 'cos they seem to know what you're doing.'

(M2 = Male first timer, Area 4, 26)
(M5 = Male repeater, Area 4, 22)

7.4 Overview Customers' understanding of the content of the correspondence they receive from an Agency could impact on the contacts they have with an Agency. For example, if correspondence was not read or understood, further contacts might be necessary, and these will be either initiated by the claimant (for example, seeking a further explanation) or by the Agency (for example, further requests for information not provided after earlier correspondence). Therefore, it is important that claimants are aware of the source of the correspondence, and what meaning or purpose it serves. Whilst in recent years there have been improvements in the standardised correspondence used by the Agencies, it appears that it still provoked a great deal of confusion amongst some of the respondents in this study.

Respondents were generally aware of whom to contact if they had queries with regard to the content of the correspondence.

On the other hand, many respondents said they did not find the correspondence overly confusing, but then again, many of these respondents did not read the letters in any great detail, focusing instead on the last few lines which gave the amount of benefit payable. Those that did require further explanation of either Agency's correspondence tended to query it at their next signing on appointment, or telephoned the number on the headed sheet. Others would wait until they received their benefit, and if the amount was not as they expected, they would take the matter up with the Employment Service or more commonly with the Benefits Agency.
Many respondents seemed to resent the amount of paper used because of lengthy and duplicated correspondence. A few respondents believed they had received unnecessary correspondence.

There was no evidence of communications with third parties (such as advice agencies or other bodies) affecting claimants’ interface with the Employment Service or Benefits Agency.

There was no distinct pattern to those situations where one Agency had telephoned the other on behalf of the claimant, although the propensity to do so appeared to be higher in Area 4, probably because of the considerable distance between the Jobcentre and the local Benefits Agency office. Some respondents said that staff were usually willing to telephone the other Agency on their behalf, but others reported that this service had never been offered to them. Respondents reporting the latter were more likely to be from Area 2 and, to a lesser extent, Area 3. This might be because of higher volumes of traffic and busier offices.
One of the research questions to be addressed in this study was whether dealing with two Agencies affected claimant motivation to leave unemployment. As Chapter 6 reports, having to deal with two Agencies did not appear to have a detrimental effect on leaving unemployment or on the intensity of claimant job-search. Yet, there were some other factors which did appear to affect movement off Income Support/Unemployment Benefit, and these are briefly considered below. There are, however, other bodies of research that examine these issues in more detail (see, for example, Shaw et al., 1996a, 1996b).

This chapter begins by examining briefly the respondents' opinions of the help they received from the Employment Service (Section 8.1), including support given in finding training and job-search opportunities. Other factors which may affect movement into employment are included in the overview in Section 8.2.

8.1 Help from the Employment Service

One of the main functions of the Employment Service is to offer unemployed people help and advice in finding work or appropriate training.

Although a few respondents gave negative opinions of the service offered by staff, the majority of respondents observed that staff at the Employment Service were fairly helpful and could offer useful advice. Nevertheless, Jobcentres in inner city areas were reported to be extremely busy, and consequently a few respondents said that staff were unable to spend much time providing job-search advice or assistance.

Furthermore, it was recognised by some that no matter how much help was received, the difficulty of obtaining employment remained:

'... perhaps I've been lucky, but they've always been really helpful in interviews and that for me, but I've still been unemployed for over a year. I still haven't got a job.' (Female first timer, Area 1, 37)

Some commented that the Back-to-Work Plan (initially drawn up at the New Claim Interview) did not aid job-search, as it was often generic and the actions proposed could not be verified. Indeed, it appeared that in some areas, particularly where there were limited employment opportunities, claimants’ plans could be very similar:

'... I would imagine everyone in the area has got the same Back-to-Work Plan.' (Male repeater (postal signer) Area 4, 21)
Many respondents commented unfavourably on the range of job vacancies displayed at Jobcentres. Common complaints included the same jobs being displayed for many weeks, low rates of pay and a poor selection of vacancies. One respondent, whose Back-to-Work Plan dictated that she should visit the Jobcentre three times a week, typified others as she only searched for a job at the Jobcentre when she went to sign on:

‘... I use the Jobcentre once a fortnight ... There's nothing there, you know what I mean? I find if I go in a couple of times a week, everything’s still the same ...’

(Female first timer, Area 1, 37)

As reported in Chapter 4, the process of claiming was perceived by many as straightforward. However, a couple of respondents said that reclaiming after a short period of temporary employment could act as a disincentive (see Section 5.1.2):

‘... a nightmare, because you'd have to sign off ... If you actually got a job for a couple of weeks, you still have to sign off and sign back on and go through all that great heap of stuff again: the B1, the housing benefit, council tax, all the different forms and the waiting for it to click back in again.’

(Female repeater, Area 2, 44)

Furthermore, respondents questioned the reason for going through the entire new claims process again, when they knew that the Agencies still retained the relevant information on their computer system. For smaller amounts (that is, equivalent to or nominally higher than the disregarded earnings or hours), most respondents said that they would not report the earnings for fears of delays or reductions to benefit. A few respondents had learnt to their cost that such reporting could lead to considerable financial loss (cf. Section 5.1.2).

In moving from benefit to full-time paid employment claimants could experience a period of little or no income for the first few weeks. This was mentioned as a concern by a couple of respondents. In one group, a woman who had secured a job to begin the following month was advised of the new Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Extended Payments Scheme by another respondent, who had read about it in an Employment Service leaflet. Other respondents appeared to be unaware of the scheme, which was introduced in April 1996, to extend payments for the first four weeks of employment, in order to assist the transition from benefit to work.

8.1.1 Training and job-search schemes

There was a widespread lack of knowledge about what courses or job-search schemes were available, and respondents frequently mixed up terms such as Jobclub, Job-search Seminars, Jobplan Workshops and so forth. Therefore, this section gives the respondents’ overall opinions and experiences unless otherwise stated:
The most favourable comments came from respondents who had requested to go on a course or scheme. These and other respondents would have appreciated earlier access to them, rather than having to wait until they had been unemployed for six months:

I  'What about advice about looking for work?'

M6  'Well, they don't give you straight away, they'll wait six months and then you go to a Back-to-Work Interview, and they tell you quite a bit there . . . When I first signed on they don't really go through it at all.'

(Male repeater, Area 1, 33)

most of the help you get, you've got to be unemployed for six months, and I think they should get rid of that because, basically, you don't want a job in six months' time, you want a job now.'

(Male repeater, Area 3, 2)

Training  The quality of training appeared to vary from area to area, and opinions about its usefulness varied from group to group and individual to individual. Those respondents who were most favourable about the courses were generally the ones who had requested to go on specific courses, some of which had been denied because they had to wait until they had been registered as unemployed for six months.

Other respondents said that many of the training courses were inappropriate because of the level of training provided compared to the individual's personal characteristics, such as age or (basic) skills:

'They're all right if you're a complete idiot.'

(Male repeater (clerical claimant), Area 1, 35)

In one group, respondents had conflicting views about the training offered in their area (Area 4). One respondent, a 57-year-old man, felt that courses advising him on how to conduct himself in an interview were inappropriate. However, others in the group had found the courses useful:

you need motivation . . . You need people there to interact with . . . people that are having the same difficulties as you to discuss it with . . . I found it quite valuable.'

(Female repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 27)

A couple of respondents commented that the 'system' did not appear geared towards enabling unemployed people to improve their prospects by undertaking further education:

'They claim, don't they, that they want a better educated workforce, but also you've to be looking for work all t'time you're doing it . . . I think they ought to give people that are trying to get a better education more time to do it, and less hassle whilst they're doing it.'

(Male first timer, Area 3, 13)
Some respondents had undertaken Training for Work, gaining experience in employment whilst earning an extra 10 on top of their benefit. In one group in Area 3, participants had found it a demoralising experience, partly because of the attitudes of others, and partly because the costs incurred whilst working on, for example, child care, travelling and/or lunch, meant that they were financially worse off:

`... it was degrading, and the attitude of people there, because someone comes in who's on the dole, in an open plan office, you know, it just doesn't work ... It's good for your c.v.... I have got a good reference from them ... but it still made me feel terrible at the end. In fact, if anything I had less confidence when I left!'  
(Female first timer (clerical claimant), Area 3, 9)

Job-search schemes  
Only one respondent in this research mentioned the Jobfinders Grant (although not by name), and its use as an incentive to obtaining employment. He had been told about it by a fellow Income Support claimant, who had been informed by an Employment Service Adviser. Other members of the group were not aware of the Jobfinder's Grant, but felt that such information should be more generally available:

`Well, they should tell people that, if that's what they're doing [Employment Service], then its an incentive to try and get a permanent job, isn't it?'
(Male repeater, Area 1, 38)

Very few respondents were aware of the Work Trial scheme, whereby if a claimant who had been unemployed for six months or more took a job which then did not work out, the Employment Service could allow him/her to reclaim benefit without having sanctions imposed for leaving the job voluntarily:

`If people knew that, I'm sure they'd be a lot more willing to try jobs.'
(Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)

This scheme could have benefited respondents in several of the groups who had raised concerns about taking employment when, if it did not work out, they could face sanctions for leaving the job voluntarily.

The cost of job-search was mentioned by a few respondents. Those who were aware of and had used the Travel-to-Interview Scheme had found it beneficial, particularly those living in Area 4, where claimants were perhaps more likely to have to travel further than those in the other areas:

`... it's looking for work and paying bus fares ... makes you come unstuck at the end of the week.'
(Male repeater, Area 2, 42)

`Looking for work can be quite expensive as well. I mean, you might have to use bus fares, or telephones or stamps, things like this. It can be expensive.'
(Male repeater, Area 3, 15)
Most respondents were aware of Jobclubs. Those that had used them generally found their services useful, in particular the use of the telephone, postage stamps, and curriculum vitae-compiling and printing facilities.

To make use of the services available, one respondent had tried to gain access to a Jobclub before reaching the six-month eligibility period:

'I say to them [Employment Service Jobcentre], well, "I need a new c. v. because I have to put on what my recent work's been." I said, "Can you help me out with that?" They said, "Oh no. You have to go to the Jobclub." Well, of course, I can't go to the Jobclub because you have to be unemployed for six months. Well, how can I apply for jobs if I've not got the right c.v. . . . what do you do?'

(Female repeater, Area 4, 20)

8.2 Overview All respondents reported wanting to move into employment and away from receipt of benefits. The reasons are perhaps obvious, but include disliking unemployment and the stigma attached to it, wanting to better their income, and a desire to feel part of society and improve their self-worth.

As well as the factors identified in Section 7.1 above, there were others that were identified as increasing the difficulty of finding employment. These included labour market factors, such as increased insecure and part-time employment, a lack of employment to match their skills and expertise: and low pay:

'I think full-time employment is a bit optimistic 'cos 70 per cent of all the new jobs now are part-time, aren't they?' (Female first timer, Area 4, 17)

In Area 4 in particular, there appeared to be a shortage of any type of work due to the lack of economic development within the area:

... I suppose the answer to that is "Well, you move out the area," but if you haven't got a job, you haven't got any money. You can't move to another place, can ya?' (Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)

Many respondents said that finding employment that paid sufficiently to be better off than when unemployed was difficult, and the worry of being worse off in employment was apparent. One respondent had learnt by experience - he had taken a job as a security guard for which he was paid L1.60 an hour, and had found he had less money to live on than when unemployed. Claimants in this or similar situations may benefit from the new Earnings Top-Up scheme, currently being piloted in eight locations, which is similar to Family Credit but aimed at those without dependants. Family Credit was mentioned by a few, although one respondent was concerned that this in-work benefit could encourage employers to pay low wages.
In the main, however, it was recognised that although the Employment Service were able to provide assistance, advice and help in various forms, the ultimate goal of obtaining full-time employment could not easily be attained. The individual was seen by some respondents as having the prime responsibility for finding employment:

*M6* `But we’ve all been out of work for so many months, haven’t we? [general agreement] And who can really . . . honestly say that anybody’s helped you?`

*F4* ‘... I think it is one of the few things that you’re best to do on your own, is find a job. Nobody can find a job for you.’  

(M6 = Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 16)  
(F4 = Female repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 27)

Therefore, although dealing with two Agencies did not appear to be a factor in movement in or out of employment, there were many other issues that were. Some of these have now been addressed by recent government policies as indicated above. However, further areas are identified, including the perceived ‘hassle’ of reclaiming after short periods of employment, which may deter some people from taking up some job opportunities. Furthermore, it appears that as many of the respondents did not know about the full range of schemes and assistance available, there is a need for increased awareness. This is a theme which is taken up in the next chapter.
In recent years a number of changes in the services to unemployed people have been introduced. The introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance represents a major change, and has redefined the nature of the service delivered to claimants. One of the objectives of Jobseeker’s Allowance is to improve the delivery of services to unemployed people by providing a one-stop service at Employment Service Jobcentres and additional job-search support.

The respondents’ experiences of changes in service delivery prior to the introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance are considered in Section 9.1, and how the service might be further improved is covered in Section 9.2. Finally, the respondents’ awareness and understanding of the changes to be brought about by the introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance are outlined in Section 9.3.

9.1 Recent changes Some of the respondents had claimed unemployment-related benefits several times over a number of years, and they were asked to comment on recent changes in the delivery of the service. Generally, the respondents said that the delivery of services had improved. Only one respondent observed that there had been no change, and another that things had got worse. The latter respondent was also very pessimistic about the introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance and this may have influenced his perception.

Amongst those respondents who identified an improvement in service delivery, there was a consensus that the office environment in both Agencies had improved. There was a genuine appreciation of recent investment in buildings, fittings and furniture:

‘... the offices are actually now much better than they used to be. They used to be really dismal, horrible places but now, you know, they’ve got comfortable chairs and pipe music coming out and it’s a bit more bearable.’

(Male repeater, Area 1, 32)

(Although one respondent commented that Benefits Agency was a still ‘a real horrible place’.)

In Areas 2 and 4, some respondents commented on the changing role of the Employment Service. The demise of the Unemployment Benefit Office and the merging of signing facilities and job advertisements at one site, the Jobcentre, was mentioned:
Where you signed on was somewhere totally different from where you went to look for a job and now they're kind of interlinked.

(Male repeater, Area 1, 32)

In addition, a few respondents noted changes in the forms and procedures of the Agencies. As already mentioned in Chapter 4 some respondents had observed that the design of the claim forms had improved:

'... the forms are a little bit better, I think, seem a bit easier.'

(Male repeater, Area 1, 38)

There also seemed to be less waiting or queuing by respondents when visiting or telephoning Jobcentres.

Others observed that nowadays they were asked more questions about their job-search behaviour. One respondent had been advised to keep a record of what she was doing to find work, because the Employment Service Jobcentre staff would check.

A couple of respondents in Area 1 thought that the local service was more efficient:

Much more efficient than it used to be.

(Female first timer, Area 1, 37)

This might be because the Agencies’ offices were co-located and changes had been made under the Closer Working Initiative.

9.2 Suggested Towards the end of the group discussions, respondents were asked to suggest improvements to the delivery of services to unemployed people. Respondents’ suggestions were not Agency-specific but concerned the delivery of services in general for unemployed people:

• more and better information;
• more front-line staff; and
• more help with job-search.

Obtaining more accessible and detailed information on both benefits and job/training initiatives was seen in all of the groups as of critical importance. There was a feeling that staff presumed that claimants knew about benefit entitlement, the claiming process and the various employment initiatives available:

[They]... don't say nothing that will help you ... You've got to find out, unless you know someone who knows something, you don't know nothing ...

(Male repeater, Area 4, 22)

Although the respondents were acutely aware of their lack of knowledge, they wanted the two Agencies, in particular the Employment Service
Jobcentre, to take more responsibility for providing information. More specifically they wanted:

- more information on display;
- giving first-timers advice on the claiming process; and
- more staff to help people complete claim forms.

A few respondents wanted to be able to obtain the required information directly from a member of staff:

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... they could do with somebody to sit there to tell you the information as you need it not like, say, "There's a leaflet in that corner there. Read that."...
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(Female repeater, Area 4, 23)

Those respondents who wanted a 'job matching' service, whereby claimants' skills and expertise are matched to job vacancies may find that this will be possible with the introduction of the new LMS computer system in Employment Service Jobcentres.

9.3 Jobseeker's Allowance

This study was conducted to explore the experience of dealing with two Agencies, pre Jobseeker's Allowance, for those in receipt of either Income Support on the grounds of unemployment or a combination of Income Support and Unemployment Benefit. Some of the respondents were, however, aware of the imminent introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance, and the discussion groups provided an opportunity to capture information on awareness and early expectations of Jobseeker’s Allowance.

The respondents' knowledge about Jobseeker's Allowance varied from being totally unaware of its introduction to being knowledgeable about an aspect of the new benefit regime. That some respondents were oblivious to Jobseeker's Allowance is slightly surprising because there had been some industrial action by staff connected with the introduction of the new benefit around the time of the fieldwork. On the other hand, several respondents raised issues relating to the introduction of Jobseeker's Allowance without being prompted by the facilitators.

It is possible that the respondents' variable knowledge about the forthcoming changes reflects, in part, differences in the dissemination of information by Jobcentres. In Areas 1 and 3 booklets had been handed out to some, but not all, respondents, whilst in Area 4 there were not even leaflets available about Jobseeker’s Allowance. One respondent was told about Jobseeker’s Allowance at his last Restart Interview, others, when signing on, had been advised to keep copies of correspondence with employers in preparation for Jobseeker’s Allowance. Those respondents who had asked staff about Jobseeker's Allowance found that they could only offer limited advice or were unable to answer the respondents' questions.
Those respondents that knew about the introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance universally saw the introduction of the benefit in negative terms:

‘It doesn’t sound as though it’s going to be a change for the better.’

(Male first timer (postal signer), Area 4, 18)

There was general agreement that under Jobseeker’s Allowance:

• job-searching had to be carried out more intensively than at present:

‘...they were gonna turn it more into a full-time job looking for a job, than what it is now...’

(Male repeater, Area 4, 24)

However, there was a belief that there was a shortage of jobs and consequently there could be diminishing returns to any increased job-searching:

‘No. I think it’s crummy to be honest ’cos I mean if the jobs are nae there, you’re just irritating employers by sending them letters.’

(Male repeater, Area 4, 24)

• claimants will require more proof of their job-searching, and that those without sufficient evidence may face a cut in their benefit. For one respondent this raised an issue about the status of self-reported evidence where prospective employers do not reply to letters. Another respondent saw it as a more discretionary scheme, believing that claimants who annoy staff could be sanctioned. There was much anxiety about possible reductions in benefit because of inadequate job-searching behaviour;

• that claimants will be coerced into unsuitable employment, where ‘unsuitable’ was defined in terms of low pay rates and possible psychological damage:

‘...people are gonna be just having to take jobs that are completely wrong for them and just end up with having a horrible job, dreading getting up in the morning and going to work and working for a bad wage...and just wearing people down.’

(Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)

and

• there could be trouble, even violence, in Jobcentres and that as a result screens, like those used in local Benefits Agency offices, would have to be installed.

In addition, there was some confusion amongst a few respondents about the number of hours a claimant could attend college before benefit would be affected. Their estimates ranged from 12 to 24 hours per week. Another respondent had been told her postal signing would end, and that she would have to sign fortnightly and would not receive any travelling
expenses, whilst another understood that his benefit would be reduced because of his partner’s earnings from part-time employment.

The overall impression is that recent developments in service provision were warmly welcomed, but that there was some trepidation surrounding the introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance.
Both Unemployment Benefit and Income Support for the unemployed required that, as well as being available for work, claimants should be actively seeking work. This section explores claimants’ understanding of the rules, responsibilities and obligations attached to benefit receipt. The subject of conditionality has, however, been explored more fully by another qualitative pre-Jobseeker’s Allowance study conducted by Cragg Ross Dawson and published in Spring 1997. In addition, there is another qualitative study, conducted by the CRSP, on the sanctions regime. Respondents’ awareness and understanding of both conditionality and sanctions was therefore not explored in depth in the group discussions and the chapter below provides limited evidence only.

This chapter begins by examining the respondents’ understanding and opinion of actively seeking employment and being ‘available’ for work (Section 10.1 and 10.2). Section 10.3 explores their knowledge of the purpose of ‘signing on’. Respondents were generally aware that if they were deemed not to be complying with the criteria, then they risked having benefits reduced or denied. Their views on sanctions are discussed in Section 10.4. Finally, Section 10.5 discusses what impact ‘conditionality’ has had, or may have, on the respondents’ behaviour.

Most respondents knew that there were conditions attached to eligibility for unemployment-related benefits and believed that the imposition of such conditions was acceptable. There was general consensus that if people were not prepared or willing to seek and obtain employment, then they should be denied unemployment-related benefits:

\[ F4 \text{ ‘.. I do think that people should look for work and if they don't think that you're looking for it they should reduce your benefit.'} \]
\[ M7 \text{ ‘think it's the people that aren't genuinely looking for work that give the rest of us a bad name, to be honest.'} \]
\[ M6 \text{ ‘That's true (all agreeing)’} \]

\( (F4 \text{‘Female first timer, Area 3, 11}) \)
\( (M7 \text{‘Male repeater, Area 3, 15}) \)
\( (M6 \text{‘Male first timer, Area 3, 13}) \)

However, some of the conditions imposed were thought not to aid movement into employment, and there was some resentment towards the regulations, particularly from those who had a previous lengthy employment history.
Unemployed claimants were expected to take ‘reasonable steps’ to seek work actively every week. These steps might include making job applications, checking newspapers, checking the display boards at Jobcentres and so forth.

There were differing reports of what could be deemed as ‘actively seeking work’. For example, some respondents had been told that they should apply for a specified number of jobs per week or fortnight (usually around two or three a week):

‘.. if you’re applying for at least two every fortnight, I think it is, then they can’t . . . say anything about it, but any less than that, they could moan, like, if they wanted to.’ *(Male first timer, Area 3, 13)*

Those that had been told to apply for a certain amount did not perceive it to be helpful in their search for work, because it could mean that they were applying for unsuitable or inappropriate jobs. For example, in Area 4, respondents in both groups expressed the opinion that there were insufficient numbers of suitable vacancies in the (rural) locality to fulfil these obligations:

‘.. you end up applying for jobs that you’re not suitable for so the employers receive letters . . . for a brain surgeon and they’ve got a dustman applying for it, and they think, “Why on earth’s he applying for this job?” Well, he’s been told to by the Jobcentre.’ *(Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)*

Another respondent, in a different area, also highlighted the difficulty of fulfilling the obligations when there were limited opportunities:

‘. . . it’s the philosophy. It’s not like the ’50s and ’60s when we’d no need to bother about looking for work; we knew we could get another job next day . . . They’re sending you out for . . . the mythical job out there, hoping that somehow you will get one and get them off the unemployment register . . .’ *(Male, Area 3, 1)*

During their period of unemployment, claimants were advised to keep records of job-search activities, which might be requested by staff at Employment Service Jobcentre review interviews and at ‘signing on’ appointments. Several respondents were aware that if an up-to-date record could not be produced then there was a risk of further questioning or even sanctions being imposed. However, the frequency and regularity of requirements to produce such evidence was unclear to most respondents:

‘Sometimes they don’t actually ask you for it . . . They’re meant to, but sometimes they don’t. So you might go there maybe twice to sign on, and no-one will ask you for the green form. And the week you go the following time and don’t take your green form, they’ll ask you for it, and then they’ll say, “Well because you haven’t shown it to us now, if you don’t bring it the next time then we’ll have to stop your money.” . . . The whole of this year I’ve been signing on now, they’ve only actually asked me for my green form twice . . .’ *(Male first timer, Area 2, 43)*
A few respondents had attended interviews or reviews at an Employment Service Jobcentre, where they expected to be asked to produce evidence and had taken their records with them, but in the event the information had not been requested by staff. This might have led to confusion over how often and at what point(s) during a claim a claimant was expected to produce this information.

10.2 Being ‘available’ for To claim unemployment-related benefits, a person had also to be ‘available work for work’. This included being able to accept immediately an offer of suitable employment (apart from certain cases, such as when child care needed to be arranged). Being ‘available for work’ also applied to the nature of the employment sought. Employment offers could be refused by an unemployed claimant only with ‘good cause’. However, for up to 13 weeks of a new claim (known as the ‘permitted period’), a claimant might restrict their employment search to a specific job, usually defined as a ‘normal occupation’. After this, claimants were expected to make themselves available for all types of work which they could reasonably be expected to do. Being ‘available for work’ also referred to not placing certain restrictions on, for example, the conditions of employment such as hours of work and rate of pay sought.

Most respondents appeared to define the term ‘available for work’ narrowly, that is, being free to take up work at short notice and not being in any other employment. They were, however, also of the opinion that they were expected to take ‘any’ work.

Several respondents said that being ‘available for work’ also applied whilst undertaking a training course:

‘I was told that if a job interview came up on a day that you were supposed to be doing your course, you would have to do it and . . . when you fill in the times that you’re available for work, you’re not allowed to . . . leave out the college times, because otherwise they’ll stop your benefit ..

(Female first timer, Area 1, 37)

Many respondents were unaware or unclear about the 13-week permitted period, during which they could refuse work that was not within their normal field. Some had not been informed, and others were unsure of the length of the permitted period:

‘I’ve just finished university after four years surviving on a grant . . . and now I’m looking for something which I’ve been training for - if something doesn't come up in the next six months I'm assuming they're going to say, "Right, go and look for something else," but I'd rather go into something that I've just done all my studies for.’

(Female first timer, Area 1, 30)

A few respondents believed that the regulations for being ‘available for work’ could be taken to extremes. One respondent had been asked by the
Employment Service Jobcentre whether he would be available for work on the day that he was travelling to an interview some considerable miles away. Another, who had a family tragedy and had to travel south to visit a hospital and attend a funeral had been obliged to give staff a telephone number and address to ensure that she would be available for work whilst there (see also Section 5.1.1).

10.3 Signing on

Most unemployed claimants were required to sign on at an Employment Service Jobcentre every fortnight. They were usually given a ‘signing on’ day and time when they were expected to attend. Before the introduction of Jobseeker’s Allowance, ‘active’ signing was introduced in some areas, which gave signing clerks a more positive role in the signing process. They checked that the claimant had been following their Back-to-Work Plan, attending interviews, and so on.

Respondents were asked about their experiences of the signing procedure, including the reasons they believed lay behind this requirement. For most respondents, signing on appeared to be a habitual process which had little purpose attached to it, other than to confirm that they had not done any work in the previous fortnight:

I . . . is there then anything you have to do to make sure that you carry on getting the benefit?

M Just keep signing on every two weeks.

I And what happens when you sign on . . .?

M ‘Sometimes they ask you, ‘Have you worked in the last two weeks?’ and things like that . . . not all the time.’

(Male repeater, Area 1, 32)

Procedures appeared to vary from office to office, and in some cases from one individual to another. In some groups, respondents reported being asked on occasion to produce the ‘green form’ (that is, the Back-to-Work Plan) which included evidence of job-search and jobs applied for. In another group, respondents reported that they were generally only asked whether they had worked at all during the previous fortnight.

Only one respondent appeared to have previously questioned the reason for ‘signing on’ and, referring to the declaration claimants sign, stated:

‘. . . have you ever read that? ’Cos technically they can force you to go out and work shovelling snow off t’road in winter and you can’t say, “No” . . . Technically they can get you to do any job they want, if they really wanted to, and that declaration you’ve signed, saying that you agree to do it!’

(Male first timer, Area 3, 13)

It might be that the reasons for signing on had never been clearly explained to respondents, or that the procedure had become a routine part of being unemployed and its purpose was rarely questioned. Either way, it
would appear that the respondents needed more information about the purpose of signing.

Under Jobseeker's Allowance, all claimants will undergo a form of active signing, likely to take the form of a short interview, to review jobseeking activity in the previous fortnight. More time will be available to staff to enable them to gain a fuller picture of the steps the claimant is taking to find work by reviewing their activities in the previous fortnight.

10.4 Sanctions If it was deemed that a claimant did not fulfil the conditionality requirements, then entitlement to benefit could be disallowed or benefit could be reduced.

The large majority of respondents were aware that sanctions could be imposed:

`You risk getting your benefit cut. You just get dragged straight through the coals and made to feel this big . . . They just make you feel totally inadequate. You end up, "OK. I'm really sorry . . . God, dunny cut off my benefit." You just end up saying you kind of agreeing with them and promising you'll make a harder effort to find a job . . ."  
(Male repeater, Area 4, 24)

However, no respondents in the groups reported having had sanctions imposed for not complying with the requirements. Although there were a couple of respondents who had had reduced benefit for a period because they had left (unsuitable) employment voluntarily. A few respondents had also left training schemes because of their unsuitability and expected as a consequence to be sanctioned, but were not.

10.5 Effect on behaviour It appears that those who were new to the system and were perhaps experiencing their first period of unemployment were more likely to comply with the requirements, even if they questioned some of the obligations. Others, who had more experience of claiming, were more likely to comply by playing the system, for example, giving answers they knew would be acceptable, even though their replies did not exactly match their actions:

`Well, you've got to do it - there's no other way is there? You've got to follow the procedures. If you don't, you don't get benefit.  
(Female repeater, Area 4, 20)

`. . . they always ask you what methods you have used for looking for work. It starts to get routine after a while, 'cos you know what to say - word of mouth, Jobcentres and things like that . . . Yeah, you've got to play the game . . . 'cos I've been at college for two years as well, but you've got to say that you're willing to work. You've got to say that you're willing to take any job that comes along . . .'

(Male repeater, Area 1, 32)
Other examples of not fully complying with the criteria and reported in Section 5.1.1 included not reporting temporary absences. The reasons for not reporting these and other minor non-compliances were primarily related to past experiences of benefits being cut or delayed. Therefore, such non-compliance was because of fears of loss of, or delays to, benefit payments, rather than a deliberate attempt at gaining benefits illicitly.

Some respondents felt that they were often distrusted by staff, who could be suspicious of their activities. A few respondents reported feeling uncomfortable entering the Jobcentre with, for example, muddy hands from gardening, which could imply that they were working. Another example came from one respondent who had taken to occasional early morning fishing. When he had attended his signing appointment after one such occasion, he was rigorously questioned about how much time he was spending fishing and whether he should have been looking for work. Other respondents appeared to resent having to prove that they were looking for work:

`. . . I was on over L300 a week. I'm reduced down now to L74 summat for me and me wife to live on, so obviously I'm looking for work.'

(Male repeater, Area 3, 7)

`. . . just 'cos you're unemployed doesn't mean you're sitting around the house all day, which I think, a lot of people in some of the offices, they think that if they phone you and you don't answer the phone, "Well, what are you doing? You haven't got a job."'

(Male repeater (postal signer), Area 4, 21)

10.6 Overview

Most respondents were aware that eligibility for unemployment-related benefits was dependent on them being able to demonstrate that they were actively seeking, and available for, work. They did what they thought was necessary to avoid any benefit reductions or disallowances. This includes those who complied with the system, keeping systematic records and those who had learnt how to `play the system', for example, by not informing the Jobcentre of short periods of unavailability. Furthermore, most respondents emphasised the importance of accuracy when completing claim forms, to ensure that they were not inadvertently making their eligibility open to question.

Most respondents, therefore, were aware of the penalties that might be imposed for refusing to comply with the conditions. However, some aspects, such as refusing to accept a job without `good cause', were less clear. Interpretation of what constituted a `good cause' appeared to vary between individuals and between claimants and staff:

`. . . if there was one set fast rule that you all knew what you were going to meet when you go in there, that's fine, but you don't. You get all these contradictory people coming at you from different directions.'

(Male repeater, Area 4, 22)
Furthermore, respondents would welcome a more individual, flexible system to take into account personal domestic and financial circumstances.

Nevertheless, the research shows that there is a need to provide claimants with detailed and specific information about their obligations to find employment. Although this is made difficult if claimants do not read leaflets and correspondence (see Section 7.1.3).
II CONCLUSIONS

This report has examined claimants’ experiences of dealings with the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency under the Income Support and Unemployment Benefit regime for unemployed people.

Specifically, it has considered their understanding and experiences of

- the organisations and benefits involved;
- specific contacts with the Agencies including:
  - making a new claim;
  - reporting changes of circumstances;
  - benefit payment queries;
  - seeking information, help or advice;
- the impact of dealing with two offices;
- communications (primarily written correspondence);
- factors that impact on movement into employment;
- improvements in service delivery; and
- the conditionality inherent in receipt of unemployment-related benefits.

This chapter examines the implications of the findings for Jobseeker’s Allowance, in particular issues relating to:

- the change in benefit (Section 11.1);
- the New Claims Process (Section 11.2);
- changes in circumstances (Section 11.3);
- seeking information (Section 11.4);
- correspondence (Section 11.5); and
- job-search (Section 11.6).

The respondents believed that the Benefits Agency dealt with ‘money matters’ and the Jobcentre with employment matters. Under the Jobseeker’s Allowance regime, all such matters will be dealt with in one place - the Jobcentre. To avoid claimants unnecessarily contacting the Benefits Agency local office, they will need to be fully and widely informed of the new system and staffing arrangements. This will require claimants to change their understanding about the Agencies’ roles.

Respondents indicated that co-located offices were preferable, and the location of processing and administration of Jobseeker’s Allowance alongside job-search facilities will be appreciated.

11.1 Issues relating to the Jobseeker’s Allowance replaces Unemployment Benefit and Income change in benefit Support for unemployed people, so claimants need only deal with the Employment Service with queries about their benefit. There will be one
set of rules for unemployed people rather than two, and one claim form as opposed to two. This change should ensure that claimants are clearer about what they are applying for, and whom to contact with queries.

The respondents were confused over the roles of each Agency, and this may be lessened as claimants deal with staff in only one location under the Jobseeker's Allowance regime. However, there is still scope for confusion with regard to contributory and means-tested Jobseeker’s Allowance. If claimants were confused about the differences when each has a different name (i.e. Income Support and Unemployment Benefit), they are likely to be even more confused when both components have the same name. This may have implications for the unnecessary reporting of changes in circumstances for recipients of contributory Jobseeker’s Allowance and, conversely, the non-reporting of changes in circumstances for those in receipt of means-tested Jobseeker’s Allowance, for example.

11.2 Issues relating to the new claim process

Making a claim was reported to be fairly straightforward and unproblematic for most respondents, although it could at times be a lengthy procedure. However, those that did experience difficulties included some claimants new to the benefit system or to unemployment, and those with particularly complex circumstances. Claimants new to the benefit system have indicated a need for more information about the process to enable them to become better ‘navigators’. For example, it may assist the first-time claimant to receive information about the ‘life cycle’ of a claim and a ‘map’ of the Employment Service Jobcentre, indicating where to go for benefits advice, to view job vacancies (not just those displayed on boards), to sign on, etc.

Many of the respondents believed that the process of making a new claim was fairly straightforward and the Agencies will wish to ensure this remains the view of claimants under the new regime.

The New Claim Interview is perceived as having a variety of purposes, including claim form checking and providing information and advice with regard to job-search. Claimants would benefit from early advice on obtaining better-off calculations and in-work benefits, which could allay fears about accepting low paid work.

11.2.1 Claim forms

Improvements in the design of claim forms in recent years were evident to some experienced respondents. Most respondents reported that the forms were relatively straightforward to complete and most questions appeared to be understood. Help given with claim form completion was seen as an important and integral part of the service, particularly at the New Claim Interview.

Specific questions in the claim forms can cause difficulty for some claimants, in particular those requiring information about the type of job
wanted and the minimum wage sought. These questions are retained in the new ES2 form, `Your Job-Search`, and claimants may still have difficulty in answering these questions. However, the division of forms under the Jobseeker's Allowance regime into one claim form and one job-search form is to be welcomed.

11.2.2 Reclaiming  
The process of reclaiming benefit after short periods of employment, for example, for a couple of weeks or a few months, is perceived as problematic by some respondents and can act as a deterrent to taking short-term temporary work. The development of a personal account for each claimant, whereby basic information is held about claimants, could conceivably be used to minimise the amount of information claimants with only short spells of employment have to provide when making a fresh claim.

11.3 Issues relating to Changes in circumstances were often reported to the Employment Service, changes in circumstances and this should assist Jobseeker's Allowance processing and administration. However, claimants may benefit from more information about which changes in circumstances need to be reported and the implications of such changes. In other words, claimants need a fuller explanation of their responsibilities for reporting changes of circumstances. Reasons for the non-reporting of reportable changes included fears of delays, or reductions, to benefit. It may assist claimants if they can be assured that their payment will be adjusted quickly and without complications. Correspondence from the Agencies regarding change of circumstances caused confusion for some respondents because the details of the change were not generally given. Fuller explanation will assist a claimant's understanding and perhaps avoid the need for further contacts.

Under the Jobseeker's Allowance regime, claimants suffering short periods of sickness (under two weeks) will be able to remain in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance. This will avoid the responsibility of payment being shifted between the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency, and diminish the likelihood of claimants having to contact both Agencies. They will, however, still be obliged to inform the Employment Service of the period of sickness.

11.4 Issues relating to Many claimants gain information about the benefit system from informal seeking information sources, such as friends or family. Some of this information may be incorrect and may lead to misguided action or inaction. However, claimants do not often approach the Agencies for non-specific benefits advice for a number of reasons, including the inconvenience of waiting, the perception that staff are unwilling to tell them or do not have the time to tell them; or that the information they receive will not be impartial. Furthermore, some respondents who asked for information were given printed matter only, when they wanted an oral explanation.
Claimants may be misinformed in their expectations of the role of the Agencies in giving such information and advice, and the Agencies should ensure that it is made clear to their customers about the type of service they can offer, for example, whether it is limited to information and advice only, rather than guidance with regard to a course of action.

Some respondents seek answers to queries or information when they attend the Jobcentre to sign on. Given that one of the advantages of the Employment Service is that there are shorter waiting times than in Benefits Agency offices, it will be important for the Agency to ensure that such queries do not cause delays to other signers, but that they are re-directed to a more appropriate area in the Jobcentre.

Under Jobseeker’s Allowance, Employment Service Jobcentres will provide advice and information on jobseeker and job-search matters. They will also provide leaflets and forms for other benefits, such as Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Jobseekers will be advised that enquiries regarding Jobseeker’s Allowance or finding work should be directed to the Employment Service Jobcentre.

11.5 Correspondence Although claim forms were reported to be fairly straightforward, other printed material warrants further attention, particularly the computer-generated standardised letters that respondents reported receiving, both in terms of the length (seen as unnecessarily long) and the use of jargon. Furthermore, efforts are required to avoid the unnecessary duplication of correspondence reported by respondents, which appears to be commonplace.

11.6 Issues relating to All respondents reported wanting to move off benefit and into job-search employment. They had a strong desire for help and advice about job-search and training as soon as they became unemployed. Being denied access to certain facilities such as the Jobclub until after six months' unemployment was a source of frustration to some.

Most respondents were unaware of the range of schemes to assist them into employment. These included initiatives such as Employment on Trial (introduced in 1989, although the eligibility period was reduced in 1996) and more recent initiatives such as Jobfinder’s Grant and Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit extended payments. The research suggests that awareness needs to be raised about their availability, and perhaps a review of current promotional information is required. The issue of responsibility for obtaining information is also important and needs to be clarified for claimants. The respondents believed that it was the Agencies’ duty to inform them of relevant schemes and benefits. This was particularly true for new claimants who could be unsure about what to do and how to proceed with both their claim and finding employment.
Similarly, the respondents knew that they had to ‘actively seek’ work, but were unclear about their responsibilities. For example, most respondents were unaware of the need to maintain records of their job-search activities or of the purpose of ‘signing on’ fortnightly.

Dealing with two Agencies under the Income Support/Unemployment Benefit regime did not appear to have an effect on job-search or on motivation to leave unemployment. However, few claimants perceived the Jobcentre as being a useful source of information about job vacancies. Respondents expressed a desire for more job-matching, which the new LMS is intended to do.
REFERENCES


ANNEX A: FIELDWORK DOCUMENTATION

A.1 Recruitment questionnaire

A.2 Topic guide

A.3 Contact history pro-forma
Interviewer instructions are in italics.

This questionnaire is to be administered ONLY to people who have agreed to participate in the group discussions.

Criteria for eligibility is that the participant is currently unemployed and looking for work (ie, signing on fortnightly as unemployed) and in receipt of Income Support (or Income Support and Unemployment Benefit). The participant should also be aged 18 or over.

If the participant agrees to participate in discussion:

I'd just like to ask you a few questions

Reassure if necessary.: All answers are completely confidential

It will only take a few minutes

It will save a bit of time at the group discussion.

1 BENEFIT INFORMATION

1.1 Can you tell me why you have just visited the Jobcentre?

[a. to get general information or literature about a claim]
[b. to start making a claim/to take a claim form in]
[c. to get help with filling out a claim form]
[d. to check on progress of a claim]
[e. to query a payment amount]
[f. to chase up payment]
[g. to notify them about a change in circumstances]
[h. to query a decision]
[i. you were asked to contact them]
[j. to sign on]
[k. to attend a New Claims Interview]
[l. to attend a Restart Interview]
[m. to look at the job vacancies]
[n. other please specify]

Q1.2 Currently received

Q1.3 Previously received

1.2 Could you look at this list and tell me whether you currently receive any of these benefits? [SHOWCARD B] complete first column of grid

1.3 Could you tell me whether you have previously received any of these benefits? (in the last 2 years?) complete second column of grid

Tick all that apply

a. Income Support
b. Unemployment Benefit
c. Social Fund
d. Council Tax Benefit
e. Housing Benefit
f. Family Credit
g. Disability Working Allowance
h. Disability Living Allowance
i. Incapacity/Sickness Benefit/Invalidity Benefit
j. Child Benefit
k. One Parent Benefit
l. Retirement Pension
m. Other Please specify

1.4 Do you generally keep correspondence about your claim:

always
sometimes
never

1.5 Can I just check, is this the first time you have claimed Income Support?

Yes
No

1.6 When did you begin your current claim for Income Support

month_____________________year

Eyemouth
1.7 During this claim, have you had to report a change of circumstances to the Jobcentre or DSS?

By change of circumstances I mean something that may affect your benefit, for example, change in address, reporting some work

No  ☐ go to Question 2
Yes   ☐ if yes, go to Question 1.8

1.8 What was the most recent change of circumstances that you reported?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

1.9 And who did you report this change to?

DSS/Benefits Agency! Social
Jobcentre/Unemployment Benefit Office/Employment Service
Both
Other please specify

2 OTHER INFORMATION

2.1 Now I’d like to ask you some questions about your home. Is it:

owned outright
owned with a mortgage
rented from the local council
rented from housing association
rented privately
other (please specify)

2.2 Do you have easy access to a telephone? (ie, at home, at friends/relatives etc)

Yes
No

2.3 Do you have easy access to a car, van or motorbike if you need to go to the DSS or the Jobcentre?

Yes  ☐ go to 3
No  ☐ go to 2.6 below

2.4 If No, How do you usually get to the DSS or Jobcentre?

________________________________________________________________________
3. PERSONAL DETAILS

3.1 What type of work do you usually do?
Probe fully for job title and description, responsibilities, kind of work, training or qualifications needed, supervisory or management level etc

3.2 At your last birthday, how old were you? years

Record sex of the respondent female male

Record name:

Address: 

Tel:  

Thank Respondent and Distribute CRSP Letter

TO BE COMPLETED BY RECRUITER

Group A (recent claimant)  
Group B (claimant of 12+ months)

Change of Circumstances reported? (Q1.7)  
Yes  
No  

Is Respondent a Postal signer?  
Yes  
No  

Eyemouth 5
j) What documents or further evidence to support claim is required?
   eg. last job details, mortgage costs, etc

k) Outcome of claim - understanding of process, UB and IS entitlement letters, signing on etc

l) If claim unsuccessful - understanding of why? Who explained?

m) If needed further help/explanation of outcome, who do they contact and why?

n) Awareness/understanding of 'conditionality' (vs 'right') of benefit

o) What do respondents think about the process of making a claim for IS/UB? (inc any cross referral)
   eg. good/bad, easy/difficult etc

p) Did respondents get all the help they needed from BA and ES?
   If not, what other help was needed?

3. JOB-SEARCH
Objective: to assess impact of current arrangements on job-search and motivation to leave unemployment

a) Effect on job search when dealing with two offices - detract from search activity?

b) Motivation to leave unemployment - dealing with 2 agencies

c) How would respondents feel about leaving UB/IS and reclaiming, say, in a couple of months time?

d) ES New Claims Advisor Interviews - explore experience, understanding of purpose

4 OTHER CONTACTS: use flip chart
Objective: to ascertain respondents' behaviour and understanding of processes other than new claim. Identify their perceptions of roles of each organisation.

Method: draw up unprompted list for what reasons respondents would contact ES and for what reasons they would contact BA (and situations where they would need to contact both or either). Check that this is their practice. Refer to list below if necessary. Explore how respondents gain information on who to approach (e.g. past experience, informal sources, eg. friends, staff at BA, staff at ES, leaflets etc).

- Change of circumstances:
  moved address
  changed Post Office/bank
  did some short term work
  found a full time job
  started a training or education course
  unavailable for work due to short term sickness/absence
  deductions from benefit (direct payments)

- Advice/help:
  need help with the claim form completion
  want to find out how work may effect benefit
  advice on in-work benefits (eg. Family Credit)
  advice on other benefits when not in work
  help with interview travel expenses (JC)
  better off calculations

5 QUALITY OF HELP AND ADVICE (FROM BA AND ES)
Objective: how far are ES and BA able to provide the help and advice needed Other sources used.

Expectations of help and advice provision.

a) Benefit advice - do respondents approach ES and/or BA?
   What does it depend on? eg. location, service delivery, waiting times, staff etc
   Experiences and expectations

b) Sources of information on benefits administered elsewhere, eg. HM and CTB

c) Quality of advice from ES - how quickly and accurately are they able to provide all the info needed?

d) Quality of advice from BA - how quickly and accurately are they able to provide all the info needed?

e) Any conflicting advice received from ES and BA? If so, how resolved

f) Do ES and BA provide sufficient information and advice? If not, what are the gaps?

6 CONTACT HISTORY GRID (split group into first timers and repeaters)
Objective: to collect and order respondents' experiences and processes for subsequent discussion, for making claim (or other recent 'piece of business' if claim not easily recalled). Experience and ease of making a new claim, reporting a change of circumstances or seeking advice/information (including number of offices contacted to complete 'piece of business/claim).

a) Distribute forms - explain - capture all relevant contacts involved to make a new claim. Include phone calls, written contact and visits (inc home visits)

b) First timers - how difficult was it to make a claim - easier or harder than expected?
   were they referred from one place to another?
   explore processes

c) Repeaters - now they have some knowledge of the 'system', can they shortcut the process?
   do they find it easier or not?
   what have they learnt?
d) Pieces of business recorded other than claim?
   ease of reporting
   process of reporting

e) Explore differences between individuals, eg, straightforward or complex - why?

7. **CORRESPONDENCE (group reconvenes)**
   **Objective:** to examine communication between claimants and organisations

   a) How often do respondents get written correspondence from BA and ES? (explore frequency)
      Is it clear who it is from?
   b) What range of topics is correspondence from ES about?
   c) What range of topics is correspondence from BA about?
   d) Is there any confusion caused by correspondence from both agencies?
   e) Do respondents get any telephone calls from ES or BA?
      What are these phone calls usually about?

8. **GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION**
   **Objective:** to establish issues surrounding dealing with two offices (or co-located office).

   a) Any difficulties of dealing with ES and BA at one/two sites?
   b) Any advantages of dealing with ES and BA at one/two sites?
   c) Do offices contact each other on respondents’ behalf, or do they refer respondents on to them?
      Availability of a link phone?
   d) Differences in opening hours - does this cause difficulty or not?
   e) Transport issues - access, availability, frequency etc
   f) Time implications, eg, queuing again, travelling to other office etc
   g) Cost implications, eg, use of private/public transport, childcare etc

9. **GENERAL**
   **Objective:** to discuss wider issues, any other matters that have arisen during the course of the discussion, and to bring the discussion to an end.

   a) Awareness of JSA?
   b) Have respondents perceived any recent changes in service delivery?
   c) Final closer question, eg, one thing that would make dealing with two agencies easier.
YOUR EXPERIENCE OF MAKING A CLAIM FOR INCOME SUPPORT OR UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT

(OR OTHER REASON FOR RECENT CONTACT FOR THOSE WHOSE CLAIM IS SOME TIME AGO)

We would like to know about all the contacts you have had with the DSS aid with the Jobcentre about this.

I. What was the overall reason for these contacts?

   New claim

   Other *please give reason:

   Please start with the FIRST contact and work forwards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>How was the contact made? (phone, written or in person)</th>
<th>Who was the contact with? (Jobcentre or DSS)</th>
<th>REASON</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
2. Is this now sorted out or completed?  
   Yes  
   No  
   Don't know  

3. How long did the whole process take overall? (days or weeks)  

4. Overall, would you say the process was:  
   quicker than expected  
   about as expected  
   slower than expected

THANK YOU

NAME:
ANNEX B

Respondent Details
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Claim duration</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>less than 12 months</td>
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</tr>
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ANNEX C

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Social Research Branch
Analytical Services Division 5
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1-11 John Adam Street
London WC2N 6HT
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