Delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision

Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase 4)

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

In February 2004, the Department for Work and Pensions commissioned ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd, on behalf of the Labour Market Research Partnership, to conduct a fourth tranche of qualitative case study research with Jobcentre Plus staff and customers in four Pathfinder offices and five new, Day 2 offices.

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## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADF</td>
<td>Adviser Discretion Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Benefits Agency</td>
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<td>BB</td>
<td>Bereavement Benefits</td>
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<td>CA</td>
<td>Carers Allowance</td>
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<td>CAB(x)</td>
<td>Citizen’s Advice Bureau(x)</td>
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<td>CB</td>
<td>Child Benefit</td>
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<td>CC</td>
<td>Contact Centre</td>
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<td>CFIS</td>
<td>Counter fraud Investigation Service</td>
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<td>CMS</td>
<td>Customer management System</td>
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<td>Child Support Agency</td>
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<td>CTB</td>
<td>Council Tax Benefit</td>
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<td>DEA</td>
<td>Disability Employment Adviser</td>
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<td>DLA</td>
<td>Disability Living Allowance</td>
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<td>DPTC</td>
<td>Disabled Person’s Tax Credit</td>
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<td>DWP</td>
<td>Department for Work and Pensions</td>
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<td>ES</td>
<td>Employment Service</td>
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<td>ESOL</td>
<td>English for Speakers of Other Languages</td>
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<td>FA</td>
<td>Financial Assessor</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCO</td>
<td>First Contact Officer</td>
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<td>FJR</td>
<td>Fortnightly Job Review</td>
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<td>GI</td>
<td>Gateway Intervention</td>
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<td>Housing Benefit</td>
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<td>Incapacity Benefit</td>
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<td>Integrated Claim Form</td>
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<td>JSAg</td>
<td>Jobseeker’s Agreement</td>
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<td>LMI</td>
<td>Labour Market information</td>
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<td>LMS</td>
<td>Labour Market System</td>
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<td>LPA</td>
<td>Lone Parent Adviser</td>
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<td>MS</td>
<td>Multiple Sclerosis</td>
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<td>MVFE</td>
<td>Monetary Value of Fraud and Error</td>
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<td>NDDP</td>
<td>New Deal for Disabled People</td>
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<td>NDYP</td>
<td>New Deal for Young People</td>
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<td>NINO</td>
<td>National Insurance Number</td>
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<td>NJI</td>
<td>New Jobseeker Interview</td>
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<td>NTC</td>
<td>New Tax Credits</td>
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<td>Personal Adviser</td>
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<td>PAM</td>
<td>Personal Adviser Manager</td>
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<td>QAF</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Framework</td>
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<td>SOC</td>
<td>Standard Occupational Classification</td>
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<td>WFI</td>
<td>Work-focused interview</td>
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<td>Working Families’ Tax Credit</td>
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Summary

Jobcentre Plus is a key part of the Government’s strategy for welfare reform. It brings together the services of the Employment Service (ES) and the Benefits Agency (BA) to provide a single point of delivery for jobs, benefits advice and support for people of working age. In October 2001, the first 56 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and associated Contact Centres were established in 17 clusters across the UK, offering a fully integrated work and benefits service. The aim of the Pathfinder offices was to lead the way in demonstrating the new service, culture and organisation of Jobcentre Plus. In autumn 2002, the 2002/03 national implementation of Jobcentre Plus continued with new Day 2 offices opening. Further offices are planned to open over the next two years and the network will be complete by 20061.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Labour Market Research Partnership (led by ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd) to conduct the qualitative evaluation of Jobcentre Plus. The overall purpose of the research was to assess the extent to which Pathfinder and Day 2 offices were delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision and the progress achieved over time. This report presents the findings from the fourth wave of qualitative research. The fieldwork included interviews with staff from Pathfinder and Day 2 public offices and Contact Centres in six case study areas between April and July 2004. Depth face-to-face interviews were also conducted with customers drawn from specific groups determined by the benefit claimed. These groups were jobseekers, lone parents, people claiming sickness or disability benefits, and carers. In addition, non-participative observations were carried out in Jobcentre Plus public offices and Contact Centres.

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First contact

At the time of the research, Contact Centres were in the process of a restructure. Contact Centres were moving from a district model to a national structure in which individual offices were serving a wider geographical area than previously. Managers, particularly of Contact Centres identified for closure, believed that the restructure affected staff morale and led to changes in recruitment and budgetary control at the local level.

Customers took a variety of routes to the Contact Centre, but generally either telephoned from home or visited a Jobcentre Plus public office to initiate a new or repeat claim for benefit. In one case study area, a call back system was used to deliver an Integrated Claim Form (ICF). Here, First Contact Officers (FCOs) called customers back to complete claim forms for Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) and Income Support (IS) over the telephone. Customers from all groups were positive about using a telephone service to initiate their claim for benefit due to the speed and convenience of the service.

All staff in Contact Centres were aware of the need to deliver the work-focused element of the Jobcentre Plus service. In practice, FCOs used varying approaches with different customer groups to introduce the subject of work. FCOs took a more direct approach in raising the issue of work with jobseekers. For lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and carers, FCOs continued to adopt a softer approach, placing less emphasis on work and a greater focus on discussing benefit options. Time pressures and call performance targets limited the extent to which work was discussed and job searches occurred in all conversations.

Some FCOs prioritised securing the right benefit for customers quickly rather than delivering the direct focus on work. FCOs typically used the VANTIVE script to identify the most appropriate benefit for customers. Some less experienced FCOs and those without a benefits background lacked confidence in their knowledge of Carers Allowance (CA) and Bereavement Benefits (BB) in order to answer customers’ benefit queries.

There was mixed evidence of the extent to which FCOs gave comprehensive explanations of the next stages of the process including explaining the purpose of the work-focused interview (WFI) and the mandatory requirement to attend. The work element of the WFI was not routinely explained to all customers.

Financial Assessor meetings

In general, Financial Assessor (FA) meetings took place in Jobcentre Plus public offices before WFIs. There was mixed use of specialist/generalist FAs to deliver benefit services. Some offices used generalist FAs to ensure a larger pool of staff was available to meet customer demand. Other larger offices used FAs who specialised in each of the main individual benefit/customer types to add value to the service customers received.
Explanations of the purpose of the FA meeting were typically brief and focused on checking through customers’ claim forms and gathering supporting evidence. Systematic checks were made to ensure the completeness of claim forms, with FAs generally checking each individual question and raising queries with customers in the course of these checks. All staff reported that progress had been made in terms of FA knowledge and ability to conduct benefit checks within their specialist benefit areas, due to more day-to-day experience of conducting claims.

In some cases, FAs also described their role as providing information and advice on benefits. There was some variation in the extent to which FAs gave information to customers on the status of their claim including eligibility, the amount they could expect to receive, when first payment was due, and the subsequent timing of payments. The degree to which customers then came away from the FA meeting with information on all aspects of their status of their claim was variable. FAs perceived some benefits, particularly Incapacity Benefit (IB) and CA, to be more complex than others. As a result, they were less confident in their ability to provide information and advice to customers of these benefits and there were examples of unresolved queries carried forward into the WFI.

Staff consistently believed that FAs performed an important role in the detection of fraud and error. They felt it fitted well with FAs’ responsibilities to check claim forms and gather supporting evidence to allow the claim to be processed. FAs perceived their meeting with customers to be the main opportunity to detect potential fraud or error. The face-to-face nature of the meeting was considered to be an effective way of eliciting and checking information to identify fraud or error.

Work-focused interviews

Pathfinder offices and some Day 2 offices routinely used specialist Personal Advisers (PAs) to deliver WFI's with lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and jobseekers. Specialist PAs were favoured due to the depth of knowledge and experience they can bring to delivering WFI's with particular customer groups. Advisers in smaller offices tended to spend only a proportion of their time delivering WFI's to a particular customer type so that they could support, and provide cover for, other colleagues.

Different explanations of the purpose of the WFI were given to customers as a result of varying understanding amongst PAs. Explanations given to jobseekers were more directly focused on work and the requirements of the Jobseeker’s Agreement (JSAg). Explanations given to lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and carers typically took a softer approach. Although a generic focus on work was evident, in some cases, explanations were more likely focus on a customer’s current circumstances and the support available through Jobcentre Plus as PAs were concerned about upsetting customers.
Discussions about work are a key aspect of WFIs. In practice, the extent and nature of such discussions varied by customer group and between individual customers. The JSAg was a key factor that influenced the overall structure of discussions about work with jobseekers. In these cases, work-related discussions tended to be more direct as a result, with a clear focus on work. Variation was evident, however, in the level of customer engagement in drawing up the JSAg. As a result, the extent to which individual jobseekers developed an ownership of the JSAg also varied.

Discussions about work with lone parents were also evident during WFIs. In these cases, WFIs tended to be customer-led as their interest in, and ability to start, work determined the scope and focus of work-related discussions. At the same time, however, these WFIs tended to be more tailored to the circumstances of lone parents. Where work was not an option for an individual, for example, the discussion focused on the support the customer could receive when work did become an option.

Typically, discussions with customers claiming health- and disability-related benefits began with an exploration of the customers’ circumstances and specifically the nature of their illness. PAs then asked individuals about the impact of their illness on the type of work they could do. Some PAs did not challenge customers’ assumptions about their ability to work. In isolated cases, the subject of work was not raised explicitly at any point in the discussion. In these instances, PAs did not feel it was appropriate and were concerned about discouraging customers from attending the Jobcentre in the future. The extent to which work-related discussions occurred with these customers therefore remained mixed.

The circumstances of carers and the extent to which work was an option largely determined the approach PAs took in discussions about work. Discussions about work with carers were limited once it became apparent that customers were not in a position to work due to their caring responsibilities. In some cases, this was an assumption made by the PA rather than a direct assertion by the customer. As a result, opportunities to hold more meaningful and substantive discussions were missed with some carers who were interested in work.

As part of the WFI, PAs are expected to provide information on the services available through Jobcentre Plus and offer advice on other specialist services that would be of benefit to customers. Information offered to jobseekers was typically work-related with a specific focus on job search activity. There was little evidence that jobseekers were referred to any services by PAs at the time of the WFI. For lone parents, information about the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) was given, either about the programme as a whole or about individual services that were relevant to a customer’s circumstances. Customers claiming health-related benefits were not routinely told about New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) Programme overall. Instead, some people with health problems were given information about specific support services or external agencies that delivered elements of the NDDP. PAs tended to inform carers that job search support or training could be accessed through Jobcentre Plus if, at any time in the future, they considered work to be an option.
A key area of progress was in increasing PAs’ knowledge of the breadth of services available locally to assist customers claiming health-related benefits. Effective practice in this area included the development of desk aids to allow easy access to such information.

Caseloading

The offer and delivery of caseload support to non-JSA customers varied between local Jobcentre Plus public offices and within, and between, customer groups. In some areas, PAs offered formal New Deal caseloading support to lone parents and customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits. Where caseloading under New Deal was not appropriate or for carers (for whom there is no New Deal provision), customers were offered informal caseload support. A number of offices used formal systems to help manage the process of formal and informal caseloading where customers were categorised according to their position in terms of work.

Formal caseloading through the NDLP was typically delivered by PAs themselves using face-to-face or telephone contact. Face-to-face contact was considered more effective in allowing PAs to explain the range of services available under NDLP. NDDP caseloading was delivered by external agencies. PAs consequently only delivered informal caseloading support to these customers. Informal caseloading for customers from across all groups tended to be delivered over the telephone and less frequently than formal caseloading.

Formal caseloading was recognised as an effective way of providing practical support for job-ready customers to move into work in the short-term. Over the longer-term NDLP caseloading support is effective in achieving job entries for lone parents through delivering encouragement to increase a lone parent’s motivation to work. PAs perceived that NDDP caseloading support was effective in providing the specialist support for customers with health conditions or disabilities. Informal caseloading was recognised as being effective in providing ongoing support to highly motivated customers in the short-term. The effectiveness of caseloading overall, however, was undermined by PAs’ limited knowledge of the services available and time constraints.

Fraud and error

Staff across all stages of the Jobcentre Plus process recognised the importance of detecting fraud and error. The importance attached to detecting fraud and error varied amongst different types of staff. FCOs identified potential cases of fraud, usually on the basis of suspicion. In contrast, FAs found that detection of fraud and error fitted well with their other responsibilities. PAs believed they adopted a more informal role as there were no specific checks they undertook.
There was clear progress in staff understanding of the potential circumstances of fraud or error. FCOs and FAs were generally aware, for example, of the circumstances when a Gateway Intervention process was required. Staff were less clear, however, of the process to be followed, or steps to be taken, once fraud or error was identified.

The office environment

In general, customers’ initial impressions of the Jobcentre Plus environment were positive. Offices were described as pleasant, clean and calm environments. Customers who were anxious about going into a Jobcentre Plus public office were reassured by staff who greeted and directed them on arrival.

Some customers raised concerns about privacy in the public office when using the warm phones or during face-to-face meetings with staff. These customers were concerned about the open plan nature of the office and the proximity of waiting areas to interview desks and phones. In general, customers felt safe in the Jobcentre Plus office. Key factors were the calm and clean environment as well as the presence of security guards. Changes to the office environment led some customers to change their views about attending a jobcentre. There was little evidence, however, that the office environment directly influenced the way customers behaved.

The impact of Jobcentre Plus

The experience of the Jobcentre Plus process had a generally positive impact on the views and attitudes of customers across all groups who had no prior experience of claiming benefits. All customers also routinely reported an increased awareness of the services available through Jobcentre Plus as a result of their participation in a WFI.

For jobseekers, the impact of the Jobcentre Plus focused on raising their awareness of ways to look for work. Some jobseekers changed their job search activity as a result of the advice and information given by the PA. There was little evidence, however, that jobseekers accessed further training or support available through Jobcentre Plus immediately after their WFI.

The extent to which the Jobcentre Plus process impacted on lone parents’ engagement to the labour market was mixed. For some lone parents, who were clear that work was not appropriate at the time, the experience had no direct impact. The benefit check provided some lone parents with the reassurance of financial security to allow them to consider their options in terms of work or training. In these cases, the WFI encouraged some lone parents to consider work as an option in the medium-term.

For some customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits, PAs did not challenge the assumptions held by customers that their illness or condition prevented work. There was some evidence, however, that the WFI did have a
positive impact on other customers. Being aware of the help and support available through Jobcentre Plus made these customers think more positively about their future.

The Jobcentre Plus process typically delivered little impact on carers’ attitudes or behaviour in terms of work. In exceptional cases, carers began to perceive part-time work was an option after being informed about permitted work. In other cases, PAs missed opportunities to promote the benefits of work to carers as they made assumptions that their caring responsibilities made work inappropriate.

Conclusions

There continues to be considerable variation in the delivery of Jobcentre Plus, both across Pathfinder offices and Day 2 offices. Staff confidence in pursuing work-related discussions with non-JSA customers remains a key barrier. Some FCOs, FAs and PAs felt uncomfortable in promoting the work-focused elements of the process. This led to brief explanations of the purpose of the WFI without a direct focus on work, and limited explanations of the compulsory requirement to participate in the WFI. Discussions in the WFI were limited as PAs did not challenge customers’ assumptions about the extent to which work was an option. PAs reported to particularly lack confidence where customers were experiencing current pain as a result of their condition or where a customer had a long-term physical or mental health problem. Staff were conscious of the potential reaction of the customer and wanted to avoid discouraging the customer from participating in subsequent stages of the process or returning at a later date. There was also limited engagement of customers in discussions about work because staff made assumptions themselves about what was appropriate. In some cases, customers were disappointed that work was not discussed further and as such staff missed opportunities to engage in more meaningful discussions about work as an option.

Across all stages of the process, the level and nature of information given to customers was a key issue. Gaps remain in staff knowledge of certain benefits and customers left meetings with unresolved queries as a result. Both FCOs and FAs who have no background in benefits reported gaps in their knowledge of what they perceive to be more complex benefits including IB and CA. Although knowledge increased from day-to-day experience and consulting colleagues, staff believed they would benefit from further training to address their gaps in knowledge. Staff ability to give information about the status of a customer’s claim is more difficult to resolve, given that eligibility decisions are generally dealt with by a separate processing department. Time constraints were a further barrier to FAs conducting benefit calculations to give customers an idea of the level of benefit they could expect to receive. Where parallel processing was conducted, FAs were generally able to give more accurate information as to the status of a customer claim. Wider introduction of this process or equipping FAs with information to allow them to give an estimate of the processing times, may help to avoid customers having unresolved queries which are carried forward into the WFI.
There was evidence that progress was made in staff ability to deliver information and advice as a result of undertaking specialist roles. FAs, for example, who specialised in a particular benefit, were generally more able to provide benefit advice as they dealt with the same benefit everyday. These staff were also in frequent contact with processing departments and were able to supply more accurate information on processing timescales. Similarly, PAs who specialised in delivering WFIs to a particular customer group were more confident in giving information as a result of their day-to-day experience. This was evident, for example, in PAs delivering tax credit advice to lone parents. PAs dealing specifically with customers claiming health-related benefits were also more able to signpost customers to local support services due to increased experience. Local managers did, however, prefer to maintain a mix of both generalist and specialist staff so that they maintained flexibility to meet changing customer demand.

Overall, while some progress was evident across all stages of the Jobcentre Plus process, there remained key areas where delivery of Jobcentre Plus services could be improved. The provision of benefit information and advice, and the delivery of a meaningful and substantive work focus for some non-JSA customers were key areas where greater consistency is required in the delivery of services to all customer groups.
1 Introduction

Jobcentre Plus is a key part of the Government’s strategy for welfare reform. It brings together the services of the Employment Service (ES) and the Benefits Agency (BA) to provide a single point of delivery for jobs, benefits advice and support for people of working age. In October 2001, the first 56 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and associated Contact Centres were established in 17 clusters across the UK, offering a fully integrated work and benefits service. The aim of the Pathfinder offices was to lead the way in demonstrating the new service, culture and organisation of Jobcentre Plus. In autumn 2002, the 2002/03 national implementation of Jobcentre Plus continued with new Day 2 offices opening. Further offices are planned to open over the next two years and the network will be complete by 2006.²

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Labour Market Research Partnership (led by ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd) to conduct a qualitative evaluation of Jobcentre Plus. The overall purpose of the research was to assess the extent to which Pathfinder and Day 2 offices were delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision and the progress achieved over time.

This report represents the findings from the fourth phase of the evaluation conducted between April and July 2004. It builds on earlier research to show the progress achieved by Pathfinders and Day 2 offices over the preceding year.

1.1 The policy context

The Government’s goal is to provide employment opportunities for all. This has led to a fundamental shift in the way in which people without work are supported. The change has been to a more active system, based on the principle of ‘work for those who can and security for those who cannot’³.

Following the success of welfare to work policies for claimants of Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA), the focus is increasingly on those who are economically inactive. With 3.5 million people claiming benefits as lone parents or because they have health problems or disabilities, the Government recognises that more needs to be done to help those who face particular barriers to the labour market. In addition, there is recognition that some individuals may need assistance or support in reconciling work and their personal circumstances.

Jobcentre Plus brings a work focus for customers claiming benefits other than JSA. Under this new service, those entering the benefit system for either a new or repeat claim are obliged to attend a work-focused interview (WFI) with a Personal Adviser (PA) to discuss the job opportunities and support available.

1.2 The Jobcentre Plus vision

The overall aim of the Jobcentre Plus vision is to deliver ‘an integrated and efficient labour market and benefit service to people of working age’\textsuperscript{4}. The Jobcentre Plus vision is that the service should provide:

- a work focus to the benefit system, for everyone using the service;
- a dedicated service to enable employers to fill their vacancies quickly and successfully;
- swift, secure and professional access to benefits for those entitled to them;
- a much better service for everyone who needs help;
- active help from PAs to assist people to get and keep work;
- a better working environment for staff, which will be safe and professional; and
- greatly improved information technology and accommodation.

1.3 The delivery of Jobcentre Plus services

The first 56 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and their associate Contact Centres were launched in 2001. The second stage of the national implementation of Jobcentre Plus took place between October 2002 and 2003, creating ‘Day 2’ offices. The third stage of the roll-out commenced in April 2003 and was completed by March 2004. The full implementation will be then be completed by the end of 2005/06.

Figure 1.1 shows the process that new or repeat claimants of working age benefits are intended to follow. For JSA customers, the emphasis is on work and overcoming barriers to work; these customers follow the well-established JSA regime. For other customers including lone parents, customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits and carers, the introduction of a mandatory WFI as part of their benefit claim is new.

1.4 The Jobcentre Plus evaluation

This research forms part of a wider programme of work to assess the delivery and impact of Jobcentre Plus. In addition to this qualitative evaluation, the Department commissioned studies including qualitative research on deferrals, a qualitative study looking at staff safety and a quantitative customer survey. The wider Jobcentre Plus evaluation also draws on findings from the ONE evaluation and other New Deal evaluations.

1.4.1 The qualitative evaluation

The overall aim of this evaluation was to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus offices were delivering the policy vision. More specifically, the research objectives were to:

- examine the effectiveness of Jobcentre Plus offices in delivering services to customers and moving customers towards the labour market;
- consider the impact on people’s propensity to use the services and make the transition into work;
- assess the ability of Jobcentre Plus staff members to offer appropriate explanation and advice;
- consider customers’ understanding and perception of the service received; and
- examine the extent to which the work-focused interview moves people towards the labour market.
Figure 1.1  The Jobcentre Plus process

**CONTACT CENTRE**

*Contacting Jobcentre Plus*

Customers contact Jobcentre Plus Contact Centre (CC) by phone ('First Contact').

*Information gathering*

During the phone call, CC staff take customers' details and help them to decide the most appropriate benefit to claim, arrange to send claim forms to them, discuss previous employment and the extent to which they are ready to work.

*Arranging a work-focused interview (WFI)*

During the call, a WFI is arranged with a Personal Adviser, to take place at a Jobcentre Plus public office, normally within four working days.

**JOBCENTRE PLUS PUBLIC OFFICE**

*The claim for benefit*

Customers bring their completed claim form and support documents (e.g. wage slips) to the Jobcentre Plus public office. They see a Financial Assessor (FA), who checks their forms and answers any questions about the claim.

*The work-focused interview*

Customers meet their PA, who explains Jobcentre Plus services, identifies barriers to work and possible help required, and may conduct a job search. PAs agree future contact and activity with customers.

*Before leaving the office*

Customers may see the FA again (this element was made optional in January 2003). FAs tell customers the likely outcome of their claim.

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5  Adapted from Jobcentre Plus brochure, *The work you want, the help you need.*
In addition, this fourth phase of the qualitative evaluation sought to:

- further examine the role of First Contact Officers (FCOs) in Contact Centres;

- explore the role of Financial Assessors (FAs);

- consider customer perceptions of safety in Jobcentre Plus public offices;

- explore the extent to which Personal Advisers (PAs) perform generalist and/or specialist roles, including what works best for different customer groups;

- examine caseloading meetings;

- consider the feedback and actions following unsuccessful submissions both in terms of WFIs and Fortnightly Job Reviews;

- explore issues relating to non-attendance at WFIs;

- consider issues of fraud and error (for example, how preventing fraud and error fits with the role and responsibilities of FCOs, FAs and PAs); and

- include a greater examination and discussion of the impact of Jobcentre Plus on different customer groups, covering jobseekers, lone parents, customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits, and carers.

1.4.2 Research design

This report presents the findings from qualitative research carried out with staff and customers of Jobcentre Plus from six clusters or districts. The case study areas were chosen to ensure a good mix of office sizes, urban and rural areas, and an appropriate geographical spread. A total of nine Jobcentre Plus public offices (four Pathfinders and five Day 2 offices) and six Contact Centres were visited. All of the public offices were using the VANTIVE computer software at the time of the research and so the findings do not reflect any issues related to the use of the new system, called CMS (Customer Management System).

The main fieldwork took place between April and July 2004, over one year after the Day 2 offices were established and a year after the Phase 3 research. This aimed to ensure that delivery in Day 2 offices had stabilised and sufficient time had elapsed for progress to be explored. The Day 2 offices included in this research were rolled out in Pathfinder districts and were amongst the earliest to be established. Their experience of delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision may not, therefore, reflect the experience of those that opened later, that were not in Pathfinder districts, or those with no previous experience of delivering WFIs to non-JSA customers.

Several research methods were used to fully represent the process, experience, perceptions and impact of the delivery of Jobcentre Plus. These methods included depth, face-to-face interviews with a wide range of staff from Jobcentre Plus public offices and Contact Centres. Staff with differing levels of experience participated, covering the following roles:
FCOs;
Office Managers (OMs);
FAs;
Financial Assessor Managers (FAMs);
PAs; and
Personal Adviser Managers (PAMs).

In total, 72 staff were interviewed from across the nine selected Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder and Day 2 offices, and 24 staff from Contact Centres.

Non-participative observations of First Contact, FA meetings and WFls were used to gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics of customer and staff interactions and to enrich the understanding achieved by the research. Over 130 observations were completed covering individuals from all customer groups studied by the research.

In addition, depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with customers drawn from specific ‘customer groups’ determined by the benefit claimed. These groups were jobseekers, lone parents, customers claiming sickness or disability benefits, and carers. Just under 120 customers were interviewed in total.

Letters were sent out to Jobcentre Plus customers, explaining the purpose of the research. Individuals not wishing to take part were given the opportunity to ‘opt out’. A gift of £15 was offered to each customer taking part in the research. Interviews with customers took place approximately three months after they started their new or repeat claim for benefit. In general, customers were able to recall, in detail, the nature, focus and content of face-to-face discussions with Jobcentre Plus staff and provided the research with a wealth of information. In contrast, they consistently struggled to recall the details of discussions held over the telephone. Where possible and appropriate, evidence from observations of First Contact are used to address gaps in customers’ recall of such discussions.

A full account of the methodology is provided in Appendix A and copies of the research tools used are provided in Appendices C – I of this report.

1.5 Report structure

The rest of the report is organised as follows:

• **Chapter 2** explores the delivery of First Contact at Contact Centres;

• **Chapter 3** looks at how benefit services are delivered by Financial Assessors in Jobcentre Plus public offices;

• **Chapter 4** examines the delivery and content of work-focused interviews delivered by Personal Advisers;
• The nature and content of caseloading meetings are explored in Chapter 5;
• Chapter 6 considers the issue and processes concerning fraud and error;
• the office environment, including customer’s perceptions of safety in the office, are explored in Chapter 7;
• Chapter 8 outlines the impact of the Jobcentre Plus process for different customer groups; and
• Chapter 9 presents the conclusions of the fourth wave of qualitative research.
2 First Contact

This chapter explores the delivery of services at the First Contact stage of the Jobcentre Plus process. It draws on evidence from customer interviews, staff interviews and observations of telephone calls received at the Contact Centre. The chapter follows the typical sequence of events at First Contact. The way in which customers initiate their claim for benefit is considered first (Section 2.2), before examining how First Contact Officers (FCOs) establish customers’ benefit needs (Section 2.3) and determine whether there is a need for a Gateway Intervention (GI) (Section 2.4). The extent and nature of discussions about work with different customer groups, including job searches and job submissions, is then outlined (Section 2.5). The chapter goes on to explore the procedures used for booking appointments in Jobcentre Plus public offices, including the explanations provided on the purpose of work-focused interviews (WFIs), and the information and advice given about the next steps of the process (Section 2.6). Findings relating to caseload at First Contact and FCOs use of the Must Dos are then presented (Sections 2.7 and 2.8 respectively). The chapter concludes with an overview of the progress achieved towards the Jobcentre Plus vision (Section 2.9).

2.1 Background

When a customer initiates a claim for benefit, they are expected to make contact with the Jobcentre Plus service through a telephone call to a Contact Centre. The first point of contact is intended to be a FCO.

The role of the FCO is to establish customers’ benefits needs and actively promote the work-focused services of Jobcentre Plus. An FCO is responsible for explaining that the WFI is a mandatory condition of benefit entitlement. Full details of the requirements of FCOs are detailed in the Must Dos guidance contained in Appendix B at the end of this report.

FCOs typically perceived their role to include: taking calls; deciding appropriate benefits; arranging WFIs; deciding on deferrals; and issuing claim forms. In some cases, FCOs felt that their role had recently changed to include job searches and job
submissions, reflecting the increased emphasis on job entry targets within Contact Centres. These cases were exceptional, however, as FCOs did not routinely perceive their role to include job searching and job matching.

Expected outputs at the end of First Contact stage include:

- booking of the WFI if not waived or deferred;
- sending out claim forms and letters to customers to confirm the appointment; and
- completing information on VANTIVE and the Labour Market System (LMS) to inform the Financial Assessor (FA) and Personal Adviser (PA) of the appointment.

At the time of the research, Contact Centres were in the process of a restructure. Contact Centres were moving from a district model, in which each Contact Centre was managed by a district manager, to a national structure. Each Contact Centre was identified as either tactical or strategic. Tactical Contact Centres were offices that expected to either relocate or close down, whereas strategic offices were expected to stay open and serve a wider geographical area. The case study areas included a mix of Contact Centres that were at different stages of the restructuring process.

Some office managers, particularly in tactical Contact Centres, felt that the restructuring affected both staff and the management of the staff. This included low staff morale, people voluntarily/involuntarily leaving, FCOs changing roles, and changes to recruitment and budgetary control at the local level.

In addition, in the last year some sites were also subject to the following changes:

- increased emphasis on job brokering at First Contact;
- the introduction of job search as a key work objective;
- the introduction of new tax credits; and
- the proposed movement towards the Customer Management System (CMS).

2.2 Mode of contact

Customers took a variety of routes to the Contact Centre. The four main routes that customers used were:

- visiting their local Jobcentre Plus office;
- telephoning from home;
- receiving a letter or being called by the Contact Centre; and
- First Contact delivered by the Jobcentre Plus public office.
2.2.1 Visiting the local Jobcentre Plus office

Customers from all groups visited their local Jobcentre Plus public office to enquire about making a claim. Jobseekers and lone parents who wanted to find work typically visited the jobcentre first because they associated the office as a place for people to look for work. Some lone parents, carers and people with health problems were advised to go to a public office by either friends or external agents. Some customers with an injury or illness caused by work and who wanted to claim Incapacity Benefit (IB) were sign-posted by agents such as trade unions, employers, and welfare rights offices. Carers also used a wide variety of routes to make initial contact, including via: a Citizen’s Advice Bureau (CAB); the Carer’s society; the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) advice line; social security office; and Age Concern. Other customers believed that Jobcentre Plus public offices dealt with benefit enquiries.

Upon arrival at the jobcentre, customers with previous experience of claiming through the Contact Centre naturally migrated over to the warm phones. Customers with no previous experience tended to be directed to the warm phones by either a Floor Walker or a receptionist. Customers were routinely given instructions about how to use the warm phone including, for example, which of the three options on the interactive voice response system they should choose if wanting to make a claim. In exceptional cases, a member of staff gave customers the telephone number of the Contact Centre so that they could call from home. Staff were reluctant to do this, however, when a customer was already at the jobcentre.

Some customers, particularly those with health problems or disabilities such as anxiety, hearing impairments, or physical discomfort, did not talk directly with the Contact Centre themselves. In one Day 2 office, PAs or receptionists helped these individuals by calling the Contact Centre on their behalf.

2.2.2 Telephoned from home

Carers and customers claiming health-related benefits typically called the Contact Centre from home, usually on the basis of advice received. These customers found the telephone number through a variety of methods, including in the Yellow Pages or from an external agent.

2.2.3 Received letter or call from Contact Centre

In exceptional cases, customers recalled receiving either a telephone call from the Contact Centre to book an appointment at a Jobcentre Plus public office or a letter with details of an arranged appointment. This was usually triggered by an agency contacting the Contact Centre on behalf of the customer or if a claim had expired. This typically affected customers claiming IB who had not evidenced their claim by sending off the appropriate sick forms.
2.2.4 First Contact undertaken by the Jobcentre Plus public office

On occasion, public offices handled First Contact. There were examples of lone parents who contacted an adviser that they had previously seen and the PA booked the WFI.

2.2.5 Customers’ perceptions of calling the Contact Centre

Customers were consistently positive about the telephone service provided by the Contact Centre. The speed and convenience of booking an appointment over the telephone were key factors contributing to their overall perceptions. Some lone parents and those claiming IB commented on the politeness of the FCO. The contact with a FCO, who dealt with all aspects of the claim, rather than an automated system, was also welcomed:

‘They treated you like human beings straight away and there is nothing worse than waiting on automated voices and you are asked for this menu and that menu. I spoke to someone straight and I knew exactly what I had to do. I had the appointment made straight away.’

(Male with heart condition, aged 38 years)

‘It was far easier than sort of having to wait in a queue...instead of the long wait and having to explain to one person what you want and then be told, oh go to such and such so yes it’s quite sort of efficient.’

(Female with arthritis, aged 54 years)

Some customers, from across all customer groups, raised concerns that the warm phones in the jobcentre did not provide enough privacy. Customers who felt uncomfortable using the warm phones did not want to reveal or discuss more private personal details with the FCO. As a result, FCOs may not collect accurate or sufficiently detailed information from the customer to make an informed decision about the benefits to which the individual is entitled or whether the customer was well enough to attend a WFI. In other cases, customers reported interruptions during their conversation with an FCO. Customers reported these distractions occurred both within the Jobcentre Plus office while using the warm phones as well as at the other end of the phone in the Contact Centre. In some cases, customers preferred to speak with someone on a face-to-face basis.

Customers who experienced both the new and the old service were generally positive about the new approach and process. Some felt that the new service was more convenient because they did not need to visit the jobcentre to collect forms and make an appointment in person. Others, mainly jobseekers, preferred the old system because they could do everything in one visit. Previously, for instance, they could look for work, sign on and the claim could be dealt with straight away on-site.
2.3 Establishing customers’ benefit needs

In general, customers tended to tell FCOs what they wanted to claim. This was particularly true for jobseekers who had previously claimed JSA. For other jobseekers, knowledge of appropriate benefits came from wider general knowledge or from advice from friends and family. Lone parents, carers and those with health problems who identified the benefit they wished to claim had received advice from family, friends or support services including doctors and the CAB. In all cases, FCOs sought to verify that this was appropriate for the customer’s circumstances. For jobseekers, FCOs established whether customers were available and actively looking for work by directly asking customers. FCOs also took a direct approach with customers who were currently employed and were asked to claim IB by checking customers had a sick note.

Where customers were unaware or unsure of the most appropriate benefit to claim, it was standard practice for FCOs to begin the conversation by collecting personal details. This included a customer’s name, address, living arrangements, date of birth/age and National Insurance number (NINO). Then, FCOs consistently used the VANTIVE script to identify the correct benefit. FCOs asked customers if they had claimed before and if they were actively seeking work to identify whether active or inactive benefits were most appropriate. Some FCOs felt that the questions that identified which benefit someone should claim were too far down the script. In these cases, FCOs modified the script by moving the question to the start of the conversation. This allowed FCOs to tailor the rest of the conversation to meet customers’ needs.

2.3.1 Dealing with benefit queries

The extent to which customers’ benefit queries were dealt with varied depending on a FCO’s confidence and experience. In general, jobseekers and lone parents found FCOs to be confident. Some FCOs lacked confidence in their knowledge of the eligibility criteria for some non-JSA benefits. There were examples of customers who were advised to claim both IB and Income Support (IS), which left them feeling uncertain and waiting until their appointment at the Jobcentre Plus office to find out which they would be entitled to. In other cases, where FCOs were not able to answer benefit queries themselves, they were observed to consult more experienced colleagues or signpost customers to other information sources such as one stop shops at their local council or the CAB.

2.3.2 Offering additional benefit advice

There was limited evidence of FCOs offering customers, from all groups, additional advice about benefits. FCOs did not tend to see this as part of their role, and so no consistent approach was found.

‘That girl [FCO] did not tell me much because all she was interested in was to get information to give me the forms to fill in.’

(Male with unspecified health problem, age unknown)
Observations of First Contact revealed that FCOs did highlight individuals’ eligibility for Housing and Council Tax Benefit, but only in a cursory manner. In these cases, FCOs typically suggested that customers may be able to claim such benefits and then directed them to their local council to apply.

Some FCOs felt unconfident about the eligibility criteria for Bereavement Benefits (BBs) and Carer’s Allowance (CA), limiting the extent to which they were able to give information or advice to customers of these benefits.

‘I’m not very comfortable about doing it. That’s because as I say I’m not a benefits background person.’

(First Contact Officer)

2.4 Identification of Gateway Interventions

FCOs are expected to identify and highlight claims with circumstances that might be more prone to fraud and error. These claims can then be followed up more closely through a home visit, a telephone interview, or a further office interview. This process is known as a GI. The circumstances that require a GI include the following:

- customers who have been self-employed;
- lone parents who are not receiving any child maintenance and are, therefore, of interest to the Child Support Agency (CSA);
- customers who might have recently separated from their spouse;
- customers who might be living with a partner as husband and wife, but have not declared this;
- customers with a ‘care of’ address; and
- customers from abroad who require a Habitual Residence Test.

Experienced FCOs had a good awareness of the circumstances that would require a GI. They generally recognised their role in reducing fraud as an additional responsibility. Some FCOs felt that the time available limited what they could achieve and so identifying GIs and other potential fraudulent claims was not always a priority.

‘They don’t have a target for it. So it’s not crucial.’

(Contact Centre Office Manager)

FCOs’ role in fraud and error is examined in more detail in Chapter 6.
2.5 Discussing work at First Contact

FCOs are expected to discuss individuals’ current job search activity, conduct a job search for those who are job-ready, and make a submission if there is a suitable vacancy. It is also an operational requirement for the FCO to gather labour market information to inform the WFI and ensure that all IT and clerical customer records are created and updated as appropriate.

FCOs generally led discussions about work with customers. There is evidence that FCOs adopted different approaches to discussions according to the type of customer and their individual circumstances, outlined in the following sections.

2.5.1 Jobseekers

For jobseekers, FCOs tended to concentrate on the requirement to look for work as a compulsory condition of entitlement to JSA as an introduction to discussions about work. The questions on VANTIVE about employment history were used by some FCOs as a guide to the discussion. Where customers had recently left work, FCOs directly asked when they had left work and why. Observations of First Contact showed that FCOs generally went on to discuss with jobseekers what work they hoped to do in the future and, in some cases, how they looked for work.

In other cases, discussions about work were driven by the customer’s personal circumstances. Customers tended to lead the discussion if there was a particular issue around work, such as redundancy or an involuntarily suspension. Other work-related issues raised by jobseekers included what action should be taken if work was found in between the call and the WFI, and what to do in the case of a gross misconduct dismissal. FCOs demonstrated they were capable of sign-posting and offering customers adequate advice.

Where JSA customers were keen to return to work as quickly as possible, they were comfortable with discussing work at First Contact as they perceived it would help with their aim to return to work. Other customers, typically those who had claimed previously, recognised that discussing work was a requirement of the process. In exceptional cases, JSA customers reported to feel uncomfortable in discussing work. In these cases, the circumstances surrounding how a customer had left their last job was the reason given for their reluctance to discuss work, for example, where customers had been made redundant or were dismissed. These individuals were less comfortable about discussing their previous employment experience.

2.5.2 Lone parents

First Contact discussions about work with lone parents were limited. The employment history questions on VANTIVE tended to be used to initiate discussions. There were limited examples of discussions about any future employment unless lone parents clearly stated that they were looking for work. Observations of First Contact suggested that, in some cases, FCOs made assumptions about a lone parent’s work
readiness and, thus, the appropriateness of subsequent discussions about work. For example, a FCO responded to a lone parent who had two children under the age of five:

‘…with two little ones…you’re not currently available for work.’

(Observation of a First Contact conversation)

Other FCOs felt that in-depth discussions about work were inappropriate with lone parents who had experienced a recent relationship breakdown or had very young children:

‘Obviously if the children are older. If they’re a lot younger, mums aren’t ready to. If they’ve just had a partner recently leave them, they’re trying to deal with the recent changes of just trying to live and cope on their own rather than starting to introduce looking for work as well.’

(First Contact Officer)

FCOs were concerned about putting pressure on lone parents at a time when they had other concerns or priorities. In one case study area, where an inbound and call-back system was operated for customers claiming IS, FCOs did not routinely promote the work-focused services of Jobcentre Plus at First Contact because their attention was focused on completing claim forms over the telephone. However, other FCOs believed that, particularly for non-JSA customers, providing information on the work services available gave people choice at a later stage when they may be able to consider work.

Lone parents who wanted to return to work typically felt comfortable talking about work and were interested in any information the FCO gave them about what help was available. For other customers, where there were limited discussions about work, lone parents expressed relatively neutral views about how it made them feel:

‘I didn’t think anything about it because she didn’t discuss it long enough.’

(Female lone parent, aged 42 years with three children aged ten, eight and three years old)

In other cases, customers reported to feel uncomfortable in discussing work as they considered that it was not appropriate at the time of their claim. This was typically reported by lone parents who were concerned about sorting out their circumstances following a relationship breakdown or lone parents who were pregnant at the time of their claim, consequently, these customers did not feel ready to discuss work at the time of their claim.

2.5.3 Customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits

There was little evidence, from interviews and observations, that meaningful discussions about work were held with people claiming health- or disability-related benefits. When FCOs did initiate discussions about work, the content was focused on previous employment and whether work was currently an option. For some
customers, questions regarding their previous employment and why they left work were raised within the context of the individual’s health problem, but that was the extent of the discussions:

‘Well basically I think all she did was ask me why I was not at work, what the problem was and that’s it. Nothing more about work.’

(Male with unspecified health condition, aged 55 years)

Some FCOs felt it was inappropriate to discuss work beyond this point with customers claiming IB due to their perceptions of the person’s circumstances:

‘If they’ve had a horrific car accident, things like that, then I don’t really think talking about work at that point is useful.’

(First Contact Officer)

‘Obviously you’re not going to…look at vacancies for somebody who has just found out that they’ve been diagnosed with cancer, because they’re still like devastated about that’

(First Contact Officer)

There was some variation in the views of customers claiming health-related benefits about discussing work. In some cases, customers reported no issues with discussing work. This was typically where customers were already working and planned to return to the same job following their illness. In more exceptional cases, customers reported to feel less comfortable discussing work, particularly if they had not worked for a significant period or if their illness was related to work, for example, stress-related illnesses.

2.5.4 Carers

FCOs routinely checked the current employment status of carers. Where carers were currently employed or had recently left employment, some FCOs explored the nature of their current or recent position. Other FCOs regarded caring responsibilities as a deciding factor as to whether work should be discussed. If carers indicated that they were not interested in work because of the level or intensity of their caring responsibilities, then discussions about work were not pursued.

Carers who talked about work were generally comfortable with the discussion. They recognised that it was part of the process of making a claim:

‘It was all very relaxed and I didn’t have a problem explaining everything, whatever she wanted to know. Because I was seeking information, so whatever she wanted to ask me, I didn’t have a problem with.’

(Male, caring for elderly mother, age unknown)

There were isolated examples, however, of carers who objected to discussing work at First Contact. These customers felt the timing of the discussion was inappropriate because they were not in a position to return to work:
‘I was cross because there’s so much going on here at the moment that I could
do with out it.’

(Female, caring for a daughter with physical disabilities, aged 31 years)

The varying depth of discussions across customer groups was reflected in the level of information collected and recorded on the LMS to inform the WFI. Observations and feedback from PAs in public offices suggested that the labour market information (LMI) captured and recorded by FCOs was insufficient for their requirements. This is discussed further in Section 4.3.

### 2.5.5 Job searches and submissions

Emphasis on job searches at First Contact varied within the different case study areas and for each customer group. FCO perceptions of whether a customer was ready to consider work was a key factor that influenced whether a FCOs conducted a job search or not. FCOs based their decisions on a customer’s level of motivation to work and an assessment of the customer’s circumstances. Other factors that influenced the decision to conduct a job search, or not, included:

- FCO perception of the suitability of vacancies available on their systems;
- if the customer had already looked at the job point in the public office;
- external factors – pending appeal decisions, ACAS involvement, pending financial decisions about starting up a small business;
- if customers had a job to return to; and
- if someone was ringing on behalf of the customer.

In some Contact Centres, Office Managers reported that they were placing a higher emphasis on job brokering and this was recognised by FCOs:

‘It never used to be important...when I applied for the job, job submissions weren’t mentioned...I think it’s always been that if you can do it, but it’s become a target and you’ve got to do it now.’

(First Contact Officer)

FCOs recognised that these targets increased their awareness of the need to conduct job searches and submissions.

Some FCOs offered customers from all groups the option of a job search. A customer’s response tended to dictate whether or not a search was conducted in practice. Where a customer had already looked for vacancies that day, the FCO did not typically pursue the job search.

‘I don’t do a job search as he’d already done that at the jobcentre...it’s the same vacancies so there’s no point in doing it again. The problem though is that we’re now in direct competition with downstairs [the public office] to get job outcomes.’

(First Contact Officer)
Interviews with customers and observations of First Contact showed that, in practice, job searches were only conducted for some customers who were claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA). In these cases, FCOs collected information on the type of work the customer sought, the hours they were willing to work, and the distance they were prepared to travel to work. In some instances, FCOs also discussed the customer’s qualifications and the wage or salary they were looking for to inform the job search.

‘I always do a job search with JSA; I’ve never done one with Incapacity or Carer’s Allowance.’

(First Contact Officer)

FCOs felt that lone parents, carers, and people with health problems were not ready to move into work and so did not feel it was appropriate to conduct a job search.

FCOs can submit customers to jobs either by sending out application forms to them, or by contacting the employer on the customers’ behalf to discuss the job in more detail and arrange an interview. Deciding to submit was typically based on a customer’s previous experience, qualifications, confidence and motivation of that customer as opposed to customer type. In practice, it was rare for customers to be submitted for a job at First Contact. Observations highlighted only isolated cases. In these cases, the job description was read out by the FCO and the jobseeker was given the employer’s number for the customer to ring for an application form.

2.6 Booking appointments and next steps

This Section explores the process for booking appointments and the explanation of next steps given to customers. FCOs are expected to promote the work-focused services of Jobcentre Plus by explaining the compulsory nature and purpose of the WFI. VANTIVE was used to book appointments in all Contact Centres. However, one Contact Centre was making appointments and then calling customers back to go through the rest of the VANTIVE script at a later time. FCOs transferred information from VANTIVE to LMS manually where they felt it was relevant to the PA for the WFI or to provide information on the reason for making a deferral.

2.6.1 Explanation of next steps

FCOs are required to provide customers with the correct interview notification and claim forms. There were no discernable differences in the explanations of the next steps given to different customer groups. In practice, customers across and within all customers groups received differing explanations. Customers consistently recalled that they were told their appointment time, date and the name of the PA. In some cases, FCOs informed customers that they would see two people. Where this occurred, customers were not always clear about the different roles of each adviser. They routinely understood that at least one person would check their claim forms but it was exceptional that customers had more detailed understanding of the PA role.
FCOs were aware of the purpose of the FA meeting and WFI but observations of First Contact revealed considerable variation in the explanations of staff roles provided to customers in practice. It was only in exceptional cases that customers were given an explanation of the role of the FA. Where this occurred, the role of the FA was explained in terms of checking claim forms and identification. Likewise, typically limited explanations were given to customers about the role of the PA beyond their name and role as an ‘adviser’. FCOs explained that this was due, in part, to the pressure they felt to take the next call and the associated squeeze on time to ensure that customers understood the next steps.

2.6.2 Explaining the purpose of the work-focused interview

The extent to which the WFI was explained by FCOs varied across Contact Centres and by customer groups. The explanation given depended upon FCOs’ confidence and understanding of the purpose:

‘I’ve got my head round the work-focused interviews. Whereas like when you first come it’s like, don’t like this, got people shouting at you. So I mean the more you do it the more confident you get.’

(First Contact Officer)

Some customers understood that there would be a meeting with an adviser about work. Typically jobseekers and some lone parents who had been through the process before, had a better understanding that there would be a meeting about work. Other customers, from all groups, reported that they knew the interview would include discussing work from the information in the confirmation letter, not from the FCO:

‘No information was given to the purpose of the interview, she sent the forms through by post and then I got a letter saying to go to the job shop. The way I looked at the form it was to see about getting a job, going back to work, which I could not believe.’

(Male with heart condition, aged 38 years)

Jobseekers were consistently told that the interview would cover the conditions of signing a Jobseeker’s Agreement (JSAg). This mirrors the emphasis outlined in the Must Dos for First Contact to concentrate on the requirement to look for work as a compulsory condition of entitlement to JSA.

The work element of the interview was not routinely or explicitly explained to customers claiming health-related or caring benefits. Some FCOs explained the WFI by outlining the topics that the PA might cover, such as benefit entitlements, the support available through Jobcentre Plus, job opportunities, and any other support that may be available. A, FCO was observed to give the following explanation to a carer:

‘It’s there so they can tell you about your benefit and discuss any other benefits you may be entitled to and offer any other information and advice.’

(Observation of a First Contact conversation)
Other explanations given to carers and customers claiming health-related benefits focused on the requirement to discuss their circumstances and assess benefit entitlement.

‘…to discuss what my situation was and what the future had in store.’

(Male with heart disease, age unknown)

There were some customers claiming health-related benefits who recalled that a direct focus on work was evident in the explanations given:

‘They said that the purpose of the interview would be to take my details, take in the form that I had filled in. If it was suitable to find us employment that they would help us to find employment.’

(Female with arthritis, age unknown)

‘Just that she [the PA]’d go through all my details and my claim, and obviously previous work and work details and why I wasn’t fit to work.’

(Female with unspecified health condition, age unknown)

It was rare for a customer to express a positive anticipation of attending a WFI. There were some examples of motivated customers that were highly focused on work at the time of their claim. The offer of a WFI did not, however, seem to affect customers’ views about what to expect or how it could help them. Typically, customers accepted the meeting as part of the process regardless of its content.

2.6.3 The mandatory nature of the work-focused interview

The extent to which FCOs explained the mandatory requirement to attend a WFI varied depending on their experience and confidence. Those less experienced tended to rely upon a prepared script. There were some exceptional examples of FCOs telling the customer that they were reading a mandatory piece of text to them:

‘I’m sorry but I’ve got to read some mandatory text to you. If it sounds like I’m reading a script it’s because I am!’

(Observation of a First Contact conversation)

‘OK I have to read out a text that I read to everyone…We want to do all we can to help you find work if you are able, and to provide you with support if you are not, as part of the new Jobcentre Plus service. I will now book you a meeting with a Personal Adviser. Remember you must keep the appointment with your Personal Adviser as part of your claim to benefit.’

(Observation of a First Contact conversation)

Explanations of the mandatory requirement to attend the WFI also varied depending on a customer’s previous experience of the process. For example, if the customer had claimed before, FCOs typically did not explicitly explain the mandatory need to attend as they perceived customers were already aware of this requirement.
Observation evidence suggests that where explanations were given a consistent message about the mandatory requirement was given to all customer groups:

‘What we’ll do is make an appointment for you to attend a work-focused meeting... It’s a compulsory part of your claim that you attend.’

(Observation of a First Contact conversation)

‘OK, the only other thing I’d say is that when the advisor contacts you at the end of April it is mandatory to attend the meeting if it’s arranged.’

(Observation of a First Contact conversation)

In general, customers across all groups were aware that attendance at the WFI was compulsory to be entitled to benefit. They understood that failure to attend would mean the claim for benefit would not be processed or that payment would be affected.

‘I was given the impression it wasn’t an option. If I wanted to proceed with the claim then I had to go to the jobcentre.’

(Female, caring for a daughter with physical disabilities, aged 31 years)

It was not clear in every case if this understanding was based on the explanation provided by the FCO or from the letter received shortly after First Contact. FCOs consistently informed non-JSA customers that if, for some reason, they could not make the appointment that they should contact them to let them know.

‘They did say that if anything changed before I made that appointment I was to get in touch to let them know whether to cancel the appointment.’

(Female with depression, age unknown)

In some case study areas, customers failed to attend appointments. In one Contact Centre, FCOs were making calls back to customers in order to reduce the failure to attend rate. The call was made to ensure that the customer had received the correct forms and to remind them of the documentation that they needed bring along to the appointment.

2.6.4 Deferrals and waivers

FCOs can defer the WFI for a period of time if they feel that it would be inappropriate at the time of the claim or because of a customer’s personal circumstances. WFIs can be waived where a customer’s claim for benefit is wholly retrospective, or where the customer is unlikely ever to benefit from a WFI.

FCOs’ decisions to defer were typically based on a customer’s circumstances. Deferrals made by FCOs included customers who were recently bereaved, hospitalised, were ill but with a job to return to, and those with terminal illnesses.

‘As you have a job to return to we can put off the meeting with an adviser
which you would have to have at the moment…Putting off the meeting with an adviser doesn’t affect your claim for benefits but the PA will contact you at the end of April to see how things are getting on…If she feels it’s appropriate for you to come in she’ll arrange a meeting for you to attend the jobcentre.’

(Observation of a First Contact conversation)

No specific tools were used by FCOs to reach their decisions on whether to defer or not other than the VANTIVE questions. FCOs’ decisions were typically based on information collected during the course of the conversation about a customer’s circumstances. For example if a customer claiming health-related benefits had a job to return to or was suffering illness at the time of the claim, FCOs were observed to have deferred these customers. FCOs also noted that team leaders assisted them to make appropriate decisions to defer when needed and reasons for deferrals were monitored.

Customers were not usually aware that their WFI could be deferred or waived. Although decisions were made through gathering information from customers about their circumstances, there is no evidence that deferral or waiver decisions were reached through explicit discussions with customers. Instead, customers felt they had no choice and had to attend the WFI in order to be eligible for benefit. There were examples of some customers, such as a recently widowed customer or people who were victims of domestic violence, who would have benefited from a deferral because they struggled to concentrate or engage at the time of the WFI. In these cases, FCOs may not have been aware of individuals’ circumstances as it was not raised by the customer.

Some PAs felt that FCOs were not making appropriate deferrals. In some cases, PAs believed that FCOs were sending people for interview in order to keep the number of deferrals down. No evidence was gathered from FCOs themselves to support or refute this assertion.

2.6.5 Booking the appointment

FCOs are expected to book a WFI to take place within four working days of First Contact if it is not waived or deferred. Staff referred to this target as the ‘date of claim’. FCOs are also expected to allocate a PA able to deal with a customer’s particular needs. A lone parent, for example, should be allocated a Lone Parent Adviser (LPA) where possible.

FCOs routinely allocated a specialist PA to specific customers where these were available. FCOs selected these PAs from a list on LMS showing the different advisers available and their specialist skills. In some case study areas, the availability of specialist PAs affected the length of time between First Contact and the date of the WFI. In these circumstances, FCOs either used their judgement or asked customers which they would prefer. FCOs felt that there was a tension between the need to allocate customers to specialist advisers and the ‘date of claim’ requirement in the Must Dos, and were unsure which should take priority.
Customers reported that the length of time between their initial contact and their WFI varied, from the next day to two months. The longer timescale included one customer who had been deferred. In general, Contact Centres booked WFIs to take place within four working days but there were areas in which the next appointment was only available in three weeks. FCOs suggested that the delays in booking WFIs were caused by:

- specialist advisers not being available;
- a backlog of appointments due to Easter holidays; or
- part-time staff and staff secondments to other offices.

Customers typically found the appointment system to be efficient. An observation of First Contact showed that when the appointment was not soon enough for the customer in terms of receiving payment, the FCO advised the customer about applying for a crisis loan and attempts were made by the FCO to bring the appointment date forward. There were also some examples of carers and people claiming health-related benefits who were offered some flexibility as to the appointment time given.

‘They offered me a few appointments so I just said which one was best for me.’

(Male, caring for partner injured in a road traffic accident)

‘The first time wasn’t convenient so I said, no I can’t make that and then she offered me another time which was convenient, so yes she was great.’

(Female with multiple sclerosis, aged 38 years)

Lone parents felt that FCOs were generally responsive to requests to have the appointment time in school hours or on a day when childcare was available. The exception was one lone parent who reported that the FCO was not able to offer any alternative appointments other than one during the school half-term holiday. This was not ideal for the lone parent as she needed to bring her children to the appointment at the Jobcentre Plus public office.

2.6.6 Ending the conversation

At the end of the First Contact conversation, FCOs routinely told customers what documentation they could expect to receive in the post, including a letter confirming the appointment time and date, and the claim forms. Customers were generally instructed to fill out the claim form before their appointment. In exceptional cases, jobseekers and customers claiming health-related benefits recalled their FCO asking whether or not they would have any trouble filling out the forms. In these cases, some FCOs offered advice about what action to take if necessary, including arriving at the Jobcentre Plus office earlier than the appointed time to receive help from staff or to go to the CAB for assistance.
Customers across all groups reported that they were aware that they had to take identification evidence with them to their appointment:

‘They did tell me that on the phone, proof of who I was, driving licence or passport, something like that and a utility bill that was it.’

(Male with physical injuries, age unknown)

Although FCOs reported that they consistently told customers at the end of the conversation about the supporting evidence required for different claims, observation evidence revealed that this did not always happen. Jobseekers and lone parents who had been employed recently were generally informed by the FCO that recent pay slips were required. Similarly, there was a consistent emphasis on the need for customers claiming health-related benefits to bring sick notes to their WFI appointments. Observations of First Contact with carers and other lone parents showed that FCOs did not inform customers of the evidence they were expected to take to their interview. In these cases, FCOs appeared to rely on the list of required evidence sent in the post.

‘The people on the telephone just tell you that it will be in the pack, to explain everything you have got to take and it is written down what they are asking for.’

(Male with respiratory problems, age unknown)

Customers from all groups routinely received a letter confirming the date, time and location of their WFI appointment, and the name of the adviser they would see. The relevant benefit forms to be completed were also received in this pack. The main exceptions to this were where appointments were booked for the next day. In these circumstances, customers were told to collect their forms from the reception desk in the public office, as there would be insufficient time to receive them in the post before their appointment. A further exception occurred in one case study area where customers claiming IS or JSA were not sent out forms in advance as they completed an Integrated Claim Form (ICF) over the phone during a call back from an FCO.

Customers making a claim for JSA received a booklet entitled ‘Helping you Back to Work’, which they were required to complete before their meeting at a Jobcentre Plus public office. This leaflet asked for information on the jobseeker’s previous employment, skills and job goals. PAs typically used this booklet to formulate a JSAg (see Section 4.5.2 for further details). Some customers claiming health-related benefits also reported receiving additional information in the post, including leaflets about financial support that was available if considering going back to work.

Customers’ understanding of the process by the end of First Contact varied hugely. Some had a clear comprehension of their responsibility to complete the claim forms and collect relevant evidence in preparation of the meeting.

‘It made it absolutely clear what you needed to take with you on the form.’

(Female with Multiple Sclerosis, aged 38 years)
Across all customer groups, the level of understanding was linked to previous experience of claiming benefit. Where customers had been through the process before they typically knew what to expect. Other customers who had no previous experience were aware of the basic process of how many people they would see but were less aware of the purpose and content of the different meetings. This limited awareness caused apprehension for some customers:

‘Well I just knew I had to see two different people, so I didn’t really know what to expect, just turn up and then I would be called.’

(Male with depression, age 34 years)

Some lone parents and customers claiming health-related benefits reported that they felt bewildered with the process at First Contact due to their circumstances at the time, such as a recent relationship breakdown, the death of a partner, or the diagnosis of an illness. There were also examples of carers and people claiming health-related benefits who were confused as to what to expect when they received the letter. Customers from both groups were more likely to report that the explanations about the meetings given by FCOs, focused on the appointment being in relation to their claim and discussing details of their caring responsibilities or the condition of their illness. These customers were confused and concerned when they received a letter indicating that they would be discussing work.

‘Well I had a letter saying that I would talk to somebody first and then I would see somebody else afterwards. But I thought why do I need to see somebody about a job because I am just on the sick. You know the letter doesn’t explain a great deal at all.’

(Female with depression, age unknown)

2.7 Caseloading at First Contact

First Contact Officers are now encouraged to keep a caseload. Contact Centre managers encourage FCOs to call customers in ‘downtime’ to look for suitable vacancies for customers.

Caseloading was undertaken, albeit to a small extent, at First Contact. FCOs’ understanding of caseloading varied but, in general, they looked for jobs for customers after the initial phone call and, if they found a suitable job, contacted the customer to let them know. The motivation to caseload customers was to increase their job entry points. Typically, customers who were perceived to be the most job-ready, usually jobseekers, were caseloaded. Few customers were aware that they were caseloaded. Instead, customers were generally asked if they minded being contacted if a suitable vacancy came up. No caseloading activity was observed during the time researchers visited Contact Centres.
2.8 Use of Must Dos

The non-JSA customer Must Dos document outlines a list of things that FCOs are expected to deliver in order to promote the work focus to non-JSA customers (see Appendix B). The Must Dos are intended to help staff ensure that every-day customer service, relates to the strategy for delivering a work-focused service. The list is designed to be used as a work aide for staff delivering the service and for managers to support and develop their staff, and to monitor the quality of the service delivered.

FCOs’ awareness of the Must Dos varied across the different sites. In some cases, FCOs regarded the Must Dos to be the same as the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF). As such, they perceived it to be more concerned with monitoring rather than as a guide for day-to-day practice. At other sites, however, Must Dos were used to guide practice on a daily basis. In one case study area, for example, the Must Dos list was pinned to FCOs’ partition boards. FCOs who used the list found them to be a useful reminder of what needed to be covered.

‘[With] seven people in the queue...things get flustered...sometimes you forget.’

(First Contact Officer)

Experienced FCOs routinely reported that they knew the Must Dos by heart, commenting that they were so ‘well known that they have become a patter’.

Office Managers consistently used the QAF to monitor the delivery of First Contact services. In one case study area, the Office Manager felt that the Must Dos would benefit from being more closely aligned with the QAF to save duplication. Team leaders used the QAF to monitor service delivery and then transferred QAF information onto a Must Dos analysis framework.

2.9 Conclusions: Progress towards the vision

Some Contact Centres were going through a process of restructuring at the time of the research. The uncertainty of whether an office would be closed or not affected both staff management and staff morale and, subsequently, the quality and efficiency of the service delivered.

2.9.1 Delivering a work-focused service

There remains mixed practice in the delivery of a work-focused service at First Contact. FCOs directly raised the subject of work with jobseekers. For lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and carers, FCOs continued to adopt a softer approach, placing less emphasis on work and a greater focus on discussing benefit options. Observations of First Contact also suggested that some FCOs continue to make assumptions about a customer’s position in terms of work, and so delivered a limited work focus.
Some FCOs understood that everyone initiating a benefit claim should receive a work focus as part of the service. As discussed in Section 2.5, however, FCOs felt that time pressures and call performance targets limited the option of discussing work. Subsequently, under these pressures, if a customer made the assertion that either they were not able to work or they did not need any advice about work, some FCOs did not challenge or pursue work as a focus in any depth.

There was some evidence that Contact Centres maintained an emphasis on job brokering. One Contact Centre Office Manager anticipated that the introduction of this additional element brought them closer to delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision. The emphasis rarely translated into practice, however, as found in the last round of qualitative research on Jobcentre Plus.

Some of the Contact Centres planned or implemented designated caseload/job search teams in order to reach the job search and job submission targets. This was a new development.

### 2.9.2 Swift, secure and professional access to benefits

FCOs generally had a good awareness of what was required of their role in terms of identifying appropriate benefits. Where customers themselves were unaware of the appropriate benefit, FCOs routinely gave customers an accurate indication of benefits to which they were eligible. There was little evidence, however, that FCOs routinely provided additional benefit advice to customers. In some cases, FCOs struggled to address queries regarding BB, IB and CA.

Some FCOs prioritised securing the right benefit for customers quickly. This was based on the view that this was a key part of the process to progress a customer’s claim for benefit. FCOs believed that it was important to arrange financial support in order to allow customers to concentrate on work, particularly when the FCO perceived the customer to be in a vulnerable situation. The role of an FCO to deliver a work focus was secondary to confirming the benefit to be claimed.

‘On balance I would love to say it’s equal, but I would have to from a First Contact point of view it’s probably something like 60/40 that we have to the right benefits paid…but we are trying to focus on the employment as well.’

(First Contact Officer)

‘Customers can’t think about jobs until they’ve got their money sorted, that’s just fact.’

(First Contact Officer)

### 2.9.3 Barriers to progress

FCOs consistently reported new elements were being introduced to their role too rapidly and without the necessary training. As a result, they did not always feel equipped to deliver the vision.
'There needs to be a clear priority for what Contact Centres are there for. We’re either there to provide a good level of service, and answer the calls within ex amount of seconds, and make sure they’re all answered. Or we’re there to inform the customer about what’s going to happen as far as the processes and procedures, or we’re there to help them find work. There are three ideas of what they could do, and I think there needs to be clarity about what they want us to do, because we’re dabbling in all three and we’re master of none.'

(First Contact Officer)

Offices were often organised in mixed teams of experienced and less experienced staff, so those colleagues could share experience and help each other with any difficulties. However, there was still a demand for more training across all offices in order to deliver the vision, particularly around the introduction of tax credits and some benefit types. Phase 3 research found that, in general, staff felt that the benefit training that they received was insufficient. In this phase of the research, FCOs had attended training courses on benefits and for some found them useful. However, gaps in benefit knowledge were still reported, mainly around BB and CA. FCOs suggested a range of training methods that could be used to address these gaps including computer-based training, learning through experience, intranet, and guidebooks. Whichever training method was chosen, it was felt by some that it was important to allow time to consolidate the training received. Some FCOs felt that the pressure of answering calls did not allow them this time:

‘I do prefer getting away from the office and everyone speaking about it, you know, so if you’ve got a problem with understanding a part of it you can discuss it. And then go back to the office and then consolidating it. But at First Contact you don’t get that chance to do that, it’s basically straight back onto the phones. So the consolidation side of it would be a help rather than just doing the course and that’s it.’

(First Contact Officer)

Staff still feel that following the introduction of tax credits, refresher training is much needed. For some FCOs, a significant period of time elapsed since their initial training on tax credits. The expectation that staff who were trained could effectively cascade information to colleagues was a concern for some FCOs given the complexities surrounding tax credits. Staff would welcome refresher training delivered directly to all staff.

The main areas of improvement cited by Contact Centre staff in order to meet the vision included:

- improving FCOs’ benefit knowledge, particularly on BB, CA and new tax credits;
- less pressure to meet ‘call’ performance targets to allow sufficient time to focus on work and customer service;
- improving understanding of the public office and Contact Centre roles through job shadowing; and
- improved information technology – ability to co-ordinate appointment bookings through one computer system, such as the proposed move to CMS.
3 Financial Assessor meetings

This chapter explores the set-up and delivery Financial Assessor (FA) meetings. It draws on evidence from interviews with staff and customers of Jobcentre Plus, and observations of FA meetings. The chapter starts by examining the models of delivery (Section 3.2) before examining how FAs prepared for the meeting (Section 3.3). The content of the FA meeting is then covered (Section 3.4), including the explanations provided to customers regarding the purpose of the meeting and the completion of claim checks. Information and advice given by FAs to different customer groups is then explored (Section 3.5). FAs’ explanation of next steps, including the purpose of the work-focused interview (WFI) is outlined (Section 3.6) before examining FAs’ role in the detection of fraud and error (Section 3.7), how they manage their workload (Section 3.8), and the monitoring of FA meetings (Section 3.9). The chapter concludes with an overview of the progress made towards delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision (Section 3.10).

3.1 Background

The FA’s role in the Jobcentre Plus process is to gather the necessary background information from each customer. Their responsibilities include ensuring that claim forms are accurately completed and passed on to the processing teams so that they can be assessed and processed quickly. As part of this claim checking process, FAs also:

- check customer identity;
- check customers’ supporting evidence;
- answer any customer queries regarding benefits (to avoid these being carried forward into the WFI);
- advise the customer of the status of their claim before they leave so that their concerns about money are addressed; and
- outline any further evidence that is needed to process their claim.
As the FA is the first Jobcentre Plus staff member that the customer will talk to in any depth, they are also responsible for explaining that the customer’s claim for benefit is dependent on the satisfactory completion of a WFI. Customers claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) must also be available for, and actively seeking, employment.

The requirements of the FA meeting are detailed in the non-JSA customer Must Dos (see Appendix B). In addition to those already outlined, the FA is also responsible for:

- gathering all evidence and verification to reduce opportunities for fraud and error; and
- alerting the Personal Adviser (PA) if it appears that a WFI might not be appropriate.

### 3.2 Models of delivery

In general, FA meetings took place before WFIs. There were some exceptional examples of jobseekers and lone parents, in different case study areas, who saw the same member of staff for both the FA meeting and the WFI.

Contact Centres arranged FA meeting appointments against allotted times in central diary systems, using both VANTIVE and the Labour Market System (LMS), linked to the public offices. FAs and Financial Assessor Managers (FAMs) had mixed views on FA appointments made centrally by the Contact Centre. Whilst this appeared to work well, FAMs still had to manage diaries locally due to staff sickness, customers failing to attend, and appointments taking longer than 20 minutes. This caused particular problems in one office, where the Contact Centre booked appointments using two different systems – VANTIVE and LMS. At the end of each day, the FAM had to match these systems to ensure that they took account of all the appointments booked and to finalise FAs’ diary appointments. As the Contact Centre closed at 6pm, this could only be undertaken after that time. This meant that FAs generally had little time to prepare in advance for appointments.

The way in which appointments were managed in each local office varied. FAMs or receptionists in some Pathfinder and Day 2 offices allocated the next available FA to customers when they arrived at the Jobcentre Plus office for their appointment. In one Day 2 office, this included an allowance of 30 minutes for Incapacity Benefit (IB) customers, whose claims were regarded as more complex than other customer groups. FAMs using this system of ‘allocation on arrival’ believed it offered added efficiency as it allowed for greater flexibility to ensure that customer waiting times were kept to a minimum. The avoidance of specific appointment times also enabled FAs to deal with queries from cold callers to the Jobcentre Plus office more quickly. FAs were also not under as much pressure if an appointment took longer than the allotted 20 minutes, as long as they kept the PA informed.

FAMs in other offices allocated FAs to customers booked in by the Contact Centre either according to their knowledge/expertise or availability. In one Pathfinder office, the FAs themselves decided which appointments they would take. Offices using this system valued the flexibility it offered and believed that customers received a better quality service as waiting times were kept to a minimum.
There was mixed use of specialist/generalist FAs. Some offices used generalist FAs to ensure a larger pool of FAs was available to meet customer demand. In one ‘generalist’ office, there was informal specialising amongst FAs. Some FAs were renowned for the knowledge that they developed over time in certain benefit types, such as Bereavement Benefits (BBs) or Income Support (IS). Other FAs did not believe there was any need to specialise as basic information on all benefit types was available to them on the intranet and/or because they had a contact person in each of the benefit processing teams that they could easily contact with any specific queries.

Other larger offices used FAs who specialised in three of the individual benefit/customer types: JSA; IS; and IB. Staff regarded the main advantage of specialising to be the added value in the service that their customers received. This included being more likely to be able answer benefit queries given that FAs were more familiar and experienced in dealing with a particular benefit type. However, when a specialist FA was not available, a different FA would deal with the customer to avoid a delay to the claim. In general, customers did not comment on the level of knowledge that their FA displayed. There were examples, particularly amongst carers, who left their FA meeting with questions unanswered. This is discussed further in Section 3.5.

One Pathfinder office was piloting parallel processing, in which FAs conducted the FA meeting and then processed the claim whilst the customer was in the WFI. In practice, however, FAs were not able to process the claim in the time taken to conduct the WFI. Staff responsible for processing were often distracted by having to deal with queries from customers who telephoned or dropped into the office. Where outstanding evidence was required, processing was also delayed until the customer was able to return to bring the required evidence. The introduction of this system led to resource issues for both aspects of the FA role. FAs needed to be trained in benefit processing. While these staff were undertaking this training; there were less staff available to deliver FA meetings. Another unforeseen effect of the resource needs for parallel processing was an increase in the office’s rate of customers who failed to attend their appointment. Part of the FA’s role was to undertake reminder calls to customers the day before their appointment was scheduled to take place. FAs in public offices with parallel processing reported that there was insufficient time available to make these calls and so more customers were more likely to fail to attend their FA and WFI appointments as a result.

3.3 Before the FA meeting

3.3.1 FA preparation for meetings

FAs and FAMs consistently used the LMS, VANTIVE and claim forms to prepare for their meeting with a customer. This preparation was either undertaken immediately before each FA meeting or at the beginning of each day. FAs routinely gathered information on a customer’s National Insurance Number (NINO), date of birth, and contact details from the Departmental Central Index (DCI) before an appointment.
If time permitted, some also looked at customers’ claim histories. In one office, FAs found that time pressures meant that they did not always check the DCI and that this could lead to them missing fraudulent claims or overpayments.

“What you’re supposed to do is check [on DCI] through each one and see if they’ve got a current claim for any benefits. But quite honestly you don’t have time to do that, you just don’t have the time.”

(Financial Assessor)

Some FAs also used other information from the following sources: the FCO; the ‘conversations’ box; or, in one area, preview telephone calls made the day before a customer’s appointment. This additional information provided a more complete picture of the customer, their needs, and their claim history. In one Day 2 office, which did not allocate appointments in advance, an administrative assistant undertook all the customer previewing and provided FAs with a sheet of information on the customer’s claim history. The FAs and FAM believed that the information provided was sufficient, however, it was evident that there was no opportunity for FAs to undertake any previewing of the information in any depth.

FAs outlined examples of where they felt unprepared for interviews with customers. This was either due to a lack of available preparation time because of work pressures or because FCOs provided insufficient information on customers’ particular needs. Examples here included customers with hearing difficulties or customers who required an interpreter. These needs were then not catered for when the customer attended their appointment.

### 3.3.2 Completing claim forms

Customers are expected to complete their claim forms before they attend meetings at a Jobcentre Plus public office. In general, customers completed their claim forms before their appointment. The main exceptions here were those who received same day or next day appointments and so received blank claim forms when they arrived at the Jobcentre Plus office. In isolated cases, customers did not arrive at the Jobcentre Plus office early as they had been advised by the FCO in order to complete their forms. In these cases, the FA either assisted the customer to complete the forms during the scheduled FA appointment or customers used the time prior to the WFI to complete forms. FAs then undertook a claim check following the customer’s WFI.

FAs reported that claim forms tended to be partially completed, with either missing information or questions that were not answered accurately or fully. There were no clear or specific questions that customers consistently answered incorrectly or any particular customer groups for whom this was a particular issue. Some FAs did refer to customers’ basic skills or dyslexia needs. Customers with these needs often required additional assistance with filling in their forms. The exception to this was where one Contact Centre used the Integrated Claim Form (ICF). In this case, FCOs filled in claim forms with customers over the telephone. This system operated for customers claiming JSA and IS benefits only. The complete claim was then
forwarded to the public office before the appointment date, helping the delivery of the FA meeting as the FA was able to use their 20 minutes more effectively.

The Jobcentre Plus customers interviewed generally completed their forms before the FA meeting. Some sought help with filling in the form from family or friends, the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), or Jobcentre Plus staff. There were examples of lone parents and people with health problems who experienced difficulties with some sections/questions, although they could not recall which specifically. FAs tended to resolve these outstanding items on the claim form during the meeting.

In some cases, FAs attempted to complete the form with the customer during the meeting. Non-completion of forms typically impacted on the time available to FAs to fully check claims and their ability to offer customers advice and guidance as the 20 minute time allowance was taken up with the need to complete claim forms. In other cases, FAs asked customers who had not completed forms to re-book their FA meeting appointment.

“If you’ve got 20 minutes it’s definitely not sufficient, because at the same time as you’re filling the form you’re going to be checking and explaining to the customer what’s going to be happening next.’

(Financial Assessor)

In some Jobcentre Plus offices, measures were put in place to avoid or minimise the non-completion of forms. Customers were contacted the day before their appointments to remind them of the need to attend, to complete the form(s), and the supporting documentation required for the meeting. Staff believed this reduced the number of customers who failed to attend and increased the number of customers who attended their FA meeting with forms that were either completed or near completion. In the one area operating the ICF system, this measure helped to ensure that FAs could concentrate on the requirements set out in the Must Dos and not on completing customers’ claim forms.

3.4 The FA meeting

FAs typically explained the purpose of the FA meeting at the outset. The meeting was typically explained to all customer groups as an opportunity for the FA to check through their claim forms. In some cases, FAs also described their role as providing information and advice on benefits. Whilst all FAs claimed to provide an explanation of the meeting’s purpose, this did not always happen in practice. Some customers did not recall receiving any explanation of the FA meeting (by either the FCO or the FA), and were surprised that they were required to see two different people.

There was considerable variation in how FAs explained the meeting. As a result, there was also variation in customers’ understanding of its purpose. As one FA noted, there are no general guidelines for FAs on how to explain FA meetings. Their understanding was that ‘as long as the explanation is professional and includes the words Jobcentre Plus a lot’, they could decide how to explain the purpose of the meeting.
3.4.1 Checking the claim

FAs and FAMs across all case study areas were confident that they checked customers’ claims in line with the requirements of the Must Dos. FAs ensured that every question on every page was answered fully, clearly and that there were no outstanding queries or issues to be verified. The FA meeting observations confirmed this. Particular examples of areas that individual FAs noted checking with particular care included:

- capital questions – customers did not necessarily disclose all the necessary information relating to their income or assets. As a result, FAs were particularly mindful of asking for details of other bank accounts, undisclosed shares, or maintenance payments;

- co-habitation – FAs across all case study areas were particularly attentive of this, especially for lone parents. In one area, the FAM referred all individuals who lived in shared housing to a second interview with Monetary Value of Fraud and Error (MVFE) colleagues;

- unanswered questions – FAs asked customers extra questions if either they had reason(s) to doubt information already provided or if customers left questions unanswered on their forms.

FAs consistently asked for two forms of identification to verify customers’ identity. These were typically: passports, driving licences and birth certificates. There were also examples of other documentation used as identification, including rent books, utility bills, and Home Office papers for asylum seekers or for people who had been out of the country for some time. The Home Office papers were checked to ensure that these customers were eligible to work and/or claim benefits in the United Kingdom.

FAs were clear about the different types of documentation required by benefit type before claims could be processed. In one area, FAs listed their understanding of the evidence required by customer type, as follows:

- **JSA** – strict evidence requirements including the last two pay slips, proof of tax credits, and evidence of other income prior to claim being made.

- **IS** – evidence required is dependent on customers’ circumstances and may include last two pay slips, proof of child benefit, partners’ wage slips (if they are working).

- People claiming sickness or disability benefits – including sick notes, other evidence from employers to verify that the customer has been ill, proof of any pensions.

- **Carers** – including evidence of recent wages or any other benefits they may be receiving.

- **Bereavement benefits** – including registration of death, details of any occupational pensions, pay slips.
Customers generally reported no issues with being able to provide this evidence, exceptions included customers who had not received final pay slips from their last employers or where a customer did not have a recent bank statement. Customers who did not provide the necessary documentation at their FA meeting were asked to supply this before their claim was processed. The time allowance given for this varied by area and, in some areas, by customer group. It ranged from the same day to one calendar month.

3.5 Additional information and advice

Additional information and advice given to customers varied, and included information directly related to the status of their claim as well as wider information. There is some evidence that FAs tailored this information to customers’ circumstances and the particular type of benefit they were claiming. FAs’ experience and the extent of their benefit knowledge was a key factor in determining the level and nature of information given.

3.5.1 Information provided on the status of the claim

FAs consistently reported giving information to customers on the status of their claim including eligibility, the amount they could expect to receive, when first payment was due, and the subsequent timing of payments. Interviews with customers and observations of FA meetings revealed some variation in the information provided to different customer groups and that staff did not routinely provide such information in practice. The degree to which customers came away from the FA meeting with information on all aspects of their status of their claim was, therefore, variable, as outlined in the following sections.

Jobseekers

Observations showed that customers’ eligibility to claim JSA was discussed in some circumstances during the FA meeting. There were examples of FAs asking customers if they were looking for work in order to confirm that JSA was the correct benefit. Discussions were also held to determine which type of JSA benefit, income- or contributions-based, customers should be claiming. FAs typically focused on customers’ work history in order to determine whether they were likely to have made sufficient contributions to qualify for contributions-based JSA. However, FAs rarely gave customers definite confirmation of their eligibility for JSA benefits. FAs appeared to be reluctant to provide such information because the final decision lies with staff who process the claim:

‘You don’t say that they are going to get it, you say if it’s allowed because we are not processors.’

(Financial Assessor)
Information given to JSA customers about the frequency of customers’ benefit receipt was consistently linked to explanations of the fortnightly signing regime. Where processing took place within the local site, FAs were also able to give JSA customers a more accurate estimate of when the first payment would be made as they were aware of any delays in processing. JSA customers typically reported that they were given information about the amount of benefit they could expect to receive. Observations of FA meetings, however, indicated that this information was not consistently given.

**Lone parents**

Lone parents’ eligibility to claim IS was rarely discussed explicitly by FAs. The exception being where customers themselves raised concerns about their eligibility due to their circumstances, such as pregnancy. Again, FAs were not able to give customers a definite response regarding their eligibility as they were not responsible for processing claims themselves:

Customer: ‘I wasn’t sure I’d get Income Support.’

FA: ‘You might not be entitled to it because of your maternity allowance, but we’ll put it in anyway.’

(Observation of a Financial Assessor meeting)

Lone parents did not usually know when to expect the first payment. Some FAs were able to give a realistic timescale for payment where they knew about local delays in processing. Otherwise an estimate was given:

‘7-10 days for your Income Support, they’ve got a bit of a backlog so it might be longer but I’ve been told to say 7-10 days.’

(Observation of a Financial Assessor meeting)

Observations of FA meetings provided no examples of FAs informing lone parents of the timescale in which payment could be expected. Some customers were aware of the level of benefit they could expect to receive, either because the FA referred to an information sheet or because the FA called a different department to provide this information to lone parents. FAs also reported that they tended to give lone parents an estimate, refer them to another department, or to a colleague so that they did not misinform customers.

**Customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits**

Discussions around eligibility were evident in observations of FA meetings with customers claiming health-related benefits with the focus principally on potential eligibility. There were examples of FAs giving customers information on their potential eligibility in terms of the contributions they have made:

‘...it goes on the contributions you’ve made in the last two years...You might qualify for Incapacity Benefit then...how long had you been on the yard for?’

(Observation of a Financial Assessor meeting)
Customers typically reported, however, that their eligibility to receive benefit was not confirmed by the FA. As a result, these customers had to wait until their first payment was actually made until their eligibility was confirmed:

‘She just said that all she could do was put me in for it and then see what the comeback is of it. She didn’t say that I’d definitely be getting it.’

(Female with back problems, aged 44 years)

There was, however, one isolated observation of a FA confirming a customer’s eligibility for IB:

‘You don’t need to claim IS as you qualify for IB as a right… all you need for the claim to go through is a completed backdated form with a sick note.’

(Observation of a Financial Assessor meeting)

Other discussions were observed concerning customer’s ineligibility to claim IS in addition to IB, based on calculations of income from a partner’s earning or savings, for example:

‘Okay, the money coming into your household will be £20 over the limit for Income Support and the money from the sale of your house will be classed as capital over £8,000 so it will also count against a claim for Income Support but it won’t affect your Incapacity Benefit.’

(Observation of a Financial Assessor meeting)

Actual calculations were not always conducted during FA meetings. FAs explained that there was not always enough time available during the meeting to undertake the calculation and some intentionally avoided giving out figures to customers so they didn’t misinform them:

‘Only if its straightforward, you don’t have time to do calculations, you only have 20 minutes and there’s no way we can do calculations for benefit with only a 20 minute period…there’s too much information to gather in that period.’

(Financial Assessor)

There was variation among customers claiming health-related benefits as to their awareness of the level of benefit they could expect to receive. Observations illustrated only rare examples of customers being given this information, where FAs were observed to have consulted an information sheet:

‘You can expect to receive £34.65 for the first six months and then it will go up to £37.00 after that.’

(Observation of a Financial Assessor meeting)

The timescale for the first payment was reported by FAs to be an estimate based on anticipated processing times. Observations of FA meetings showed that this information was not consistently provided, and customers rarely knew when they
could expect their first and subsequent benefit payments. There was only one observed example of a customer being told that benefit would be paid every four weeks.

**Carers**

A dedicated processing department, outside of public offices and districts, deals with claims for Carer’s Allowance (CA). FAs felt that this was a key factor influencing their ability to provide carers with information on the status of their claim, both in terms of when the first payment would be made and their eligibility. Where processing of other benefits took place on-site or within the district, FAs typically reported being aware of any local delays but with CA claims only an estimate of processing times were given:

‘As I’ve just explained to you, we’ll courier this form over to Preston and it will take approximately eight to ten weeks.’

(Observation of a Financial Assessor meeting)

FAs were also less confident about eligibility for CA as they had little experience of processing the claims themselves and relatively little contact with staff from the processing department. Customers were, therefore, unsure whether they would receive any benefit following the FA meeting:

‘Nobody tells you whether you’ll get it, you just give your information and you just wait and see if you get anything.’

(Male, caring for wife with Multiple Sclerosis, aged 64)

Observations and customer interviews also showed FAs did not usually provide carers with information on the level of benefit they could expect to receive or the timescales for subsequent payment.

### 3.5.2 Additional benefit information

Information provided to customers about additional benefits varied between different customer groups. JSA customers and lone parents were given relatively limited information. In these cases, information tended to focus on the availability of, and the process for claiming, Housing Benefit (HB). Similarly, carers were offered little additional benefit information although one customer was informed about IS in an exceptional case. FAs were observed giving customers claiming IB, information about entitlement to a number of additional benefits, such as IS or BB. Where customers had a short-term illness, such as a broken leg, some FAs provided information about JSA and explained the requirement to transfer to claiming JSA once the individual recovered from their illness or injury.
3.5.3 Wider information and advice

Some FAs, from across all public offices, provided customers with other information and advice that was not directly related to their claim, including:

- information on the system of direct payment into bank accounts;
- signposting to other advice services such as the CAB;
- checking customers had made a claim for HB or Council Tax Benefit and, in the case of lone parents, a Child Support Agency (CSA) claim; and
- informing customers of other entitlements including new tax credits.

Such information was given to customers across all groups and observations confirmed that the information given was usually verbal.

Lone parents, in particular, received wider information and advice, usually regarding child tax credits. The extent of the discussion depended on lone parents’ knowledge of the credits. More in-depth discussions were found where customers were not aware that the child element of IS had been removed and replaced by tax credits. FAs felt able to provide more advice on new tax credits and the process for applying with facilities to fast track customer details to the Inland Revenue via a government E-portal. A specialist IS FA in one Day 2 office, also reported giving out further information about a toy lending library, the Sure Start programme, free school meals, and open days at the local leisure centre to lone parents.

3.5.4 Dealing with customers’ enquiries

FAs provided additional information and advice in response to queries or comments raised by customers, either in the course of the meeting or, more typically, when FAs asked customers at the end of the meeting if they had any additional queries.

A key requirement of the FA meeting is to answer customer queries relating to their benefit claim so that benefit-related queries are not carried forward into the WFI. Examples of the benefit queries raised by customers during the FA meeting included issues concerning the status of the claim, such as how much customers will receive and when payment will be made. As discussed in Section 3.5.1, FAs typically responded by giving an approximation or a ‘likely’ amount that would be paid and an estimate of the timescales for payment. This advice usually took into account their awareness of any local delays in processing. FAs were less confident in answering other customer queries concerning benefit rules, such as the number of hours customers can work before affecting IS and CA benefit entitlement. Such queries raised by carers were not resolved by the FA and were subsequently raised again in the WFI.

Other customers raised queries about additional entitlements related to their specific circumstances. Customers claiming health-related benefits, for example, were observed to ask about help they could receive with health/medicine costs. Lone parents who were pregnant asked about their eligibility for the maternity grant and
entitlement to free milk. There was some evidence that FAs did not answer such queries to the satisfaction of all customers:

‘I was quite cross actually, because I did ask, I said was there anything else that I was entitled to apply for and she said no…it was only through a friend, she told me I was able to apply for the maternity grant which I didn’t know about.’

(Female lone parent, currently pregnant, aged 27 years)

Customers, from all groups, were routinely concerned about the financial help they could receive in the period before their benefit was processed and paid. FAs consistently provided customers with information about the Social Fund and the option to apply for a Crisis Loan in response to these concerns:

Customer: ‘How can I live without money until then?’

FA: ‘If you have no income I can give you the number for the Social Fund team and you can apply for a Crisis Loan, would you like the number?’

(Observation of a Financial Assessor meeting)

3.5.5 FA confidence

In general, FAs were confident about giving advice to customers in their specialist benefit area as they felt sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced. Where FAs had previously worked in a benefit role, they reported that their previous experience gave them more confidence to deal with a wider range of benefits:

‘I’ve been here for thirteen years…I’ve done bereavement, I’ve done widows benefit, pensions, income support, carers allowance, I know bits about them all, pretty much the whole range of them.’

(Financial Assessor)

If FAs were faced with an unfamiliar issue, staff typically referred to guidance on the Intranet or asked colleagues within the office or the processing team. These sources of information were considered a key means of increasing FAs’ knowledge of benefits:

‘If I’m not sure of the full information…then I’ll go and ask my team member…you cannot know fully about all benefits, it’s just impossible, you can’t do that. And everything is changing so quickly.’

(Financial Assessor)

Some FAs, typically those without a benefit background, felt that there were some gaps in the training and information provided on certain benefits, particularly those perceived to be more complicated such as IB and CA. FAs recognised that these gaps in wider knowledge prevented them giving customers more in-depth information and advice across the full range of benefits, if required. There were also examples of FAs who avoided giving information to customers themselves, preferring to refer the customer to a colleague in order not to misinform customers:
‘I’d probably never give out advice on IB as IS, to be honest as I don’t have the level of knowledge on IS and would not want to give the wrong advice.’

(Financial Assessor)

FA confidence in providing information and advice on other issues such as new tax credits was mixed. FA staff in one Day 2 office received training on tax credits a year before it was required and had forgotten much of the information by the time it was needed. FAs who regularly dealt with lone parents were generally more confident with the child tax credits because they dealt with such claims on a day-to-day basis.

3.6 Next steps

The FA meeting typically ended with the FA asking if the customer has any additional queries or questions, as outlined in Section 3.5.4. The following section covers the additional processes that occur as the FA meeting closes, including explaining the requirement to attend and the purpose of the WFI, handing the customer over to the PA, and the next steps for the processing of the claim.

3.6.1 Explaining the WFI

Observation evidence showed that the WFI was usually explained at the beginning of the FA meeting to set the context. Explanations typically made the distinction that the FA meeting focused on dealing with the customers’ benefit claim while the meeting with a PA focused on work, as shown in the following example:

‘Hi, my name’s [name] I’m your Financial Assessor…I’ll just go through your claim form and then I’ll pass you on to the Personal Advisor who’ll talk more about work and things in detail.’

(Observation of Financial Assessor meeting)

FAs consistently provided information about the timing of the WFI immediately after the FA meeting but there was less consistency in the provision of information about the length of the WFI. In general, FAs gave varied explanations of the purpose of the WFI to different customer groups, as outlined below.

Jobseekers

Explanations of the WFI given to JSA customer were typically job-related and focused directly on work:

‘You’ll now be seeing [PA name] about what you’re looking for job-wise and what we can offer you.’

(Observation of Financial Assessor meeting)

‘You’ll then see [name of PA] and she’ll talk to you about jobs, where to look, what kind of jobs are available, and you’ll see her straight after me.’

(Observation of Financial Assessor meeting)
Other FAs reported that they focused explanations on the fortnightly signing process, explaining that the PA will give the customer a signing date and time and go through a JSAg with customers.

_Lone parents_

Variation was evident in the explanations given to lone parents. It was apparent from observation evidence that some explanations were kept very general and focused on who the customer would be seeing rather than the explicit purpose of the WFI:

‘Now you’re booked in with [PA name], one of our Lone Parent Advisers. I’ll call her now.’

(Observation of Financial Assessor meeting)

For other lone parents, however, the WFI was explained with a clear work focus and that it would involve a discussion about work with a PA:

‘…then I’ll pass you on to the Personal Adviser who’ll talk more about work.’

(Observation of Financial Assessor meeting)

Some FAs reported that they would further tailor the explanation to customers’ circumstances by, for example, explaining that the WFI would focus on looking for part-time work.

_Customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits_

FAs gave a softer explanation of the WFI to customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits due to their perceptions that the process could be upsetting for some customers:

‘So I always think that this work-focused interview for the people that are incapacitated that is the wrong term, because it makes people extremely upset and you can guarantee that at least once a day we will have somebody in front of us in tears. And that’s very distressing.’

(Financial Assessor)

Other FAs were observed to focus on the support mechanisms available to the customer when they can work in the future:

‘You’re going to see [PA’s name] who is a Personal Adviser. She will talk to you about the work side of things, what work you’ve done and what kind of work you might like to do in the future.’

(Observation of Financial Assessor meeting)

_Carers_

Carers recalled limited explanations given by FAs about the purpose of the WFI. This was confirmed by observation evidence where explanations were limited to the FA explaining to the customer that they would see an adviser following the FA meeting:
‘Then you’ll go over to an advisor – you’re seeing [PA name] today at [time] – so we’ve got lots of time.’

(Observation of Financial Assessor meeting)

FAs reported that they would tailor explanations to carers by explaining that the WFI was part of the new process and that everyone who makes a new claim had to go through the same process. By adopting this approach, FAs wanted to avoid customers feeling pressured to participate or risk upsetting customers who may perceive that a WFI was inappropriate given their circumstances.

One of the Must Dos for FA meetings is to make customers aware that as a condition of the benefit claim they are required to attend the WFI. FAs did view the responsibility for explaining this aspect of the WFI as part of the FA role. In exceptional cases, FAs either viewed this to be the responsibility of the FCO or did not raise the mandatory nature of the WFI to avoid a potential reaction from non-JSA customers. Observation evidence revealed that the mandatory requirement to attend a WFI was not usually explained by FAs.

3.6.2 Handover to the PA

Following the FA meeting, FAs generally asked customers to take a seat in the waiting area, directed the customer to the PA, or walked the customer over to where the PA was sitting. If the customer had already participated in an FA meeting, it was rare that the FA would see the customer again after the WFI. This arrangement only occurred when:

- a benefit query/issue was raised during the WFI;
- the customer’s claim form was not completed fully during the FA meeting;
- additional benefit forms needed to be completed; or
- outstanding evidence was subsequently provided by the customer.

Some FAs gave a brief summary of the customer’s case and circumstances to the PA prior to handing the customer over for the WFI. This generally covered:

- employment issues, such as whether the customer was looking for work, the type of work sought, and due start date;
- health problems/illnesses; and
- specific issues raised by the customer during the FA meeting, such as training.

FAs also passed on details about the benefit advice given to customers to the PA in order to avoid repetition of advice and to maintain consistency in the advice given.

During the handover, FAs referred to customers’ emotional state and behaviour during communication with the PA, in order to provide an overview of the customer’s general mood, any potential for aggressive behaviour, or if the customer was drunk. This was perceived to be for the benefit of both PA and customer. The PA
would be more prepared and could tailor their approach to avoid upsetting or provoking the customer further:

‘Sometimes if the customer’s really annoyed or upset…I think they need to know how the customer’s feeling that day, because we’ve got to make it easier for the customer at the end of the day.’

(Financial Assessor)

In some offices, however, the exchange of information during the handover did not occur. This was either because the working relationships between FAs and PAs was not as close as found elsewhere or because the size of the office did not facilitate this type of communication. FAs based on a separate floor, for example, did not have direct contact with PAs as part of the handover.

### 3.6.3 Progressing the claim

During the handover, the claim form itself was also typically handed over to the PA. This allowed the PA to access the customers’ details for use in establishing a record of the customer on the LMS. The claim forms also provided PAs with information on customers’ circumstances.

Following the WFI, the claim form was typically returned to the FA section to be logged onto the system before it was sent for processing.

### 3.7 Fraud and error

As part of their role, FAs are required to gather evidence and verification to reduce opportunities for fraud and error. All staff consistently believed that FAs performed an important role in the detection of fraud and error. Staff felt that these responsibilities fitted well with FAs’ responsibilities of checking the claim form and gathering evidence to allow the claim to be processed.

FAs perceived the FA meeting to be their main tool in detecting potential fraud and error. The face-to-face element in particular was considered to be an effective means of eliciting and checking information from customers that may suggest fraud or error as such information may not emerge through other means. The meeting specifically allowed FAs to question customers and listen to their responses to identify any inconsistencies with the information contained in the claim form. FAs were also able to query, with customers, any issues that suggested potential fraud that were raised and recorded by FCOs in the notes section of LMS. In one Day 2 office, FAs used a particular aide memoir that listed questions relating to fraud and error to assist FAs in identifying the need for a Gateway Intervention (GI). The FA meeting also allowed FAs to verify the authenticity of evidence and documentation customers presented to support their claim. In one Pathfinder office, an ultra violet scanner had been purchased to help verify the legitimacy of documentation.
FAs’ confidence in detecting potential fraud and error and raising it with the customer depended on a range of factors, as follows:

- **Experience**

  Staff members talked about gaining confidence from personal experience of detecting fraud and error rather than from set procedures. FAs and FAMs with previous experience of dealing with customers on a face-to-face basis were also more confident about raising it with customers.

- **Transparency of fraud/error**

  FAs felt more confident when dealing with more obvious cases of potential fraud that required a GI, such as cases where a CSA application was required or when a couple was living together. They were less confident in other cases where FAs suspected fraudulent claims, such as undeclared savings.

- **Training**

  In one Day 2 office, FAs sat in with processors to understand what evidence was required to support the claim and how decisions were made.

- **Office environment**

  Staff in another Day 2 office did not feel comfortable questioning a customer to resolve a suspicion about potential fraud in an unscreened environment due to the customer’s potential reaction.

The detection of fraud and error throughout the whole Jobcentre Plus process is examined in more detail in Chapter 6.

### 3.8 Managing workloads

Staff provided varied responses in relation to managing FA workloads. Some FAs felt that they were stretched whilst others did not perceive there to be any issues with their workload. FAs consistently related their ability to manage workloads to the amount of downtime available to them. FAs spent downtime on a range of activities, including: catching up on paperwork; preparing for the following day’s meetings by previewing customer information; registering claims; closing down claims; and processing claims. Some FAs reported that there was no downtime.

FAs were generally able to conduct meetings in the allocated time slot, reporting that 20 minutes was sufficient. FA meetings with single JSA customers and rapid reclaim customers generally took the shortest length of time to complete, between five to ten minutes. FA meetings tended to last longer with customers who:

- claimed multiple benefits;
- had learning difficulties or mental health issues;
- did not speak English as a first language;
were identified for GI;  
provided incomplete documentation such as claim forms; or  
arrived late for the FA meeting.

In these circumstances, FAs considered that the 20 minute allowance was insufficient. One Day 2 office made a local arrangement where FAs could take 30 minutes, rather than the standard 20 minutes, with IB customers. This was installed in response to time pressures encountered by FAs and because PAs reported that they did not need the full 40 minutes with an IB customer. The customer spent less time in a WFI but the same overall time speaking to advisers.

FAs identified a number of issues that affected their overall ability to manage workloads:

- staff reductions and a general perception amongst some FAs that they were under resourced;  
- removal of set FA appointments due to the volume of cold callers and enquiries; and  
- parallel processing (in one case study area).6

Consequently, FAs reported that they were under an increased amount of pressure to conduct a range of duties and tasks both within, and outside of, the FA meeting. Some FAs specifically emphasised the impact on fraud and error detection. In these cases, FAs felt that there was less time available during the FA meeting to conduct thorough checks, such as cross-checking old claims on the DCI computer system, as well as completing the required checks and gathering evidence for processing.

### 3.9 Monitoring FA meetings and use of Must Dos

FAs were generally aware of the content of the Must Dos, despite the fact that the expression Must Dos was not always explicitly used or recognised. There were mixed messages, however, regarding the extent to which the Must Dos were used and how well they were understood. Some FAs believed that the Must Dos were naturally covered in the FA meetings as they form part of everyday working practice:

> ‘You don’t consciously think, that’s a key work objective I’ve just achieved. It’s something that you know that you have that is part of your normal role anyway. So you know that that’s got to be done, you know whose registering the claims etc, you know customer service, that type of thing...It’s an automatic part of your working life.’

(Financial Assessor)

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6 In one district, processing of JSA claims occurred within individual offices by a dedicated processing team or as a duty of FAs in addition to conducting FA meetings.
Other FAs, however, demonstrated less use and knowledge of the Must Dos. One FA acknowledged that she did not follow the Must Dos in explaining the compulsory requirement to attend the WFI due to the potential reaction of the customer. This supports our earlier findings in Section 3.6.1.

FAs’ awareness of the Must Dos was raised through observations and emails received when the Must Dos were first introduced, and through regular guidance or updates provided via the intranet, internally produced desk guides, and lists. There was some evidence, however, that the amount of guidance had a negative impact on FA workload. One FA, for example, noted that she received 15 emails in one day and often takes them home to read.

FAMs generally monitored the content of FA meetings on a monthly basis using the Quality Assessment (QAF) framework. The frequency with which monitoring occurred varied due to time constraints experienced by FAMs. They usually observed, but also sat in on, the FA meeting to look at a FA’s interview style and the quality of information gathered. FAMs consistently reported providing feedback to the FA and used this to identify strengths, recommend changes to delivery, and/or to identify training needs. In one Day 2 office, a FAM reported that monitoring had not taken place since the introduction of parallel processing. In this instance, the FAM believed monitoring was not needed as the FAs were sufficiently experienced at benefit checking.

3.10 Conclusions: Progress towards the vision

The delivery of FA meetings was broadly in line with the Must Dos in respect of ensuring that claim forms were accurately completed. The systematic checking of claim forms was effective in allowing FAs to identify any gaps or unanswered questions and to raise any queries with customers while they are present. FAs were also consistently gathering evidence and verification to reduce opportunities for fraud and error and to allow the claim to be processed. FAs were aware of the evidence required for different benefits and were consistently checking identification documentation. Time pressures as a result of incomplete claim forms, however, affected FAs’ ability to conduct full and comprehensive claim checks.

3.10.1 Delivering a work-focused service

The explanations given to customers by FAs about the purpose of the FA meeting and WFI are typically closely linked, with a clear focus on the work-related element of the WFI. It was evident, however, that there is room for improvement and more progress to be made in terms of the aspect of the Jobcentre Plus vision concerned with delivering a work focus to the benefit system. Such explanations were not delivered to all customers who are using the service. There were examples of explanations given to carers and customers claiming health-related benefits that did not touch upon the subject of work. FAs reported to be concerned to avoid a potential negative reaction from customers who felt work was inappropriate. Observation evidence also revealed that the mandatory requirement to attend a WFI was not usually explained by FAs.
3.10.2 Swift, secure and professional access to benefits

Effective and systematic claim checks were undertaken by FAs to ensure that there are no outstanding queries or issues that may delay processing of claims. Good practice in undertaking preview telephone calls to customers has also helped to increase customers’ propensity to complete forms prior to the FA meeting and to bring the required supporting evidence which further aided the processing of claims. The approach to checking claims and good awareness among FAs of the evidence requirements of claims, also contributed to the detection of fraud and error, helping to ensure that customers accessed benefits to which they were entitled.

All staff reported that progress had been made in terms of FA knowledge and ability to conduct benefit checks within their specialist benefit areas, due to more day-to-day experience of conducting claims. Gaps in knowledge and confidence with certain benefit claims were still reported, however, particularly by staff who did not have a background in benefits. The ability of FAs to give in-depth information and advice about claims that were perceived to be more complex, remains variable.

Considerable variation was evident in FAs’ advice to customers about the status of their claim. Information about eligibility, timescales for payment and the level of benefit customers could anticipate to receive was given to some jobseekers, lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and carers. Where processing took place locally, FAs were able to provide more accurate information to customers as they were able to refer to colleagues at the relevant processing department or other information sources. Customers such as carers typically had unresolved concerns over their claim, and FAs felt unable to answer these queries as processing took place centrally.

The findings also highlight varying ability of FA staff to answer customer queries about additional, or what were perceived to be more complex, benefits. Where staff did not specialise in a particular benefit, or had a benefit background, the complexity of these benefits and the infrequent contact with staff who process the claims, affected FAs’ ability to answer customer queries. As such some customer queries, particularly those claiming IB and CA benefits, were carried forward into the WFI.

Progress was also evident in the development of staff skills to process claims. The introduction of parallel processing in one case study area, in particular, enhanced FAs’ ability to deliver both face-to-face FA meetings with customers and claim processing. Conducting both roles was believed by staff to be beneficial in allowing FAs to give more accurate information on the timescales for processing and likely outcomes in terms of eligibility, therefore enhancing the service given to customers. However, where FAs required training in the processing role, this impacted on the availability of staff to deliver the FA meeting service in the interim.
4 Work-focused interviews

This chapter explores the delivery of work-focused interviews (WFIs) to the four different customer groups covered by the research: jobseekers; lone parents; customers claiming health or disability benefits; and carers. The chapter starts by examining the models of delivery and the set-up of Personal Adviser (PA) teams (Section 4.2) before examining how PAs prepared for the WFI (Section 4.3) and instances where customers failed to attend their appointment (Section 4.4). The content of WFIs is then covered (Section 4.5) in detail, including: how the purpose of the WFI was explained; the extent to which work was discussed; whether or not job searches were conducted; the extent to which PAs gave customers information and advice; whether discussions about benefits occurred; what agreement and action plans were made; and what follow-up contact was agreed. The instances in which deferrals and waivers were made or were felt to be appropriate are outlined (Section 4.6), followed by a summary of the length of WFIs and PAs’ ability to manage their workloads (Sections 4.7 and 4.8 respectively). The role of the PA in fraud and error is then explored (Section 4.9) before the monitoring of WFIs is examined (Section 4.10). The chapter concludes by examining where progress was made towards delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision (Section 4.11).

4.1 Background

WFIs are a key element of the Jobcentre Plus process, designed to deliver a ‘work focus to the benefits system for everyone of working age’ and to provide ‘active help from PAs to help people get and keep work’. Following the Financial Assessor (FA) meeting, all customers are expected to attend an interview with a PA. The requirement to attend can be deferred or waived for customers in certain circumstances. Customers who are terminally ill or whose claim is wholly retrospective, for example, can have their WFI waived. These customers are, therefore, not required to attend an interview at all. Other customers who are experiencing a range of serious health conditions, those who are due to give birth within eight weeks of their claim start date, and customers who face severe difficulty in attending the jobcentre due to illness or caring responsibilities are also eligible to have their WFI deferred for an appropriate period. This is typically decided by the First Contact
Officer (FCO) or staff at the public office, and a WFI will be rearranged at the end of this period. The aim of the WFI is to help customers consider work as an option, to identify barriers to work and appropriate help and to explain the services available through Jobcentre Plus. More specifically, the requirements of the PA during the WFI, as described in the Must Dos, are to:

- consider if a waiver/deferral is appropriate and take the necessary action;
- explain the purpose of the WFI and the requirement to participate;
- discuss any current job search activity;
- have a meaningful and substantive discussion of the customer’s work options and work prospects based on an assessment of their skills, experience, qualifications, barriers and caring responsibilities;
- undertake a job search for those ready for work and make a submission if there is a suitable vacancy;
- focus on an Incapacity Benefit (IB) customer’s residual capacity not their incapacity – what they can do, not what they cannot and be prepared to challenge assumptions;
- actively promote in-work benefits and tax credits and other advantages of being in work for the customer and their family;
- carry out an in-work benefit calculation wherever possible, either using known figures or hypothetical examples;
- actively promote and encourage the customer to take up New Deal or other help to enable them to prepare for work and refer them to specialist provision;
- agree a Jobseeker’s Agreement (JSAg) for claimants of Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) or encourage the customer to develop a Customer Action Plan setting out what they will do to prepare themselves for work and what we will do to help them;
- tell the customer about mandatory Trigger Meetings and set an appropriate workflow or reminder on the Labour Market System (LMS);
- offer continuing contact with the customer and encourage further meetings before the mandatory repeat WFI to discuss their work options; and
- advise the FA whether the customer participated in the WFI so that benefit processing is not delayed.
4.2 Models of delivery

All customers typically saw a PA immediately after the FA meeting, with only a short delay of between five and 15 minutes. Customers were usually directed to a waiting or seating area before they moved to a PA’s desk. Customers tended to use the time in between FA meetings and the WFI to use the job points located in the jobcentre or to read information leaflets available in the waiting area. Lone parents visiting some offices were particular positive about the toys available in the waiting area to entertain young children during any delays. In one Pathfinder office, FA meetings and WFI with some customers, such as lone parents who attended with pushchairs and customers who had mobility issues, were conducted at the same desk on the ground floor of the office. This was because some advisory areas were located on the first floor and so, with no lift available, were not accessible. PAs found this inconvenient as they had to log onto the computer system on a new computer and they didn’t have sources of information to hand while conducting the interview away from their usual desk. In larger public offices, customers were sometimes directed to a different floor for their WFI, with reception or security staff on hand for help.

In exceptional cases, a customer saw a PA on arrival at the jobcentre. In these instances, an FA was not available either due to strike action or staff shortages as a result of illness or understaffing in the office. In these circumstances, the PA conducted the claim check before delivering the WFI. In one Pathfinder office, for example, lone parent PAs conducted both the FA and PA role as there were no Income Support (IS) FAs in the office. This required the lone parent PA team to allow 20 minutes for the FA element in addition to the 40 minutes automatically allocated for the WFI in their diaries.

4.2.1 The appointment booking system

Contact Centres booked WFI appointments into the diaries of individual PAs using the VANTIVE system. Staff at public offices typically reported few issues with the booking system. Only one Personal Adviser Manager (PAM) in a Pathfinder office preferred the LMS over VANTIVE as it allowed specific interview times to be booked rather than blocks of time, which afforded greater consistency with FA diaries. Other PAMs felt that there was less flexibility with the system where appointments were booked into specific diaries than when they allocated appointments across all PAs in their office. VANTIVE does not book appointments evenly across PA diaries depending on the skill searches used by FCOs and managers found it difficult to rearrange diaries to meet the target of booking appointments within four days of the customer making the initial claim.

4.2.2 PA team set up

All case study public offices used specialist PAs to conduct WFIs to a certain extent. Staff perceived specialist PAs to be those who were specifically responsible for a particular customer group. The extent to which specialist PAs were available for all customer groups varied between, and within, offices.
Pathfinder offices typically used specialist staff for lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and JSA customers. Similar arrangements were also found in Day 2 offices, although there were some examples where specialist staff were only available for JSA and non-JSA customers. Only one Pathfinder and one Day 2 office identified a specialist PA for customers claiming Carer’s Allowance (CA). There tended to be lower numbers of these customers attending public offices for WFI s and so other offices did not allocate a specialist PA but used specialist IB PAs instead.

Specialist advisers in smaller offices, both Pathfinders and Day 2 offices, only spent some of their time delivering WFI s to a particular customer group. For the rest of the time, these advisers acted as generalist PAs dealing with other customer groups. Managers consistently believed it was important to maintain a mix of skills in order to cover for sickness absences, holidays and part-time working:

‘I think multi-skilling can be good, if anyone’s on leave we’re always constantly trying to backfill that post.’

(Office Manager)

Jobcentre Plus staff consistently favoured the use of specialist PAs due to the depth of knowledge and experience they can bring to delivering WFI s with particular customer groups. Staff who specialised in delivering WFI s to a particular customer group, felt they had a better understanding of customers’ circumstances, more awareness of potential barriers, and detailed information on the options available to their customers. They believed that this allowed them to deliver a better service for customers:

‘Rather than every adviser trying to know a bit of every type of benefit, to be referred to a certain adviser that has a more in depth knowledge of what’s available, is a lot better for that customer.’

(Personal Adviser)

Staff also felt that there were advantages to the use of generalist PAs. Managers, in particular, felt that there was a need to maintain a wider knowledge of the PA role to avoid disruption to the delivery of services in case of staff absences. In some exceptional cases, PAs felt that a more generalist role provided them with a more varied role and greater challenges in their job, as each customer seen presented varying circumstances.

4.2.3 Length of PA appointments

The length of time allocated for WFI s was consistent across all offices. Full new claims were generally allocated 40 minutes, with 20 minutes available for JSA and IS rapid reclaims, where customers have claimed in the last 13 weeks. Staff and customer views on the sufficiency of the length of WFI are detailed in Section 4.7.
4.2.4 Changes in structures over past year

As in the last round of research, staffing arrangements included specialist staff for certain customers groups such as jobseekers, lone parents and customers claiming health-related benefits. More generalist staff were also evident in both Pathfinder and Day 2 offices. Managers in some larger offices reported that specialist staff tended to spend more time working with their particular customer group as more stock customers were being seen in addition to new claims.

4.3 Preparing for the WFI

Prior to the WFI, PAs accessed information about customers from a range of sources. Basic personal details and date of claim information was accessed from VANTIVE. Additional information was provided by FCOs through the conversation or notes section of LMS. PAs reported that this sometimes included information about the reason for the benefit claim, the circumstances in which customers left employment, and information on previous and future employment options. For customers claiming health-related benefits, FCOs may also include information on customers’ health problems. In practice, however, such notes just tended to record that customers were ‘sick’ and more detail was rarely provided about the nature of an individual’s illness. Other sources of information used by PAs prior to the WFI included the customer’s claim form, old customer records on LMS, and, for JSA customers, the ‘Helping you Back to Work booklet’ they are required to complete in addition to their claim form. In some offices during the handover to the PA, FAs provided verbal information to the PA about a customer’s circumstances or emotional state on the day of the appointment.

Staff held differing perceptions about the need for such information prior to the WFI and so its actual use varied. Information from the various sources allowed some PAs to prepare for the meeting by having a basic picture of the customer and their circumstances, and an idea of the topics to discuss with customers. Dealing with sensitive issues, such as illnesses, was also considered to be easier when they were known about in advance. This allowed, for example, PAs to seek advice or information on how an illness affected a customer’s ability to work. Some staff found it useful to have information available as it helped them to mentally prepare for the WFI and decide how to focus the interview:

‘I do prefer to have a claim form to refer to. I like to have a look at someone’s situation and certainly their condition…I like to know that before I see them.’

(Personal Adviser)

Other PAs did not feel it was essential to have information about a customer prior to the WFI. These PAs were keen to avoid prejudging, or making assumptions about, customers and their circumstances:
‘I find that quite good to start off fresh and listening to everything they’ve got to say rather than, sometimes with a little bit of information you can start making preconceived ideas and judging them.’

(Personal Adviser)

Staff views of the sufficiency of the information available prior to the WFI varied depending on their perception of the need for such information. Less experienced PAs typically reported the need for information, as they were less confident in being able to adapt the approach to delivering the WFI to the circumstances of the customer. In more exceptional cases, more experienced PAs also reported that information received prior to the WFI was insufficient as it did not enable them to determine a customer’s circumstances and know what approach to take in delivering the WFI. PAs dealing with customers claiming health-related benefits in particular, reported that information received that only stated the customer to be ‘sick’ was insufficient. These PAs reported that they found it helpful to know the nature of the illness as they perceived this information to determine the focus of the interview.

Ensuring that detailed and complete information is available through the various sources, gives PAs the option of accessing and using the information if they choose to. Good communication between FAs and PAs that occurred during the handover, was an example of effective practice ensuring that PAs were prepared for the WFI.

4.4 Failure to attend

All customers are required to attend a WFI for their claim to be processed, unless deferred or waived by a FCO or FA. The extent of failure to attend at WFIs varied between offices, with levels as high as 50 per cent while others reported it to be more manageable at ten per cent. In Day 2 offices, staff generally believed that the level of ‘failures to attend’ fell over the past year as the time between First Contact and the WFI reduced. Some offices, both Pathfinder and Day 2 offices, introduced preview phone calls to customers the day before their scheduled appointment in an effort to minimise failure to attend, with some success reported. An additional Day 2 office planned to introduce this system shortly after the fieldwork for this research took place.

Staff did not perceive there to be noticeable patterns in the type of customers who failed to attend designated interviews. Instead, they identified a number of key factors that affected individuals’ ability to attend, including:

- difficulty with childcare or a child with an illness on the day of the appointment;
- illness; and
- customers securing employment prior to the WFI.
There was no evidence of follow-up of a JSA customer who failed to attend. Instead, the onus was left with the individual to contact Jobcentre Plus and rearrange a WFI so that their claim could proceed.

For non-JSA customers who failed to attend, letters were sent out explaining the need to attend the WFI as a condition of the benefit claim. Customers were asked to contact the jobcentre within five days to rearrange their WFI. From October 2003, non-JSA customers were only able to rebook their WFI once. If failure to attend occurred for a second time, and staff believed the customer did not have good cause not to attend, receipt of their benefits could be affected. Staff felt that this new process led to more customers attending the second appointment. Reductions in failure to attend were not, however, solely attributed to this new regime. The introduction of previewing calls, better explanations to customers at First Contact, and reducing the time period between First Contact and the WFI, were all felt by staff to be key factors helping to reduce failure to attend.

4.5 The content of the WFI

This section examines the content of WFIs for different customer groups. First, it outlines the explanations given to customers about the purpose of the meeting. Discussions about work are then explored, including how work was raised, the range of topics covered, and the level of customer engagement in the interview. Job searches and submissions conducted for different customers are then covered, followed by a discussion of the extent to which PAs gave customers information and advice, and talked about benefits. The section ends by outlining the agreement and action plans made and the follow-up contact agreed.

4.5.1 Explaining the purpose of the WFI

As one of the Must Dos, PAs are required to explain the purpose of the WFI to customers, including the need to attend as a compulsory condition of their benefit entitlement. Various explanations were given to different customers, largely due to PAs’ differing understanding of the purpose of the meeting. Each customer group is considered in turn.

Jobseekers

Interviews with jobseekers and observations of WFIs, showed that PAs did not consistently provide detailed explanations of the WFI at the start of the interview. In some cases, PAs introduced themselves and informed customers that they would conduct the interview. In some of these cases, PAs did not go on to explicitly explain the purpose of the meeting:

‘Ok my name is [name] I’m your Personal Adviser and I’ll be conducting your interview this morning.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)
Staff felt the requirements linked to the receipt of JSA – to be available and actively looking for work – made a more direct approach to explaining the WFI more appropriate. PAs, therefore, gave general explanations that were related to work.

‘Right, OK, what I’m going to do today is have a chat about your work options and look to getting you back into work.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Other explanations focused on the process and requirements that needed to be completed during the WFI as a condition of JSA, such as the JSAg:

‘Let me just briefly explain, for you to get Jobseeker’s Allowance you need to be actively seeking work, readily available for work and have agreed a Jobseeker’s Agreement. This is what we are going to do.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

JSA customers were generally aware of the mandatory requirement to attend the WFI. Observations of WFIs, however, provided no evidence that this was routinely explained by PAs. Customers with previous experience of claiming tended to be aware as a result of their previous experience. Others, with little or no history of claiming, recalled that these conditions were explained to them either at First Contact or in the letter received following their initial call.

*Lone parents*

WFIs with lone parents typically began with an explanation of the purpose of the meeting. In exceptional cases, where lone parents saw only one staff member who conducted both the FA and WFI elements, explicit explanations of the WFI element were not observed.

The explanations given to lone parents tended to include an explicit focus on work. In some cases, the explanations were relatively generic with limited specific information on the aspects of work to be discussed during the WFI:

‘I’ll do what’s called a work-focused meeting, which looks at your circumstances at the moment and we’ll talk about work.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

For other customers, a focus on work was still evident but PAs adopted a softer approach by emphasising that the meeting would explore customers’ options in terms of work and the help that can be accessed through Jobcentre Plus:

‘It’s just to see what help we can offer you and to look at work…We’re not forcing you into work but it’s to see if it might be an option…It’s about giving you help if you want to come off benefit.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)
Lone parents were not routinely given explanations of the mandatory requirement to attend the WFI as a condition of receipt of benefit. Observation evidence, however, indicated that clear and explicit explanations were given in some cases:

‘You’ve been asked to come in today because it’s now mandatory that you have to attend an interview if you claim benefits.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Customers claiming health-related benefits

PAs consistently provided an explanation of the purpose of the WFI to customers claiming health-related benefits at the beginning of the meeting. The extent to which work was directly addressed, however, varied. Some explanations focused on the information and options available to help customers to return to work when the time was right. PAs were concerned about the potential reaction of customers if they focused too heavily on work:

‘I’m here to let you know what is there for you, and if you want to go back to work or training that’s great, we can help, and if you don’t it’s letting you know where we are for when the time is right.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Other PAs included a direct work focus in explanations, where they were aware from information they had previewed that work was a realistic option for customers:

‘He told me who he was and that he was going to talk more about work if that was appropriate.’

(Male with heart disease, age unknown)

Observations of WFIs clearly showed that some explanations did not include any direct reference to work. Instead, PAs focused on the WFI as part of the Jobcentre Plus process, explaining to customers with health problems that they would provide information on the services available:

‘The purpose of this meeting is that since Jobcentre Plus came in you have to attend a work-focused interview when you claim any benefits. It’s not as scary as it sounds. It’s just to give you support if you need it.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

‘This meeting is just to tell you about the services we can offer. To offer any advice and help we can.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Some PAs informed customers with health problems or disabilities that the WFI was a compulsory part of the Jobcentre Plus process. Others also explained that it was a mandatory requirement for receipt of benefit. Customers’ recall of these explanations were mixed. While there were examples of customers understanding these conditions, observation evidence found no examples of such explanations being given by the PA in practice.
‘Well I can’t remember how she worded it but she just said this was a compulsory procedure that they had to go through even when it did not apply to me.’

(Male with respiratory problems, age unknown)

**Carers**

WFI observations revealed that PAs did not consistently provide carers with an explanation of the purpose of the interview. Where explanations were provided, PAs did not emphasise work because they were concerned about the potential reaction if customers felt work was pushed too hard when it was inappropriate. Instead, staff adopted softer explanations by either emphasising the support and help available from Jobcentre Plus or explaining that the WFI was part of the process for claiming benefits:

‘My role is quite simple. I need to ascertain your circumstances. Then I can explain the services and support available to you.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Carers rarely recalled their PA providing an explanation of the purpose of the WFI. Instead, these customers tended to assume that they were required to attend in order to be eligible for CA. Observation evidence provided no evidence to show that PAs did explain the mandatory nature of WFIs to carers.

**4.5.2 Discussing work**

The purpose of the WFI is for PAs to explore work as an option for customers. Discussions about work are, therefore, a key aspect. The Must Dos require a meaningful and substantive discussion about work to occur during WFIs for all customers. The extent and nature of such discussions varied by customer group and between individual customers. The following sections summarise the depth of the discussions found for each customer group in terms of the range of subjects covered and the extent to which customers were engaged in the meeting.

Key factors that influenced the depth and nature of the discussions across all customer groups included:

- PAs’ perceptions of customers’ job-readiness and interest in work, based on PAs’ assessments of customers’ motivation;
- customers’ interest in other topics, for example, training or further study;
- PAs’ concerns that discussions about work in the initial meeting may discourage customers, particularly lone parents and people with health problems, from accessing Jobcentre Plus services in the future; and
- English was not the first language of customers.

The discussions that occurred with each customer groups are explored here.
The experience of staff in delivering work-focused discussions is a key factor in PAs’ confidence to discuss work with customers from different groups. Experience gives staff the confidence to judge customers’ needs to tailor or pitch the discussion appropriately.

Senior staff generally report an increase in PA confidence to delivering work discussions to non-JSA customers, as a result of experience gained since the introduction of Jobcentre Plus.

In some cases, staff report lower confidence to discuss work with customers, for example some difficulties with JSA customers that are completely despondent and not interested in work.

PAs also report less confidence in discussing work with carers as this would require discussing situations where their situation would change which can be sensitive for customers. Likewise, PAs reported being less confident in discussing work with customers claiming health-related benefits who are in current pain.

**Discussing work with jobseekers**

The subject of work was typically raised with jobseekers at the outset of the WFI. In exceptional cases, however, other issues, such as language, distracted the PA from beginning the interview with an immediate discussion about work. In one WFI, for example, a PA started by making a referral to a course for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Observations of WFIs showed that, following the confirmation of a customer’s personal details and completion of this part of their record on LMS, PAs generally turned to the topic of work by explaining that claimants of JSA were required to actively look and be available for work, and complete a JSAg.

The JSAg tended to shape the overall structure of discussions about work with jobseekers. WFI observations showed that PAs led the discussion in order to cover each section of the JSAg. This was facilitated by the completed ‘Helping you Back to Work’ booklets provided by JSA customers. PAs were also observed to confirm with customers the details they wrote in this booklet, for relevance and accuracy, before entering details in the JSAg template on their computer.

The JSAg focused discussions around the type of work sought by the customer, including:

- sectors and positions they were seeking;
- hours of work;
- acceptable levels of pay;
- geographical areas where they were able to access work; and
- how customers were going to look for work.
PAs routinely covered these topics for all jobseekers during the WFI. There were some cases, however, where a JSA customer had a recent or existing agreement. In these cases, PAs focused the discussion on updating the individual’s job goals. For other jobseekers, the categories of the JSAg were covered in a wider discussion about the customer’s work experience, skills, barriers to work, the perceived financial benefits of work, and ways of looking for work. The following sections examine these topics in more detail.

**Discussing work experience and skills**

Discussions with JSA customers were principally focused around their work experience and skills to highlight relevant job goals for the JSAg. These tended to concentrate on customers’ most recent work experience. PAs felt it was useful to collect information on the position held and duties undertaken, hours worked, location and name of the most recent employer. Staff believed that this information gave key indications of the type of work a customer sought. Customers usually provided this information in the ‘Helping you Back to Work’ booklet completed prior to the WFI. Observations of interviews supported this, but also showed that PAs and customers primarily focused on the last position held and the type of work undertaken. In some cases, PAs sought to clarify the type of work previously done by the customer as this was not always clear from the written information provided. This was necessary so that the PA could identify a code or job goal from a set list for the JSAg to subsequently inform a job search:

*PA:* ‘What did you do at [last employer’s name]?’

*Customer:* ‘Hand packing and I was a machine operative as well.’

*PA:* ‘Ok I’ll put codes for operator on here [the Jobseeker’s Agreement] for you.’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

In some cases, the WFI also covered a customer’s work experience prior to their most recent job. PAs tended to explore all work experience where customers did not identify any job goals in the ‘Helping you Back to Work’ booklet or where customers reported that they were no longer interested in the type of jobs included in a previous JSAg. PAs used information about prior experience to suggest alternative job goals to a customer:

*PA:* ‘You’ve done labouring jobs, and bar manager and restaurant manager jobs?’

*Customer:* ‘Yes.’

*PA:* ‘So what about working in a hotel or leisure?’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

Where customers’ primary job goal was captured in one code, PAs routinely asked about other types of work the customer had done in the past to identify other types of work available for the customer. Some jobseekers provided a limited input to
these discussions. Observations of WFIs showed that PAs tended to lead such discussions, by suggesting alternative job goals, and then sought agreement from customers. The observations also showed, however, that some customers appeared disinterested about the alternative job goals suggested by a PA. In exceptional cases, customers acknowledged that this disinterest stemmed from a perception that there was no point in pursuing jobs that they were not interested in. In these cases, PAs informed customers that the suggestions were only an indication and they did not prevent customers looking at a full range of jobs:

‘This is all just for the jobcentre, you can apply for any job.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Observations of WFIs revealed that discussions about skills were more limited. The ‘Helping you Back to Work’ booklet included a section on skills. PAs would only explore this when customers included information here. In some cases, PAs were observed to use this opportunity to inform customers of potential training opportunities that can be accessed through Jobcentre Plus:

PA: ‘I did notice on the form you have basic IT skills.’

Customer: ‘Yes, a basic knowledge.’

PA: ‘The jobcentre does run courses if you wanted to update your skills.’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

Skills were occasionally raised in the context of customers’ job goals/aspirations, particularly if a PA felt that the customer’s job goals were unrealistic. In some examples, however, the PA did not go on to address if, or how, the customer could develop the skills required.

**Barriers to work**

In general, PAs focused on tangible barriers to work, such as transport, usually within the context of the JSAg. When customers were questioned about the geographical areas they would look for work, PAs routinely checked if jobseekers held a driving licence, had access to transport, or if they relied on public transport. PAs did not tend to ask jobseekers if they felt they faced any barriers or difficulties in getting and keeping work. The exception here was where customers were asked directly whether they had a health problem or disability:

PA: ‘Any health issues at all?’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

PA: ‘I notice there is a square marked up for disability. It says Dyslexia?’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

Customers who recently left a job were routinely asked why they had left. In these cases, PAs tended to focus on the impact on eligibility for receipt of benefit. PAs did not generally perceive the reasons given to present a potential barrier to keeping work in the future.
In some cases, barriers to work emerged during a job search. PAs outlined the job specifications to jobseekers, including details of the work experience and level of skills or qualifications required. Some JSA customers were not suitable for the jobs identified because they did not possess the necessary experience, skills, or qualifications.

Although barriers were identified, the extent to which PAs addressed these or put forward solutions during the initial WFI was relatively limited. One jobseeker, for example, highlighted a problem with the times of public transport, but the PA did not follow-up the discussion by suggesting ways to solve the problem. A different PA however acknowledged that generally it was difficult to give useful advice about barriers to work such as transport if it wasn’t in relation to a specific job. In other cases, PAs offered advice to customers about how to cope with potential barriers. One PA, for example, was observed to advise a customer with dyslexia to tell potential employers if the customer was required to undertake any written tests as part of a recruitment process. The customer did not perceive this to be a current barrier but instead felt it had been an issue at school. He agreed with the PA, however, that he would tell the employer if he felt the need to. In exceptional cases, customers were disappointed that other barriers were not discussed during the WFI. For example one customer was interested in training to enable him to consider different types of work but this was not discussed. Another customer, who recently changed from claiming, IS to JSA, felt the PA did not acknowledge ill-health as a barrier. This customer felt that his illness made it inappropriate to be claiming JSA and he was disappointed that the PA did not discuss this.

**The financial benefits of being in work**

There was only isolated evidence of the financial benefits of work being discussed with jobseekers. In some cases, PAs worked out how much a customer could earn with the rates of pay advertised for jobs. In other examples, PAs advised customers of their weekly wage if they accepted the minimum wage as their acceptable level of pay in their JSAg. This was effective in an exceptional case where a customer was surprised at how much he could earn on the minimum wage when working full-time. There was no evidence that formal In Work Benefit Calculations (IWBC) were conducted for jobseekers or any substantial discussion of tax credits occurred.

**Discussing ways of finding work and job vacancies**

PAs routinely covered jobseekers’ planned job search activity as part of the JSAg. In general, PAs asked customers how they were going to look for work and advised them to record details of their job search activity to provide evidence at the fortnightly signing meeting.

Observations of WFIs with jobseekers, showed that a range of new or alternative places to look for jobs and receive support were also discussed, including:
• services available through Jobcentre Plus such as the Jobseeker Direct service and the job points within each office;

• more general activity, such as signing up with agencies, or using the internet; and

• external agencies where customers could access job search support, including job brokering agencies, where they could access free internet or support in developing a CV.

Interviews with jobseekers revealed that PAs were successful in raising individual’s awareness of the different places they could look for work. JSA customers with no previous experience of the jobcentre, in particular, were made aware of the job points available in the office and the Jobseeker Direct service.

In some cases, PAs tailored their job search advice to JSA customers’ job goals by, for example, suggesting specialist trade magazines or agencies that focused on recruitment for particular sectors. There was limited evidence, however, that PAs formally referred jobseekers to an external agency.

Discussions about ways of finding work were considered helpful by jobseekers in terms of the job search information received. This was particularly the case where customers’ awareness of job search mechanisms was raised. Other customers, however, reported that the discussions were less helpful as the PA was not telling them anything new and they had their own established approach to looking for work. In other exceptional cases, customers expressed overall negative views about how useful the discussions were. These customers typically reported that the discussions were not helpful as they were suffering health conditions which they perceived made work inappropriate.

The depth of WFI discussions with jobseekers varied. Circumstances where discussions were more limited included where customers:

• had a recent JSAg on record. In these cases, jobseekers’ input to the discussion was usually limited to confirming what was already in place;

• had very clear job goals. In these circumstances, PAs did not feel that it was necessary to engage the individual in a discussion about their skills and interests in order to establish job goals;

• lacked motivation. PAs acknowledged that some customers were more difficult to engage in discussions. In these cases, PAs tended to ask customers more questions in an attempt to engage them. PAs were also more likely to remind customers of the requirement to participate in the WFI where customers were being particularly unresponsive;

• spoke English as a second language. Customers with limited English language skills were, generally, more difficult to engage in a discussion about work given their level of understanding. In some cases, PAs sought the assistance of colleagues who had relevant language skills. Otherwise PAs sought to collect only the basic information required.
Discussing work with lone parents

PAs and lone parents engaged in a discussion about work at the outset of the WFI where the explanation of the WFI was work-related. There were other examples where PAs proceeded to check customers’ details and circumstances in terms of number of children before raising the issue of work. Other customers brought unresolved issues from the FA meeting such as tax credits which deflected the discussion away from work in the early stages of the meeting. Following the explanation and the resolution of other issues, work was typically raised by PAs by directly asking customers if they had ever worked and/or when they last worked. PAs determined subsequent discussions about work by assessing each customer’s interest in work and its appropriateness given their personal circumstances. Observations revealed that this was determined by asking customers directly:

‘Would you like to go back to work?’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

‘Is work an option for you at the moment?’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

In other cases, PAs used a customer’s existing LMS record to facilitate discussions. PAs asked whether the circumstances detailed in the record had changed to allow work to be an option. Customer responses to these questions were key in influencing the focus of subsequent discussions in the WFI. Where customers responded positively to a PA’s initial questions about work, a range of topics were then covered. For other customers who stated that work was not an option, discussions focused on training or other support available through Jobcentre Plus. Lone parents felt the discussions were useful when they focused on particular services, such as childcare or training that were relevant to their circumstances as a lone parent. In other cases, where work was not discussed directly some lone parents considered that this was an appropriate approach. They perceived PAs were being sensitive to their situation by not pressurising them to consider work. It was only in exceptional cases, where lone parents felt the discussions could have been more useful with greater discussion about their options in terms of work.

Discussing work experience and skills

Discussions about work with lone parents tended to be initiated by PAs asking customers about their work experience. Where customers had little recent work experience, typically lone parents who had not worked since the birth of children, the discussion focused on when they had last worked and the type of work done. Where lone parents were currently employed or had worked more recently, discussions were more detailed with information collected about the position and duties undertaken, hours worked, location and name of the employer. PAs asked these lone parents whether or not they were interested in similar work or planned to
remain in the same job. This allowed PAs to assess the need and focus of any subsequent job search. Lone parents typically reported no issues with discussing their previous work experience. One customer, however, was disappointed that the PA did not give any information about schemes the customer believed were available to gain work experience.

In addition, PAs collected basic information about any qualifications or existing skills through more general discussions about customers’ work experience and any courses they had completed, such as computer or basic skills courses. This information was usually gathered for future reference. There was only one highly exceptional case where such information was used in the context of a job search. Some customers were disappointed that there were only limited discussions during the WFI about training to enhance customers’ skills. There were exceptional examples, however, where the opposite was true. For example one lone parent reported that the PA was very helpful in providing information about a childminding course.

**Barriers to work**

Observations of WFIs showed that PAs did not consistently identify or discuss lone parents’ barriers to work. In some cases, PAs asked lone parents directly about any potential barriers:

‘*You obviously completed the claim form yourself, so you’re ok with general reading and writing?*’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

‘*Have you got any health issues?*’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

The identification of other barriers, such as childcare responsibilities or housing issues, tended to occur through a more general discussion about a lone parent’s circumstances. The extent to which customers acknowledged barriers such as childcare responsibilities varied, and there was some evidence that staff assumed that this was a barrier faced by all lone parents. In one case, for example, a customer reported that her PA told her that she would not need to work until her child was 16, despite the customer reporting that work was something she would consider. This customer felt disappointed that the PA was not more helpful in providing information about work. Similarly, there were exceptional examples of other lone parents who felt financial barriers to training weren’t addressed by the PA as they remained confused about what training courses Jobcentre Plus would fund. Other customers recognised that they faced barriers that were not discussed during the WFI, including, for example, emotional barriers related to a relationship breakdown or having pre-school children that they wanted to remain at home with. These customers were not concerned that these barriers weren’t discussed by the PA as they recognised that they would be resolved in time.
The financial benefits of being in work

Discussions with lone parents about the financial benefits of being in work typically covered tax credits, IWBCs, and other financial incentives to return to work such as the Back to Work Bonus.

PAs reported that tax credits were promoted to all lone parents but the extent to which they were discussed was observed to vary. Customers’ prior knowledge and experience of tax credits was a key factor that determined the nature of these discussions. For customers who claimed tax credits previously, PAs reported less need to discuss them in as much detail. For other customers who had little understanding of tax credits, PAs spent longer explaining the benefits of tax credits should the customer move into work. For lone parents who had recently split from a partner, PAs often reminded customers of the need to cancel tax credits being paid in the name of their ex-partner and to start a new claim in their name. Observations showed examples of PAs contacting the Inland Revenue to do this on the customer’s behalf. One PA reported, however, that she felt this should be covered in the FA meeting as it was more related to the financial side of the claim. A primary concern for lone parents was that they felt reassured that they knew what they were entitled to in terms of benefits and tax credits. Lone parents typically reported no preference about when these discussions should occur in the Jobcentre Plus process.

IWBCs were consistently offered to lone parents, but were not generally conducted at the initial WFI. Customer interest in starting work immediately and time constraints were key factors that determined whether or not they were conducted. Where staff felt customers would benefit from having a calculation, but insufficient time was available, a follow-up appointment was booked. Where lone parents had a calculation conducted, PAs perceived the results to have increased a customer’s interest in work:

‘She said she was interested in working 16 hours, so I said well what we’ll do is a benefit calculation and I did one straightaway and her eyes lit up.’

(Personal Adviser)

Customers routinely reported to be surprised by the outcome of the calculation in terms of how much they would be better off if they were working. In some cases, however, lone parents didn’t feel that the outcome directly influenced the frequency or intensity of job search activity at the time of the WFI. These customers typically had other factors to consider to in their decision to take up work. In some cases, for example, they did not want to work until their youngest child had started school. These customers still felt that the information was useful for the future when they were in a position to consider work as an option.
Discussing ways of finding work and job vacancies

Job search activity was only discussed with lone parents who were looking to move into work in the shorter-term. Customers tended to be given information and advice about potential sources of vacancies such as job points, trade magazines and recruitment agencies rather than provided any actual job search support during the WFI. There were isolated examples, however, of lone parents being offered help with developing a CV if they chose to return to see the PA at a later date.

Lone parents’ interest and ability to start work were key factors in determining the focus and direction of the discussions about work. As such, conversations tended to be more tailored to the circumstances of lone parents. Where work wasn’t an option, for example, the focus of the discussion was on the support customers could receive when work did become an option. There were also examples of discussions focusing on particular services that customers expressed an interest in. Where a lone parent told the PA they were interested in going back to college, for example, the PA spent time discussing the different options available.

Observations showed examples of PAs attempting to engage all customers in a discussion about work during the initial WFI. PAs emphasised the need to listen to lone parents and not push the issue of work too strongly if a customer stated they were not interested. These PAs were keen to avoid discouraging customers from attending the jobcentre in the future. This was evident in responses given to customers:

‘Right so I can appreciate at the moment you’ve got a lot to sort out. As a lone parent bringing up children we don’t push you into work.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Other PAs preferred to get customers to attend a further meeting where work would be discussed. PAs felt that customers would be more ready to talk about work at this point as their benefit claim would be processed and concerns about financial security would no longer be a distraction. This was a standard approach among PAs in one case study area where the FA meeting was conducted by the PA in addition to the WFI. In these cases, PAs acknowledged that the FA meeting element distracted from delivering the WFI. Some lone parents welcomed this approach and felt reassured that PAs did not put pressure on them to consider work when they had other financial and emotional issues to resolve. In exceptional cases, however, customers were disappointed that the issue of work was not discussed in more detail at the initial WFI as they were interested in work at the time. One lone parent acknowledged, however, that she did not ask for further discussion. She felt the PA was being sensitive in her approach to discussing work in the initial WFI and that more discussion would occur at the next meeting.

Lone parents’ views as to the usefulness of the discussion about work depended on their situation and interest in work at the time of the WFI. Where customers had a specific job goal or were interested in a specific service and this was addressed
during the discussion, the customer typically reported the discussion to have been helpful as they had received the information they wanted or they felt the PA was interested in their situation which impacted on their motivation. In exceptional cases, this led to lone parents accessing a particular service such as training which enabled them to move towards work. For others, the information did not lead to any direct action but customers were reassured that support was available for the future. Customers also thought the discussion was helpful where they perceived the PA had understood their circumstances at the time and had not put pressure on the customer to consider work as an option. Where customers were given general information about services available in the future, this reassured customers that support was available for when they were in a position to consider work.

In exceptional cases, lone parents did not perceive the WFI to be helpful in providing information about work. In some cases, this was because lone parents had already been through the process and did not feel that they received any new information about the services available. Conversely, another lone parent did not feel the meeting was helpful as her options regarding work were not discussed in enough detail. This lone parent was keen to enter self-employment but the PA was not able to give any information to the customer about whether this was a viable option, other than to give the customer a contact number for a support agency. Other negative views concerning the WFI, focused on lone parents who felt the PA had pressured the customer to consider work when they did not feel in a position to do so. There were exceptional examples of customers who were pregnant at the time of the WFI or who had experienced a very recent relationship breakdown, who felt pressure to consider work as a result of the discussion. These individuals felt it should be up to them to decide if work was an option for them and whether or not they wanted to discuss it.

**Discussing work with customers claiming health-related benefits**

PAs and customers with health problems or disabilities did not tend to engage in a discussion about work at the outset of the WFI. Instead, discussions typically began with an exploration of customers’ circumstances and specifically the nature of their illness. In some cases, this led to the issue of work being raised. PAs asked some customers about the impact of their illness on the type of work they could do and whether customers were able to work currently. Customers were typically asked directly:

‘Do you feel in a position to look for work?’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Customers typically reported that this direct approach was not an issue. Customers who were interested in work welcomed the issue being raised, while others accepted that it was part of the process and the PA had to ask in order to establish their circumstances. In exceptional cases, however, customers were uncomfortable with this direct approach as they perceived that it should have been obvious to the PA from the information given previously by them that work was not an option at the current time.
Observations of WFi's showed that, in isolated cases, the subject of work was not raised at any point in the interview. These WFi's were relatively short and focused on the services available through Jobcentre Plus. After the WFi's, PAs reported that they had not felt it was appropriate to talk about work as the customer's health condition meant work was not a realistic option in the short-term. PAs reported that these customers typically had a medical condition which was causing them current pain which PAs considered would not enable these customers to physically be able to work. In these cases, customers typically held the same view and considered the approach of not discussing work, taken by the PA, to be appropriate.

Where discussions about work did occur, the range of topics covered and the depth in which individual topics were discussed varied between customers, as outlined below.

**Discussing work experience and skills**

Discussions about work experience with customers who had health problems typically focused on what work customers had undertaken prior to their illness or injury. For customers who were currently employed, the discussion tended to extend to whether or not they planned to return to the same employment on recovery. Where customers with long-term health problems had been recently employed, information was collected about the job role. In some cases, PAs also explored the impact of customers' illness or condition on their ability to undertake work in the future. Customers were often keen to emphasise that the type of work they had done previously was not appropriate given their health condition. In exceptional cases, customers felt frustrated with the discussions as they felt PAs did not fully understand the implications of their illness on the types of work they could do. This consequently impacted negatively on their view of how helpful the WFI had been.

Observation of WFi's involving people with health problems showed that skills were not routinely discussed. In exceptional cases, some customers were looking to retrain in a different career or job as a result of their illness or condition. Discussions in these instances focused on how existing skills could be transferred into new types of work or what new skills were required for alternative jobs. In some cases, this had a positive impact on a customer's motivation to work as they had not previously considered the options that were suggested by the PA.

**Barriers to work**

An initial discussion about customers' circumstances tended to identify health issues as a barrier. Where a physical health problem emerged, discussions focused on how this condition affected the customer's ability to work:

Customer: ‘My shoulder's been dislocating since the early 80’s and I've been moving to lighter and lighter work since then.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)
Observations revealed only limited examples of PAs challenging customers’ assumptions about their ability to work where they raised their condition or illness as a barrier:

**PA:** ‘Sometimes you can work even if you have a doctor’s note.’
(Observation of a work-focused interview)

**PA:** ‘Have you ever thought of changing the type of work you do?’
Customer: ‘All I can do-no education you see.’
(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Some staff felt that they lacked the confidence to challenge customers’ assumptions regarding their position in terms of work. PAs were particularly uncomfortable in challenging customers who were in visible pain or had been claiming IB for a number of years. This was due, principally, to limited experience of dealing with these customer groups and PAs felt a lack of confidence to deal with the potential reaction of customers. PAs also reported that limited knowledge of the health conditions customers were experiencing was also a factor, as they felt they had limited understanding of how some illnesses could affect a customer’s ability to work. This prevented PAs making sensitive and valid suggestions about appropriate alternative work that customers could do.

**The financial benefits of work**

In general, the financial benefits of work were not discussed with customers claiming health-related benefits. No examples of IWBCs were found in observations or reported by customers claiming health-related benefits. In exceptional circumstances, some customers remarked that they would be better off in work and PAs responded by giving a general indication of how much they could be better off. In general, however, PAs felt that discussion of the financial benefits of work were not relevant to customers who were not considering work as an option at the current time as a result of their health conditions. Likewise PAs felt such discussions with customers who were currently employed were not needed as these customers were aware of the costs associated with being in work. Some PAs felt that this element distracted attention from other aspects to be covered in the allocated time of the WFI. As a result, it was not discussed so that PAs could concentrate discussions on, for example, giving information about support services or job search.

**Discussing ways of finding work and job vacancies**

Job search activity was not routinely discussed with people with health problems. Customers who were looking to move into work in the short-term recalled general discussions about ways to find work, but it was rare that new ways of looking for work were discussed:

‘She just asked if I got the daily paper and looked through it, which I do.’
(Male with depression, age unknown)
There was no evidence that customers were disappointed that job search activity was not discussed in any greater detail. The level of engagement in discussions about work and the extent to which the full range of topics were discussed with all customers with health problems, was mixed. Some customers with longer-term or more severe conditions were not given the opportunity to engage in more in-depth discussions. The PA, therefore, did not challenge their assumptions about their health condition as a barrier to work. PAs also perceived that other customers, particularly those with mental health problems, would not engage in discussions as a result of their condition. Limited information was given to these customers as a result:

‘I didn’t think she was ready to absorb the information and it would have just gone over her head. She was visibly upset and if you go through the usual stuff then she just wouldn’t have taken it in.’

(Personal Adviser)

Interviews with customers who were experiencing depression or stress-related illnesses at the time of the WFI welcomed this approach as they recognised that at the time of the WFI their state of mind was a distraction from their ability to consider work.

In other cases, PAs did attempt to engage customers with health problems in a discussion about work. Customers determined the depth and direction of discussions by stating whether or not they felt that work was not an option. In these circumstances, PAs focused attention on the range of support available when individuals were ready to consider work. More limited engagement in discussions was also evident with customers who planned to return to the same job once they recovered from their illness. These customers did not feel it was necessary for greater involvement as they perceived that much of the information about looking for work was not relevant to them since they already had a job.

Conversely greater engagement was observed in discussions between PAs and customers who were interested in work. Some customers, for example, with physical health problems were interested in alternative jobs. In these instances, PAs explored with the customer the type of work they were interested in and what they felt was appropriate given their illness or condition.

Mixed views were reported by customers claiming health-related benefits as to how helpful the discussions about work were during the WFI. Some customers typically thought the discussions were helpful when they were given ideas about different types of work they could do. For others, being given reassurance that there was help available for customers when they were ready to go back to work, was the most useful outcome of the WFI:

‘That was very helpful and it gave me an idea of what you could do and that there was help out there for a career and getting back on your feet.’

(Female, with anxiety, depression and lower back problems, age unknown)
For other customers, including those who had a job to return to or those who were looking for work in the short-term, the discussions about work were less informative as customers didn’t feel they were getting any information which they didn’t already know. For other customers for whom work was not an option, the discussion was not considered to be worthwhile at all as they felt it was irrelevant to their situation at the time:

“At the time I thought it was a waste of time. I thought when I went there I am not really looking for work, because of my health and age, and I thought that lady could have been helping someone else who is looking for work.”

(Female with arthritis, age unknown)

For these customers, a shorter WFI or receipt of leaflets or flyers about the services available would have been more appropriate. This would enable the customers to have the information for future reference and they could return to see the PA when they considered it appropriate.

Discussing work with carers

Discussions with carers usually began with PAs exploring customers’ circumstances, finding out who they cared for and how long they had been caring. This gave PAs an indication of carers’ position in terms of work. Other PAs adopt a more direct approach:

“Have you been out of the labour market for a while?”

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

Other PAs initiated a discussion about work by informing customers about Permitted Work:

“She asked me if I was aware that I could still work if I wanted to up to a certain level.”

(Female, caring for daughter with physical disabilities, aged 31 years)

Carers typically realised that this approach was necessary in order for PAs to establish their circumstances in terms of work:

“I knew what my circumstances were and what they were offering was not appropriate to me but they didn’t know that so yes you go along with it and you tell them what they want to know.”

(Female, caring for daughter with physical disabilities, age unknown)

However, in exceptional cases, carers appeared frustrated that they had to repeat information about their situation which they had given at different stages of the process.
Discussions about work with carers were limited once it became apparent that customers were not in a position to work due to their caring responsibilities. This was typically as a result of a direct assertion by the customer. However, there were other examples where PAs were observed to make an assumption that work was not an option for carers and so limited discussions were evident. In most cases, carers felt that this approach was suitable as they were not in a position to consider work and felt the PA should not be putting any pressure on them to consider work. Carers typically reported being more open to participating in discussion with the PA once they were reassured that they wouldn’t be pressured to consider work.

“When I realised that she wasn’t going to force me into something that I didn’t necessarily want to do, she was just going to provide me with opportunities that would benefit me, I didn’t mind talking with her at all.’

(Female, caring for mother with chronic bronchitis, age unknown)

There was one highly exceptional example, however, of a carer who would have welcomed more direct discussion about work as this customer was keen to explore work opportunities as a break from her caring responsibilities.

PAs adopted a more direct approach to the subject of work in cases where carers were already working. In these cases, PAs typically established that a customer was already working from the claim form or information provided by a FA. Once a customer confirmed that they wanted to stay in the same job, however, further discussions were limited as the PA perceived that there was little additional information they could give that the customer didn’t already know. There were exceptional examples where carers were able to consider part-time work as help from family members with the caring duties enabled them to have time to take up paid work. More substantive discussions were held in these circumstances, typified by a wider range of subjects, as examined below.

**Discussing work experience and skills**

Carers’ work history was explored for customers who worked recently, regardless of whether or not the customer was in a position to work at the time of the WFI. PAs also explored the nature of employment for those carers who were working at the time of their interview with a PA. Where carers wanted to remain in the same job, PAs did not pursue further discussions.

PAs reported that they would discuss skills with carers, particularly if they had been away from the labour market for a significant period. Observations of WFI, however, revealed no examples of skills being discussed.

**Barriers to work**

Discussions with carers about barriers to work tended to focus on their caring responsibilities. Some PAs explored the extent to which caring was a barrier by asking customers whether they cared on a full-time or whether there was any other help that might allow customers to consider work. There was no observational
evidence that PAs routinely explored with a customer that their caring responsibilities prevented customers considering work. In exceptional cases, customers were disappointed that further discussions did not take place.

**The financial benefits of being in work**

The focus of discussions was typically on how much customers could earn before their CA was affected. There was an isolated example of a carer reporting that this was more than they expected, and it had a positive impact on their attitude to work, particularly as they were not aware that they could take paid employment in addition to claiming CA.

**Discussing ways of finding work and job vacancies**

Job search activity was not routinely discussed in WFiS with carers. Where carers did not perceive work to be an option, job search was not discussed at all. In some cases, customers were informed about job search services, such as Job brokers, for future reference. More specific discussions occurred for customers who had undertaken some recent job search activity. One carer, for example, secured a job interview prior to the WFI. In this case, discussions with the PA focused on how to approach the interview.

Carers generally expressed neutral views as to how helpful the meeting was, they recognised it as part of the process but as they perceived work was not appropriate at the time of the WFI due to their circumstances, they did not recognise that the discussions were worthwhile. Generally, customers considered that the PA was understanding and, in this sense it, was considered useful as they felt reassured that they would not be pressured to consider work. The exception was one customer who reported feeling pressure and, as such, did not consider that the discussions had been helpful.

**4.5.3 Conducting job searches**

One of the Must Dos requires PAs to undertake a job search for customers who are ready for work and to submit customers where there are suitable vacancies.

**Jobseekers**

Job searches were consistently provided for jobseekers during the WFI. Some staff reported that the depth of the job search, in terms of the number of vacancies sought for each job goal, depended on the time available in the WFI once other requirements were met such as completing the JSAg. Staff reported that customers can be brought back in for an additional interview if there is insufficient time to conduct a job search during the initial WFI. In practice, this only happened in isolated cases depending on the first signing date. If the first signing date was imminent, staff acknowledged that they would receive a job search at the fortnightly signing interview so there was no need for the additional interview. In isolated cases, PAs did not conduct a job search for jobseekers who were looking for work in a particular
industry, such as ship building, or other contract-based employment. Staff reported that vacancies for this type of work were usually sourced by word-of-mouth rather than advertised formally or in the jobcentre.

In general, jobseekers were satisfied with the appropriateness of the job search conducted in that it was tailored to their job goals and took account of where they wanted to work and the hours they were willing to work. There were some examples, however, of customers who did not feel that the job search was useful or appropriate, as highlighted by the following examples.

- For customers seeking to become self-employed, the job search was considered inappropriate. PAs often encouraged these customers to look for other work in the meantime while they pursued self-employment. Customers tended to perceive that there were no suitable vacancies related to the areas they were seeking to establish a business in.

- Job searches were considered less useful by customers where there was some difficulty experienced in matching up the desired job goals with the categories for conducting the job search. This was a difficulty reported where customers were looking for high-skilled or professional jobs. In these cases, PAs tried a combination of different job titles to access suitable vacancies, with varying success. Customers, however, reported more success in looking in specialist trade magazines.

- There were isolated examples of customers who perceived the vacancies found through job searches to be limited to low paid jobs, although this was not raised by the customer with the PA.

Lone parents

Some PAs determined whether it was appropriate to conduct job search on the basis of their perceptions of a lone parent’s motivation to work. Others asked customers directly if they wanted a job search to be conducted so as to avoid making any assumptions about a customer’s interests:

‘I’d ask, I’d just ask them if they want me to do a job search.’

(Personal Adviser)

Job searches were, therefore, routinely conducted for lone parents, typically for those with children of school age who were ready to consider work imminently. In some cases, job searches were also conducted for customers who were not immediately ready to start work but who expressed an interest in working in the future, typically once their youngest child was at school. These customers were interested to know what type of work was available and how much they could potentially earn. As such, these job searches were often linked to a subsequent IWBC. PAs reported that they would not conduct a job search if the customer had not expressed an interest and it was clear that work was not a current option due to the customer’s circumstances. PAs ensured that these customers were aware that a job search was a service they could offer if the customer wanted to return at a later date.
Lone parents felt the type of vacancies the PAs looked for were appropriate as they included part-time work with hours that fitted with childcare responsibilities. The usefulness of the job search depended on whether suitable vacancies were identified. Lone parents found job searches most useful when vacancies were found and when they believed that these were not advertised anywhere else.

Customers claiming health-related benefits

Conducting job searches for customers claiming health-related benefits was more variable. PAs’ perceptions of the customer’s ability to take work in the short- or longer-term due to their illness or condition, was a factor in deciding to conduct a job search:

‘If they’ve only just been signed off sick...99 per cent of them are not ready for work, I would say. You get the odd one maybe that you can have a look and see.’

(Personal Adviser)

Circumstances where other PAs conducted a job search included where the customer has a short-term illness, such as a broken hand, and they were likely to return to claiming JSA after it healed:

‘Something that is going to mend in a short period of time...probably who have just swapped from JSA to IB, I would look for work for those customers.’

(Personal Adviser)

There were some examples of job searches conducted for customers with longer-term, physical health conditions who expressed an interest in looking for different types of work. In other cases, PAs reported that they would conduct a job search as a way of challenging customers’ assumptions that work was not an option. In these cases, the job search allowed PAs to show customers alternative jobs outside of their usual line of employment that they would be able to do regardless of their illness or condition.

In exceptional circumstances, job searches were conducted for customers who felt this was inappropriate. In one case, for example, a PA looked for building work vacancies for a customer who suffered back problems. Other customers felt a job search was inappropriate as they could not consider any work at the time:

‘It was not really appropriate, it was not something I wanted at that time because it was too soon. I mean getting another job did not even come into it at all.’

(Female diagnosed with depression, age unknown)

These customers typically did not raise their concerns with PAs, as they felt PAs were simply doing their job by conducting a job search. They felt the WFI would finish sooner if they did not interrupt the PA.
Carers

It was extremely rare that job searches were conducted for carers. There was an isolated example of a job search conducted for a carer who was looking for part-time work at the time of the WFI. This customer reported that the outcome of the job search was of limited use as few vacancies were found that were suitable to fit in with her caring and childcare responsibilities. Another carer was aware that the service could be offered at a later date.

4.5.4 Job submissions

There were few examples of customers across all groups being submitted for vacancies following a job search by a PA. Instead, some PAs rang employers to request an application form or for details of the job to be sent to customers’ home address. In other cases, customers were given details to contact the employer in their own time.

Customers received little feedback following job submissions. All customers who were submitted to a vacancy reported that it was rare that they received a letter from the employer to say their submission was unsuccessful. JSA customers who had been submitted to a vacancy typically reported that they had to tell the advisers they saw at the Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) appointment about whether they were successful or not. This information was not fed back to PAs by employers.

4.5.5 Providing information, advice, and referrals

A key part of the WFI is for PAs to provide information on the services available through Jobcentre Plus and advise on other specialist services that would be of benefit to customers. PAs’ ability and confidence to supply specialist information to customers varied.

Jobseekers

Information offered to jobseekers about services was typically work-related. In general, JSA customers were informed of these opportunities verbally, although there were also some examples of customers being given a leaflet with the information. Examples of the type of information given included:

- job search clubs and agencies that provided help with CVs, job search;
- job fairs;
- training courses such as basic skills, ESOL courses, or specific courses to address a particular need identified for working in a specific sector such as forklift truck driving; and
- agencies to address specific barriers such as debt or housing issues.

There was little evidence that jobseekers were referred to specific services by PAs at the time of the WFI. In exceptional cases, the research team observed PAs referring individuals to ESOL courses. Although the referral was explained, customers were
given little information about the content of these courses other than its location and duration. Customers were, therefore, unsure what the course would involve and reported being a little reluctant to attend.

It was rare that JSA customers were informed about the New Deal programmes at the initial WFI. Where information was given, it focused largely on the eligibility criteria. Information on the services and support available was not given in any detail. Where stated, the focus was on more intensive job search support, work placement opportunities and training. In an exceptional example, the training opportunities available through New Deal were mentioned to one customer who was eligible for early entry. However more details about what areas the training would cover and what skills the customer would gain were not discussed explicitly. Other cases highlighted that the information given about opportunities available through the New Deal were tailored to customers’ circumstances. One customer, for example, was told about work placements available through New Deal as the customer lacked experience. Another customer was told about retail training courses as this was an area of work the customer was interested in but had no work-related experience.

Information was largely given by PAs as a matter of course. There were few examples of customers raising queries, although PAs were observed to give customers the opportunity to do so at the end of the interview. Customers felt that there were a number of areas where more discussion would be helpful. This included more detail on the IT training courses available and, for one customer, more direction in terms of sources of help for self-employment.

**Lone parents**

In general, specialist PAs felt more confident and able to apply specialist advice and information to lone parents than generalist PAs. Their experience of working with lone parents on a daily basis, and routinely providing information, allowed these PAs to build up a good knowledge of local services and support.

PAs typically gave lone parents information about the services available through the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). PAs varied in their approach to how this information was given. Some PAs described individual services such as IWBCs or training courses that were directly related to the circumstances or interests of the customer without mentioning the overall programme. Others were more explicit in describing the programme directly:

‘The other point of the interview is to let you know as a lone parent what help and support there is for you. There’s the New Deal for Lone Parents which might help.’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

Observations of WFI revealed that, in some cases, PAs stopped at describing the existence of the programme and the eligibility criteria with few details given about actual services. In other areas, PAs were observed to systematically describe the
programme and the range of services available. This included training courses and financial incentives to go back to work including the Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF), Back to Work Bonus, and help with travel costs and childcare. PAs tended to verbally describe the services available and then gave customers a leaflet or information pack to read in their own time.

Lone parents’ interest in the services available determined the depth in which services were described. PAs generally asked lone parents if they were interested or followed an individual’s lead if a customer indicated they were not interested. In other cases, PAs assumed that customers were unlikely to be interested imminently due to their circumstances at the time of the WFI. Some customers, for example, were still coming to terms with a relationship breakdown while others were heavily pregnant. In these circumstances, PAs either gave customers written information to take away or asked individuals to return at a later date when they were not distracted by other issues. In a highly exceptional example, a PA only provided general information about specific services such as training courses if they perceived that the courses available were unsuitable. This tended to occur for lone parents with high level qualifications, as highlighted by the following quote:

‘I agree that most of the courses won’t be suitable for someone at your level.’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

PAs were also observed to give a range of information to lone parents in response to their queries. This included information on childcare, signposting to the Child Support Agency (CSA), and Children’s Information Services. Other examples included advice on where to access training courses that weren’t available through Jobcentre Plus. Some customers, for example, asked about IT courses. In these cases, PAs signposted the lone parents to local colleges or Learndirect. Customer queries also related to their benefit claim, such as when money would be received. PAs responded by providing an estimate of the processing time of IS (see Section 4.5.5).

There was some evidence that lone parents’ queries were not always answered by PAs during the WFI. Areas where lone parents would have liked more discussion principally focused on training courses. One customer, for example, wanted to enrol on an external IT course. Although the PA told this individual that the course was not eligible through Jobcentre Plus, no further information was offered about how she could do the course. Another customer reported that the PA was not able to supply information about the eligibility criteria and delivery of army training courses. In an highly exceptional case, a lone parent was disappointed that the PA was unable to provide advice on starting a business.

Customers claiming health-related benefits

Customers claiming health-related benefits who intended to return to an existing job once they had recovered were provided with little specific information by PAs because advisers did not perceive that they required the help. Similarly, individuals with short-term illnesses, such as a broken limb, were generally only given information about job search support, such as the Jobseeker Direct service or job points.
On some occasions, training was discussed where a change of career was considered appropriate as a customer’s illness or disability meant their usual type of employment was inappropriate:

‘They gave me information on courses for disabilities and that would try and help to get me a job that would fit in with my disabilities.’

(Female with back problems, aged 44 years)

This was typically observed to occur where a physical illness meant heavy manual work was no longer an option. In these circumstances, customers were referred to Learndirect or provided with information on IT courses to allow them to consider clerical or office work in the future.

There was very limited evidence that customers claiming either health related or disability related benefits were told about New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP). People with longer-term health problems who felt work was an option in the longer term were typically given such information. Observation evidence, however, showed that customers were told about individual agencies or brokers rather than explicitly told about the overall programme. There were no examples of the programme being mentioned directly in any observed WFIs. Some customers were given a leaflet about the programme. This was considered useful for customers who felt they weren’t in a position to access any of the services at the time of their WFI, so they had information for future reference.

Two Pathfinder offices were active in gathering information from local organisations that could provide assistance to customers claiming health-related benefits who had longer-term or more severe physical and mental health conditions. The purpose of this was to ensure PAs had easy access to referral and advice options for these customers. In one office, this was translated into a desk aid which served as a reference tool for PAs on specialist provision and referral options. This resource increased PAs’ confidence to deliver specialist advice to customers as they had immediate access to information without having to consult colleagues and they were confident they were giving the right information to customers.

PAs in other areas were aware of Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs). Customers were referred to these staff members if PAs felt they were not able to supply sufficient information themselves. Customers reported that seeing a DEA was useful as they were able to supply information and referral advice to organisations that dealt specifically with their particular illness or condition:

‘She [the DEA] gave me a lot of information on arthritis, the society and where I could get instruments to help me for day-to-day living.’

(Female with arthritis, aged 53 years)

Observations of WFIs involving people with health problems showed that customers rarely asked for specific information or advice in addition to that given by the PA. There was an isolated example of a customer asking about the New Deal 50+ programme that they had seen advertised as they were interested in retraining to
allow them to find a less stressful job. The PA responded by explaining the eligibility criteria and gave the customer a leaflet about the programme. The customer felt this was an appropriate response as they planned to wait for a few months before considering their options more fully. Other customers with health problems felt that the WFI did not cover their areas of interest in sufficient detail. These individuals identified areas where further discussion would be of use:

‘I would have liked to have talked about future job applications, that’s what I was saying to her. What was I going to write on future job applications, but it was like she didn’t know, so it was quite difficult really.’

(Female diagnosed with a kidney infection, aged 23 years)

‘I’m really looking forward to setting up my own business and I was interested in some grant or something to set the business up. I couldn’t really explain that to her because she kept on about building or work.’

(Male with back problems, aged 34 years)

Carers

Carers were given limited information about specific services available through Jobcentre Plus. This was either because customers clearly indicated that they were not interested in such information or PAs assumed they were not interested due to their current circumstances. Instead, staff tended to inform these customers that help was available with job search or training through Jobcentre Plus if, at any time in the future, they considered work to be an option. Carers did not feel that further information was required. They were not interested in accessing support at the time as their main concern was financial security:

‘As long as they understood why I couldn’t work and that’s why I wanted to claim such and such a benefit, that’s all that mattered to me.’

(Male, caring for partner injured in a road traffic accident, age unknown)

Several carers felt the PA would have supplied more information if the customer indicated it was appropriate:

‘I think if I’d have needed to discuss anything else then they would have happily done it. They offered me all the help I needed at the time, if I needed more help in the future I go back.’

(Female, caring for daughter with physically disabilities, aged 31 years)

There were, however, isolated examples of customers who wanted more information on the training courses available through Jobcentre Plus. One customer was disappointed that this information was not given despite telling the PA that they were interested in further education and training. Another customer acknowledged that although she was interested in receiving more information about basic literacy and numeracy courses she didn’t think to ask about it at the time of the WFI.
4.5.6 Discussing benefits

Some form of benefit discussion occurred in WFIIs with customers from all groups, although discussions were not extensive.

For JSA customers, benefit discussions occurred as a result of queries raised by customers. This included when their benefit would be paid or, in exceptional cases, whether payment of benefit would be affected if a customer’s signing date fell on a public holiday. PAs believed that customers either forgot to raise such queries in the FA meeting, or they wanted PAs to reiterate information previously provided by the FA. PAs responded by giving an estimate of the time the claim would take to process or reassured the customer that payment was not affected by public holidays as alternative signing arrangements could be made.

Observation of WFIIs also revealed other circumstances in which PAs initiated a discussion about benefits with jobseekers. In an exceptional example, a PA noticed that the FA had not completed a backdated claim for the customer. In this case, the PA confirmed the date they wanted to claim from and completed the relevant form. Other circumstances where eligibility to benefit was raised by PAs included where customers had left their last job. PAs tended to explain that entitlement to benefit could be affected if customers left employment without good reason. Customers were informed that the claim would be passed to a decision maker, who may require further information from the individual concerned.

Discussions about benefit issues with lone parents were initiated by PAs in one case study area where PAs conducted the FA role as well. In other areas, benefit issues were routinely raised by PAs, particularly in the context of an IWBC. PAs needed to ask customers what benefits they were claiming, such as Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB). WFI observations also revealed examples of customers raising direct queries about when they would receive benefit. PAs responded by giving customers an estimate of the times for processing as well as reassurance that it would be paid as quickly as possible if customers were concerned about their financial security:

‘They do Income Support as fast as they can. It usually takes ten days but for lone parents they try and do it quicker.’

(Observation of work-focused interview)

Customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits reported few specific discussions about benefits, other than PAs checking they were claiming additional benefits such as HB or CTB. There was an isolated example of a customer checking whether the response he received from the FA that he was ineligible to claim IS was correct. The PA was observed to appear uncomfortable in answering this query directly and simply asserted that the FA had a better understanding of benefits than her and that all information would have been checked to see if the customer was eligible.
All evidence showed that discussions about benefits with carers concerned the eligibility and conditions around working whilst still claiming CA. PAs typically informed customers about the Permitted Work conditions of CA before checking whether they would consider work as an option. Customers were generally surprised by the information provided as they were not aware that they could work while in receipt of benefit.

PAs were usually able to answer general benefit queries raised by customers. There were examples of PAs who felt they lacked confidence and knowledge to answer questions about certain benefits such as IB and CA. These PAs did not have a benefit background or they had not dealt with benefits since the introduction of the FA role, so their knowledge was depleted. In these circumstances, PAs tended to consult with an FA colleague or ended the discussion by giving customers the contact details for the relevant benefit processing departments to answer any outstanding queries.

4.5.7 Agreements and action plans

Completing a JSAg is a mandatory part of WFIs for all JSA customers. In contrast, non-JSA customers are not expected to complete any formal agreement. Instead, PAs are encouraged to develop a Customer Action Plan (CAP) for the customer on LMS. Where completed, these CAPs set out agreed steps and actions towards achievement of short and longer-term goals for the customer.

The JSAg covered a range of topics concerning the type of work jobseekers were looking for and how they were going to look for work (see Section 4.5.2). Observation evidence suggests that the requirements of the JSAg as a condition of receipt of benefit were routinely explained to JSA customers.

‘...benefit regulations mean that we need to do a jobseeker’s agreement.’

(Observation of a work-focused interview)

In exceptional cases, these explanations were relatively limited, particularly where a customer had completed a JSAg previously. In these cases PAs perceived customers were aware of the requirements. Once the relevant sections of the JSAg were completed, PAs tended to recap on the information contained and printed out a copy for the customer to read, agree and sign. This agreement was then available for FJR advisers to check customers complied with its conditions and to focus the job search conducted by, and for, JSA customers.

In addition, staff used the notes section on LMS to provide any additional information they felt would be useful for FJR advisers, such as whether customers were submitted for any vacancies following a job search at the initial WFI and, in exceptional cases, where customers demonstrated aggressive behaviour during the initial WFI. Information may also be passed on if customers had holidays planned or interviews arranged that would require them to miss one of their FJR meetings.
CAPs were not consistently used for lone parents, customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits and carers across offices. Some staff did not use them at all. In these cases, PAs recorded brief details of the meeting on the LMS notes section, usually after the customer had left. Other PAs reported that they did use the LMS tool to complete CAPs but they rarely perceived this to constitute a formal CAP. These ‘plans’ tended to record customers’ job goals and aspirations, and the actions or services that customers may take up to achieve these goals. The plans also provided the opportunity to record further details of customers’ circumstances. Customers’ input into the plans varied. In some cases, PAs completed the plan after the customer left. In others, customers were given the opportunity to review the content. It was exceptional, however, that customers were either given a copy to keep or required to sign the CAP. This was confirmed by the limited awareness found amongst non-JSA customers regarding the existence of a CAP.

4.5.8 Follow-up contact

There was little evidence that PAs routinely provided information on six or twelve month Restart interviews, although some jobseekers were already aware of such meetings as a result of prior experience of the Jobcentre Plus process.

Some lone parents were aware of the need to attend a further meeting after six months. PAs were observed to explain the meeting as an opportunity to see how lone parents were progressing, rather than highlighting the specific requirement to attend for continued receipt of benefit.

Customers claiming health-related benefits were less aware of the mandatory requirement to attend trigger meetings. Some customers with short-term illnesses, such as a broken limb, and some customers with depression or stress-related illnesses, were explicitly informed of the requirement to attend further meetings once they recovered from their illness. Others, with longer-term physical illnesses or more severe mental health problems where the timescale for recovery was unclear, were not usually given explanations about trigger meetings. PAs reported that they didn’t want to put any additional pressure on these customers or overburden them with information.

Carers’ awareness of the need to attend additional meetings was very limited.

4.5.9 Offering continuing voluntary contact and caseload support

PAs routinely offered ongoing contact with customers and encouraged further meetings before the mandatory trigger meetings.

JSA customers automatically receive follow-up contact with the fortnightly signing procedure. There were some exceptional examples, however, where jobseekers were offered informal contact with the PA who conducted their WFI such as returning to have a more comprehensive job search conducted. Given the contact JSA customers have via the signing procedure, extensive follow-up contact was not considered necessary for all JSA customers. This contact was offered to customers...
who had a clear job goal where PAs were confident there would be vacancies and customers demonstrated significant motivation to get a job. PAs targeted these customers as they were more likely to achieve a job entry in the limited time between the initial WFI and the first FJR meeting.

The offer of voluntary contact was more evident for other customer groups. Lone parents, carers and customers claiming health-related benefits were typically given contact details for the PA. These customers were told that they could re-contact the PA at any time if they had any other queries or their circumstances changed and/or they were ready to consider work. Customers across all groups were generally positive about this opportunity to have further contact with their PA. They felt it was reassuring to be able to access additional support from PAs.

In addition to encouraging voluntary ongoing contact, PAs are encouraged by the Must Dos to actively promote and encourage customers to join a New Deal programme during the initial WFI. Lone parents were routinely given information about NDLP during the WFI, either verbally or in written form. This information tended to be for future reference where lone parents were likely to consider work in the future. There were some examples, however, of lone parents agreeing to attend a further meeting with the PA to discuss the NDLP in more detail or to receive specific help available under the programme, such as an IWBC or to help with childcare.

Discussion of the NDDP with customers on health- or disability-related benefits was not happening routinely. Observation evidence showed customers were told about individual job brokers or agencies who deliver the NDDP services rather than the programme as a whole. Few customers were explicitly aware of the programme and where they were it was viewed as a resource for the future when their circumstances changed. As a result, there were very few examples of customers who agreed to attend further meetings as part of the NDDP.

Caseload support through the New Deal programmes was generally offered to the slightly less job-ready customers but there was some difference between customer groups. In the case of lone parents, they might just need support from the New Deal to do an IWBC, before being able to start work, while other lone parents who were less job-ready, required more support over a longer period. PAs felt that regular contact under the NDLP would help to sustain the customer’s motivation to find work. For customers claiming health-related benefits, the NDDP appeared to be offered to customers who were likely only to be job ready in the medium- to long-term. For example, information was given to customers who required a career change to enable them to consider work as an option in the medium-term. In these cases, individuals were given information about courses that could be taken to retrain. The NDDP was also promoted to customers with longer-term health problems but who felt work was an option in the longer-term. There were examples of customers who were suffering depression or stress-related illnesses who were given information on the NDDP as the PA felt these customers may retain their interest in moving into work if they had information about services that were
available. Other PAs felt external agencies delivering the NDDP, had specialist contacts to better help customers who were suffering specific illnesses such as multiple sclerosis or arthritis and who were interested in work in the longer-term.

In addition, PAs also arranged other contact for some customers across all non-JSA customer groups, which they perceived to be informal caseload support. Informal caseloading typically occurred where customers were re-contacted by PAs, either by telephone or in additional face-to-face meetings, following the initial WFI and outside of New Deal contact. Informal caseloading was seen by PAs as suitable for customers who were the most job-ready. These customers were perceived to need little support to move into employment, as they have clear job goals and high motivation to find work. Telephone contact was seen by PAs as a means to check up on a customers’ progress and to provide encouragement to customers to continue their job search activity. Informal caseloading was also offered for customers who were a long way from being job-ready, particularly those claiming health-related benefits whose health condition made it unclear when work would be an option. PA’s felt they could not offer any practically help at the time of the WFI so regular contact was not required. Informal caseloading allowed the PA to follow up the customer and check whether their circumstances had changed at a later point.

4.6 Deferrals and waivers at WFIs

PAs’ experience of seeing customers who they perceived appropriate for a deferral by the Contact Centre was relatively limited. Staff believed that FCOs were more aware of the circumstances where deferrals and waivers can occur, and felt that appropriate decisions were generally being made. There were isolated examples of customers who were booked a WFI when a deferral would have been more appropriate. These included customers with physical health issues who were in significant pain, people who experienced a recent bereavement and lone parents who were heavily pregnant or who recently gave birth. Since these customers came into the Jobcentre Plus public offices, PAs tended to deliver a shortened WFI. These meetings tended to focus on supplying customers with information on the help and support available in the future.

4.7 Length of meetings

Customers and staff typically reported that the 40 minutes available for the WFI was sufficient except where:

- an interpreter was required;
- extensive job searching and multiple job submissions occurred; or
- the PA was required to conduct the FA role.

In practice, observations of WFIs showed considerable variation in the length of WFIs, ranging from five minutes to one hour. Key factors that determined the length of meetings across all customer groups included:
customers’ prior experience of the process – less time was spent on explaining the claim process if customers were already aware of the process;

• customer interest/attitude towards work – the depth of work-related discussions in terms of the range of topics covered depended on customers’ motivation to work;

• whether job searches and submissions were conducted;

• the extent of engagement of customers – where PAs struggled to engage customers, the meetings tended to be shorter. Conversely, they tended to be longer if customers had lots of questions;

• where customers did not speak English as a first language and/or had brought an interpreter with them;

• complexity of interviews – meetings were longer if customers had multiple barriers and a range of issues to be addressed before discussions about work could begin.

The length of meetings varied for different customers groups, as outlined in Sections 4.7.1 to 4.7.4.

4.7.1 Jobseekers

Jobseekers’ familiarity and prior experience of the Jobcentre Plus process influenced the extent to which WFIs lasted for the allocated 40 minutes. If JSA customers already knew about the fortnightly signing regime, for example, and were familiar with the purpose and context of the JSAg, it was not necessary for PAs to explain this in any depth. Similarly, where customers had a recent or existing JSAg, PAs were required to check that the details, such as job goals, were still valid. WFIs, therefore, tended to be shorter as the PA did not engage the customer in a discussion to establish these details. WFIs were also shorter where job searches were not conducted if, for example, the customer found some vacancies on the job points prior to their WFI. In exceptional circumstances, meetings overran for jobseekers who were interested in applying for several jobs found during a job search.

4.7.2 Lone parents

If PAs or lone parents themselves felt it was inappropriate to work at the time of the WFI, the meeting tended to be relatively short-lasting around ten minutes. This occurred where customers had financial or housing issues relating to their relationship breakdown that needed to be resolved before the customer could consider work. Where lone parents were interested in work, either in the short- or medium-term, WFIs tended to be longer. In these cases, PAs conducted job searches, IWBCs, and spent longer discussing tax credits with these customers.
4.7.3 Customers claiming health-related benefits

WFIs for customers claiming health and disability related benefits were very short (five to ten minutes), typically because the PA did not feel it was appropriate and did not feel comfortable in discussing work with the individual. In some cases, customers with health problems made it clear that they were not willing to talk about work. There were also examples of customers who were still employed and planned to return to the same job when they recovered. In these cases, job searches and wider discussions about job search activity were not necessary.

WFIs tended to be longer for customers who were interested in work. This included customers who were interested in alternative job opportunities as their physical health condition meant their usual manual type of work was inappropriate. PAs spent longer with these customers conducting job searches and discussing the range of services that were available to assist these customers to return to work.

4.7.4 Carers

WFIs for carers tended to be the shortest. Customers either told their PA that they were not interested in work at the time of the WFI or PAs felt it was inappropriate to discuss work given individuals’ caring responsibilities. Job searches were, therefore, rarely conducted and PAs only briefly explained the services available through Jobcentre Plus. Customers felt that the length of time they spent with the PA was sufficient. They received the information they required and felt that a more in-depth discussion was inappropriate given their circumstances at the time of the WFI. In an highly exceptional case, an observed WFI lasted 50 minutes as the customer was interested in combining caring responsibilities with some form of part-time work. In this example, the PA spent time looking for suitable part-time vacancies and discussing the Permitted Work conditions of CA.

4.8 Managing workloads

When PAs were not conducting WFIs with customers, they used any ‘downtime’ to conduct a range of tasks, including:

- paperwork and administration;
- job matching for caseloaded customers;
- answering telephone queries;
- seeing customers who drop in to the jobcentre;
- following up deferred customers; and
- contacting service providers to arrange referrals.

PAs felt that that the time available to complete these tasks was limited. In several offices, WFI appointments were booked back-to-back and so limited any downtime to periods when customers failed to attend their interview. In one Pathfinder office,
lone parent PAs also conducted the FA role. In this case study area, PAs felt that the considerably reduced amount of downtime affected their ability to provide caseload support to non-JSA customers.

4.9 Fraud and error

PAs and PAMs believed that PAs had a role to play in detecting, and preventing, fraud and error. PAs felt their role was relatively informal as there were no specific checks they could make. Instead, they were aware of the need to pick up on inconsistent information given by customers which may suggest a fraudulent claim. Where potential fraud was suspected, PAs discussed the case with a FA or made a direct referral to the Counter Fraud section. The issue of fraud and error throughout the whole Jobcentre Plus process is examined in more detail in Chapter 6.

4.10 Monitoring WFI and use of Must Dos

In general, PAs were aware of the requirements and topics to be covered in WFIs, as contained in the Must Dos (see Appendix B). Awareness of the Must Dos document was generally good, as they were covered in initial adviser training and awareness was reinforced at regular team meetings. Staff acknowledged, however, that they did not use it as desk aid and did not follow the guidance explicitly on a day-to-day basis. PAs believed that they covered most aspects in interviews as a matter of course and decisions on covering other aspects such as conducting IWBC, were made by the PA depending on the circumstances of individual customers.

PAMs routinely monitored WFIs using the Quality Improvement Framework (QAF). Managers felt that this framework ensured monitoring was effective and helped to make sure that staff delivered WFIs consistently. In one Day 2 office, the framework was enhanced to cover all of the Must Dos. In this area, PAMs provided verbal and written feedback to PAs. In another Day 2 office, the outcomes from the QAF process were used to develop a series of workshops to cover areas where further PA training was required. The frequency of monitoring varied between offices, but generally occurred on a monthly or quarterly basis.

4.11 Conclusions: progress towards the vision

All staff in public offices were generally positive about their progress towards the Jobcentre Plus vision. Staff typically associated the vision with the Must Dos and as such believed they were largely delivering to the policy intent. In general, PAs were delivering WFIs in line with the requirements of the Must Dos.
4.11.1 Delivering a work-focused service

There was evidence of progress in explaining the purpose of the WFI. The explanations provided, generally contained a focus on work. There was also clear evidence that PAs were discussing job search activity with those customers, from all groups, who were looking to start work imminently. In particular, PAs routinely informed customers of job search support available through Jobcentre Plus as well as external agencies. In addition, PAs also actively promoted in-work benefits. PAs dealing with lone parents in particular were more confident in explaining tax credits as they dealt with them on a daily basis.

However, areas remain where PAs were not routinely delivering all Must Dos, as follows:

- Although customers were aware of the mandatory requirement to participate in the WFI as a condition of receipt of benefit, this information was typically gained from the First Contact stage of the process rather than covered explicitly by the PA.

- The extent to which all customers held meaningful and substantive discussions of work options was mixed. Customer engagement was increasing and lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and carers who were interested in work, were engaged in discussions that covered a range of work-related topics. Job searches and submissions were, routinely, also undertaken with these customers. However, there were examples of customers across all groups where engagement in the WFI was more limited. In these cases, the range of topics covered and the detail provided were more limited. There were isolated examples where customers across all groups were disappointed that work was not discussed when they were interested. In these cases, PAs appeared to continue to make assumptions about the appropriateness of work. Opportunities for more meaningful and substantive discussions were, therefore, missed.

- PAs delivering the WFI to customers claiming health-related benefits were not challenging the assumptions of all customers about what they could do in terms of work.

- Inconsistent information was given about mandatory trigger meetings to lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and carers. In addition, PAs were not consistently explaining the mandatory nature of these meetings, including the timescales involved and their purpose.

PAs delivered a work-focused service to jobseekers. Engaging lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and carers in discussions about work remains mixed. PAs were successfully engaging with customers who were highly motivated and interested in work. However, PAs were not routinely challenging the assumptions of customers claiming health-related benefits about their ability to consider work. PAs felt uncomfortable in discussing work with customers with severe health
conditions. PAs were also observed to make assumptions about customers’ barriers, such as childcare or caring responsibilities, which limited their engagement of customers in discussions about work.

Staff reported that knowledge of the process and services available to different customer groups, particularly for lone parents and customers claiming health-related benefits, was a key area of progress. As a result, PAs felt that they were closer to delivering the same service for all customers who needed help. Examples of effective practice in this area included one Pathfinder office where a specific desk aid had been developed to ensure PAs has ready access to sources of information about services and support available to customers claiming health-related benefits. However, as found in the last round of research, although PAs were increasingly aware of the breadth of services and support available, evidence from this phase of the research suggested that PAs were not consistently giving customers detailed information on the support available. There was also limited evidence that formal referrals to services and actual assistance was given during the initial WFI. The extent to which PAs were giving customers active help to assist all customers to get and keep work in line with the vision was, therefore, less evident.

4.11.2 Barriers to progress

PAs identified a number of areas that undermined the extent to which they were able to deliver the Jobcentre Plus vision. The lack of downtime was a factor in preventing further progress. This time can be used for caseloading activities to provide ongoing support after the WFI, but staff felt they had limited ability to pursue these activities. Some staff also felt that there was a mismatch between the targets for job entries and the realities of the support element of the vision. These PAs felt that the emphasis on job entries does not allow for success in distance travelled for other customers to be recognised and measured.

For carers and customers with severe physical or mental health problems, staff acknowledged the need for more information and confidence in order to ensure these customers received the same level of service as other customers. Staff felt that specific training was difficult to deliver as much is related to confidence and experience. The increased specialisms in PA roles were viewed as one way to address this issue as well as good working relationships with other, more experienced, colleagues who can provide advice and support.
5 Caseloading

This chapter explores the delivery of caseload meetings. It is largely based on interviews with staff, but also includes non-Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) customers’ perceptions where individuals participated in caseload meetings. The chapter begins by outlining the purpose of caseload meetings and the systems put in place by Jobcentre Plus public offices (Section 5.1). The content and format of caseloading is then explored (Section 5.2) before the effectiveness of follow-up contact is outlined (Section 5.3). The chapter concludes by examining progress towards the Jobcentre Plus vision (Section 5.4).

5.1 Purpose and systems for caseloading

The purpose of caseload meetings is to provide additional support for customers who claim benefits other than JSA to help them prepare, and look, for work. The non-JSA Must Dos document (see Appendix B) indicates that such support is generally provided through participation in a New Deal programme. Although caseload support is voluntary, Personal Advisers (PAs) are encouraged by the Must Dos to actively promote and encourage customers to join a New Deal programme during the initial work-focused interview (WFI). Caseloading for lone parents can be provided through New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) which is delivered by PAs themselves. Caseloading for customers with health problems or disabilities is provided through New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP), typically delivered by a number of external providers or job brokers.

As described in Section 4.5.9, PAs encouraged lone parents and customers claiming health-related benefits to join a formal caseload at their initial WFI by taking up provision under the New Deal programmes. PAs varied in their approaches to this. Some PAs described the overall programme while others focused on individual services available such as job search support, training or in-work benefit calculations (IWBCs) (see Section 4.5.5.).

Where caseloading under the New Deal was not appropriate if, for example, a customer was not interested in joining a New Deal programme or for carers (for whom there is no New Deal provision), caseload support can also be provided by the
PA or by a Disability Employment Advisers (DEA) for customers with health problems. Where the customer does not formally join a New Deal programme, PAs viewed this as offering ‘informal’ caseload support.

In some offices, both Pathfinder and Day 2 offices, formal systems were developed to help manage the process of informal and formal caseloading. All customers were ‘caseloaded’ and categorised into one of a number of groups based on their position in terms of work. This allowed PAs, with limited ‘downtime’, to identify the customers for whom a job entry was more likely to be achieved and the type of help customers may require in achieving this outcome.

One system in use in a Pathfinder office was where customers were categorised into ‘green’, ‘amber’, and ‘red’ groups. This was referred to as a ‘traffic light system’. Green customers were the customers that PAs perceived to be very job-ready, in that they were motivated to work and faced few barriers to be able to enter work immediately. These customers typically required only a little help with job search activity before starting work. These customers may be informally caseloaded or receive specific practical help. PAs reported that a job search service was typically provided from the New Deal in only a limited number of meetings or the PA might refer them to training providers or for help with CV preparation. Amber customers were people who were slightly less job-ready. PAs typically perceived that these customers had less motivation to find work and they faced barriers such as childcare or transport issues that prevented them taking up some jobs. These customers typically required greater direction from the PA in their job search activity to identify suitable vacancies that matched their skills and interests and more practical help to overcome barriers. However, PAs reported that some of these customers could also be much less job ready. For example, if a customer illustrated a high degree of interest in and motivation to work but had greater support needs, PAs caseloaded them under amber as they felt they could clearly provide assistance to these customers. Customers in the red category were typically reported to be those who were not interested in work or those for whom it was not appropriate at the time of the WFI. This included customers with longer-term health conditions where the timescale for recovery was unclear, lone parents who reported only to be able to consider work when their children had started school and carers who expressed a preference to concentrate on their caring responsibilities. PAs reported that they would informally caseload these customers and contact them at a later date to see if their circumstances changed. There was little evidence from customers that this follow up contact actually happened. Another Day 2 office used a very similar system, where customers were placed in ‘hot’, ‘warm’ and ‘cold’ categories.

In isolated examples, PAs also caseloaded jobseekers even though this was not part of the policy vision. It was recognised that caseloading of jobseekers was important in order to achieve job submission targets. Informal caseloading was generally only offered to JSA customers who were keen to start work immediately and support given only in the period before the customer’s first Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) meeting. In other offices, PAs reported that JSA customers would not be caseloaded as there were other staff and services available to help them into work.
5.2 Content and focus of caseloading

Public office staff recognised the primary aim of all types of caseloading to be to move customers into, or towards, work. Caseload support was consistently understood by PAs as maintaining regular contact with customers to provide ongoing support and to check customers’ progress towards employment:

‘Caseloading is to meet with somebody on a regular basis, to do regular interviews with them, do regular job searches, give them advice and just have contact with them, so that you are up to date with what is happening with their circumstances and their job search.’

(Personal Adviser)

PAs generally determined the type of caseload contact made with non-JSA customers. The nature and intensity of caseload contact varied, however.

Formal caseloading for lone parents is provided through the NDLP, delivered by PAs themselves. PAs reported to use face-to-face meetings or telephone calls, or in some cases, both modes of contact in delivering this formal caseload support. Face-to-face meetings were preferred to deliver formal caseloading as this type of contact was perceived to be more effective in allowing the PA to explain the range of support available under the NDLP programme. Where services such as IWBCs were offered, a face-to-face meeting was preferred as it eased explanations of the calculation. Access to some of the New Deal services, such as the Adviser’s Discretionary Fund (ADF) and referral to training, was also more likely to be achieved through a face-to-face New Deal meeting.

New Deal caseloading for customers with health problems or disabilities is delivered by a number external providers or job brokers rather than by PAs in Jobcentre Plus offices. PAs, consequently, only delivered informal caseloading support to these customers.

The evidence from customers and PAs suggested that informal caseloading support for lone parents, carers and customers claiming health-related benefits tended to be delivered over the telephone. There were, however, exceptional examples of a lone parent calling into the Jobcentre Plus office on the off-chance to see their PA or attending a one off meeting to fill in maintenance forms, for example, or to have a job search conducted.

Other factors that influenced the extent and nature of informal caseloading contact included:

- **The motivation and enthusiasm of the customer to move into work**

  Customers from all non-JSA groups who were highly motivated to move into work were informally caseloaded. PAs restricted their contact to telephone calls as they were confident customers were undertaking their own job search activity and required little direct help from the PA. PAs also tended not to invite customers
for a face-to-face meeting if the customer was not interested in work in the short-term.

- The timescale in which customers would be able to consider work as an option

Where customers were unlikely to consider work in the short-term, telephone contact was undertaken initially to check whether a customer’s circumstances had changed and if they felt ready to think about moving into work or joining a New Deal Programme. Customers claiming health-related benefits were contacted after a specific event, such as a hospital visit or the expiry of a sick note. Lone parents were typically contacted when their youngest child started school or nursery. PAs acknowledged that these events might help to determine the customer’s situation in terms of work.

There was considerable variation across offices and individual PAs regarding the frequency of caseload support. Some PAs felt that formal New Deal caseloads were more intensively delivered with weekly face-to-face contact with lone parents. In contrast telephone contact as part of informal caseloading support could be limited to a period of up to six weeks following the initial WFI.

‘Someone could be in every week or on the phone every few days; it depends on the client as to how intensive the support is.’

(Personal Adviser)

However, a range of other factors influenced the intensity of the support delivered through either New Deal or more informal caseloads. PAs generally determined the intensity of the contact based on their assessment of the appropriateness of contact, given a customer’s circumstances. PAs, for example, were concerned not to pressure lone parents who had experienced a recent relationship breakdown. For carers and customers claiming health-related benefits, contact was less frequent where PAs felt it was inappropriate for customers to be considering work. The timescale for further contact with customers claiming health-related benefits was also determined by key events happening that changed their circumstances, such as an operation or the expiry of a sick note. More frequent contact was offered, however, where customers were interested in the services available through Jobcentre Plus or demonstrated a clear motivation to move into work. Local arrangements and targets in terms of job matching also influenced the intensity of contact. In one case study area, PAs referred to the ‘golden service’ intensive job matching with the result of getting two customers a week into a job. This consequently led to more intensive contact. Other PAs only contacted their caseloaded customers when they found what was perceived to be a suitable vacancy.

Given the varying use of Customer Action Plans (CAPs) in initial WFIs (see Section 4.5.7), their use in guiding the frequency and content of both formal and informal caseload meetings was also mixed. Where used, the short- and long-term goals included in CAPs were used as a guide to the number of times the customer would
be contacted. The customer’s goals detailed in the plan also allowed PAs to tailor the content of formal face-to-face caseload meetings.

It was rare for customers to know that they were caseloaded. PAs generally informed lone parents or customers claiming health-related benefits that they would be in touch in the future:

‘She [the PA] said that they would be in touch with me and that she would keep looking and that if something comes up she’ll let me know.’

(Female lone parent, age unknown)

‘No she was just generally talking, she said maybe sometime later she would contact me to go back and have an interview with her...just to see if circumstances have changed.’

(Female with arthritis, aged 56 years)

In practice, few customers reported any further contact with PAs. There was some evidence of lone parents returning to a further appointment which can be identified as NDLP caseloading. In these cases, they mentioned a NDLP Adviser, explicitly identified the NDLP or accessed services available under NDLP. Evidence of formal caseloading under the NDDP was much more exceptional. One customer reported attending a course with the Shaw Trust, one of the external agencies responsible for delivering NDDP support.

Customers across all groups were routinely given contact details for the PA. It was only in exceptional cases that the PA initiated this informal caseloading contact. There were exceptional examples of lone parents having further contact with PAs outside of formal New Deal caseloading including one lone parent who reported further telephone contact with the PA to see how the customer was getting on with an application form she had been given at the WFI. Another lone parent returned to see their PA a week after the WFI to fill in maintenance forms. There were no instances of customers claiming health-related benefits and carers receiving informal caseloading contact. These customers were consistently given details about being able to re-contact PAs. In a highly exceptional case, one customer with a long-term health condition was disappointed that the PA had not made contact after saying he would.

5.3 Effectiveness of caseloading

Staff perceptions of the effectiveness of caseloading varied across offices and between staff within the same office. Office Managers (OMs) and Personal Adviser Managers (PAMs) generally felt that all types of caseloading were only as effective as the staff responsible for delivery. The success of caseloading relied heavily on the input of PAs. PAs’ activity in terms of job matching, building a rapport with customers, and encouraging them to join a caseload in the first place, was
considered by managers to be key to the success of caseloading. PAMs were aware of PAs who only kept a small caseload to satisfy managers. These PAs tended to be less active in contacting customers to pass on vacancy information or to encourage them to access services through Jobcentre Plus. Consequently, job entries for these customers were less likely to be achieved as a direct result of the caseload activity.

Perceptions among PAs of the effectiveness of caseloading also varied. They identified a number of key factors that they felt contributed to effective caseload support, including:

- if the customer was actively ready to job search;
- if a PA actively and regularly kept on top of their caseload;
- whether the caseload was kept to a manageable size; and
- the extent to which PAs prioritised and understood the purpose of caseload support.

Formal caseloading was recognised as an effective way of providing the encouragement or practical support for job-ready customers who then move into employment in the short-term.

Through formal NDLP meetings, highly motivated lone parents were helped with job search activity or other practical support, including financial support, which had a direct impact on their ability to move into work. This caseload support, however, was only one of the factors contributing to job entries in the short-term. The motivation of the customer was also felt by PAs to be a key factor in customers making the move into employment. Over the longer-term, NDLP caseloading support was effective in achieving job entries for lone parents through delivering the practical support and encouragement that customers need. Where lone parents experienced a period away from the labour market, the rapport built with customers as a result of the regular face-to-face contact of formal NDLP caseloading was recognised by PAs as having a positive effect on a lone parent’s motivation to work.

‘Increased contact is important in helping people understand that someone is there to support and encourage them…this may be all that is needed in returning to work.’

(Personal Adviser)

‘Very effective because you are making contact with that customer and you’re building a rapport and they get to know a familiar face and a friend that they can come and ask advice from and ask questions.’

(Personal Adviser)

The effectiveness of NDLP caseloading was recognised by staff as being limited by PAs’ knowledge of the services available. There were examples of PAs who lacked confidence in providing information about New Deal programmes, in-work support, and how to conduct IWBCs.
Given that NDDP caseloading is delivered by external agencies, it is not possible to comment extensively on the effectiveness of this caseloading support over the longer-term. PAs perceived that the specialist support available through the NDDP would contribute to job entries for customers with disabilities or health conditions. PAs recognised, however, that NDDP caseload support was not always able to change customers’ circumstances in terms of their health condition or illness which was a key barrier to these customers achieving a job entry.

Informal caseloading was recognised by PAs as being effective in providing ongoing support to customers that encouraged them to return to work. Informal caseloading was felt to be effective in this sense for lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and carers who were highly motivated to move into work in the short-term. Again, the caseload support was only one of the factors; the motivation of the customer was also felt to be a key factor in making the move into employment. Some PAs were less positive about informal caseloading as a process overall and, thus, felt that this form of caseloading was less effective. One PA in a Day 2 office, for example, felt that it was more effective to work with customers while in the WFI rather than through caseload meetings. The PA felt they had more influence over the vacancies the customer looked at and jobs they applied for while customers were present. Once customers left the Jobcentre Plus office, the PA felt customers often lost the motivation the PA had instilled in them. Remembering the interests and needs of a number of customers on an informal caseload was also regarded as more difficult and as such would lead to a less effective service being delivered:

‘I find that I can concentrate much better on a client in front of us, than trying to remember a client who I saw three or four weeks ago. I’ll work with who I’ve got in front of me and I prefer to do that.’

(Personal Adviser)

Overall, PAs felt that both the formal and informal caseloading process was an effective tool but given its voluntary nature and the circumstances of some customers it does not necessarily lead to an effective outcome, such as a job entry:

‘Well it is effective but you don’t always get a result. It’s effective that you can move a person on slightly but they don’t necessarily return to work or come off benefit.’

(Personal Adviser)

5.4 Conclusions: Progress towards the vision

The promotion of formal caseloading support was broadly occurring in line with the Must Dos guidance. Lone parents were routinely given information about NDLP during the WFI, either verbally or in written form. In contrast, discussion of the NDDP with customers on health- or disability-related benefits was not happening routinely. Observation evidence did show that some customers were told about individual job brokers or agencies who deliver the NDDP services rather than the programme as a
whole. There remains, therefore, some variation in the level of detail given to customers about different New Deal programmes.

The Phase 3 research highlighted that more offices were making formal arrangements with non-JSA customers for PAs to re-contact them at a certain point after the WFI but in practice the delivery of informal caseload meetings was patchy. This phase of the research suggests that a number of offices continue to put mechanisms in place to manage the process of caseloading in light of limited downtime for PAs. Emphasis was clearly placed on caseloading those non-JSA customers that PAs believed had good prospects for getting back to work and who were ready to start looking immediately. As a result both formal and informal caseloading was perceived by PAs to be effective in helping to achieve job entries in the short-term. This targeted approach potentially overlooked less job ready customers. There was also a risk that advisers misjudged the degree of interest a customer had in finding work. In these cases, customers’ access to caseload advice and information was limited even where they might benefit from further support. Over the longer-term, formal New Deal caseloading support was felt to be effective in achieving job entries for lone parents by delivering practical support and encouragement that these customers were perceived to need.

The overall effectiveness of caseloading was affected by a number of factors. PAs reported that their ability to caseload was restricted by constraints on their time. PAs described any downtime being taken up with completing paper work, preparing for the next day appointments, checking email and bulletins. As a result, PAs were limited in the number of customers they could caseload and actively work with. It was rare for a PA to have more than twelve to 15 customers on a caseload at any one time. Consequently, in practice PAs typically targeted those customers most likely to move into work imminently and the process seemed to largely operate as a telephone job search service. The effectiveness of formal caseloading was also limited by PAs’ knowledge of the services available.

In this phase of research, there was evidence that offices were taking, or planned to take, measures to actually deliver more caseload meetings by setting aside specific resources to improve caseloading performance. This included: recruiting casual staff to conduct caseload meetings; PAMs taking greater responsibility for caseloading; and PAs making more referrals to the DEAs’ caseloads. There was no evidence, however, that this occurred in practice.
6 Fraud and error

This chapter outlines how the Jobcentre Plus process identifies and handles fraud and error within the benefit system. The chapter provides some background information on the overall aims and objectives in relation to reducing fraud and error, and explains how this is intended to work (Section 6.1). The importance attributed to detecting fraud and error by Jobcentre Plus offices and the roles and responsibilities of different staff in identifying and dealing with fraud and error is then outlined (Section 6.2) before exploring how fraud and error were identified in practice (Section 6.3). The steps taken by staff once fraud or error has been identified are outlined (Section 6.4), followed by an overview of staff confidence in identifying fraud and error (Section 6.5). The chapter concludes with a summary of the impact of Jobcentre Plus on eliminating fraud and error (Section 6.6).

The findings in this chapter are based on interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff and observations of their contact/interaction with customers. The research did not include customers’ perspectives of fraud and error.

6.1 Background

The Jobcentre Plus Vision 2003-07 outlines how Jobcentre Plus aims to half the fraud and error rate (in percentage terms) from what they were in 1998\(^7\). They intend to do this in a number of ways, including:

- using every suitable contact with customers to discuss the possibility of work;
- working closely with partners, for example local authorities and other Government departments, to tackle benefit fraud;
- greater use of intelligence about possible fraud and error, under laws that allow Jobcentre Plus to share financial data with other organisations;

• installing a framework of checks and balances into their systems and processes
to reduce fraud and error; and

• introducing the second phase of the Customer Management System (CMS) to
remove the need for re-keying between systems, which should reduce fraud,
error and running costs.

The Jobcentre Plus Business Plan for 2004-05 includes more detailed information on
the fraud and error targets for this financial year. These are to reduce losses from
fraud and error for people of working age on Income Support (IS) and Jobseeker’s
Allowance (JSA) with a 33 per cent reduction by March 2004 and 50 per cent by
March 2006 and a 25 per cent reduction in Housing Benefit (HB) fraud by 20068.

Whilst ‘fraud’ and ‘error’ are normally jointly referred to in Jobcentre Plus
documentation, the two concepts are quite different. Fraud implies a deliberate
intent by an individual to deceive Jobcentre Plus. In contrast, error does not and can
simply involve a mistake in the claiming process. As can be seen from the following
sections, the approaches used by staff to detect both fraud and error are quite
similar as the querying of an error can lead to the detection of potential fraudulent
claims.

When First Contact Officers (FCO) or a Financial Assessor (FA) identify a claim with
circumstances that might be more prone to fraud and in need of further investigation
they follow a process called Gateway Intervention (GI). A GI involves a home visit, a
telephone interview or a further office interview by a Financial Assessor Manager
(FAM), a FA or a Visiting Officer, depending on local arrangements. There are various
circumstances that require a GI including:

• customers who have been self-employed;

• lone parents who are not receiving any child maintenance and are, therefore, of
interest to the Child Support Agency (CSA);

• customers who have recently separated;

• customers who might be living with a partner as husband and wife but have not
declared this;

• customers with a care of address; and

• customers from abroad who may require a Habitual Residence Test.

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6.2 The importance attributed to detecting fraud and error

Office Managers (OMs) and FAMs consistently recognised the importance of detecting fraud and error and Monetary Value of Fraud and Error (MVFE) targets. Some FAMs used the MVFE target as a motivational tool for the FAs they managed, and presented it as a target that FAs could work towards and a way in which their contribution could be recognised:

‘Everyone seems to mention job entry targets this and job entry targets that. The FAs do feel a bit as if they’re left out of the whole equation... well you have to try and say that, you know at least this target is one of the most important, and the amount of money that they could be saving. And you’re a tax payer as well so don’t forget you’re saving some money for yourself.’

(Financial Assessor Manager)

FAMs and FAs found that the detection of fraud and error fitted well with their other responsibilities. FAs recognised the importance of their role as the first face-to-face contact that a customer had with Jobcentre Plus and the need to establish customers’ personal circumstances to ensure that customers’ forms and identification were correct. There was an exceptional view from one OM who believed that the detection of error was a larger part of PAs’ role and that fraud was the responsibility of staff who saw customers more regularly.

‘It’s more likely to be the adviser or the FJR [Fortnightly Job Review] staff that would identify fraud because they see people more regularly.’

(Office Manager)

6.2.1 The role of the FCO

In order to minimise benefit fraud and error, more responsibility has been placed on the FCO and their role in highlighting claims with circumstances that might be susceptible to fraud and error. These claims can then be explored more closely through a GI.

Where FCOs’ conversations with customers lead them to identify a claim that requires a GI, they are expected to complete a JCP 7 form and send this to the FA. The FA will then make arrangements for the customer to be seen by the appropriate person, either in the office or through a home interview, depending on their local arrangements.

6.2.2 The role of the FA

FAs were also given additional responsibility to identify and highlight claims with circumstances that might be subject to fraud and error. If an FA identified the need for a GI, they are also expected to complete a JCP 7 form and either carry out or arrange for the intervention to be carried out by the locally appointed staff member.
The FCO notifies the customer of their work-focused interview (WFI) appointment time, taking into account the 20 minute benefit check. It is the FA’s responsibility to contact the customer to arrange an earlier time to enable a GI to take place before the WFI and to book this time on VANTIVE for the FA or the FAM conducting the intervention.

The FA is required to preview all cases when they receive notification of them as cases with a child support interest require certain actions well in advance of the customer interview.

6.2.3 The role of the FAM

FAMs are aware of the need for a GI to be performed with a customer through receipt of a JCP 7 form from FCOs or FAs or through direct communication with FAs on their teams. The FAMs’ level of involvement in the process following identification of possible fraud and error depends on local arrangements for conducting a GI interview. It is either the appropriate grade of FA or a FAM who holds these interviews within the Jobcentre Plus office.

6.2.4 The role of the PA

The role of the PA in fraud and error is slightly different. If, as part of the WFI, they suspect fraud, and there is no outstanding evidence required, they should pass a fraud referral directly to the Counter-Fraud section. If outstanding evidence is required, PAs should complete a fraud referral and retain it with the claim documents until the necessary evidence has been gathered from the customer(s).

6.3 Detecting fraud and error in practice

All Jobcentre Plus staff recognised the importance of detecting fraud and error. The extent to which this was possible, however, depended on a number of factors, including:

- **Knowledge of the eligibility criteria for benefits**
  
  Some FAs were more knowledgeable about certain benefits due to their experience and/or previous role in the former Employment Service (ES) or Benefits Agency (BA). This meant that, whilst they often called upon their colleagues for support and advice, they were less sure about the eligibility criteria for some benefits and this affected their ability to pick up on fraud or error.

- **The confidence and ability of FCOs and FAs to elicit information from customers**
  
  Those staff members with more experience of working with customers and of using various questioning techniques to elicit information or to query answers, had greater confidence in their ability to detect fraud and to pick up on errors.
• **Time constraints**

Time constraints impacted on FAs’ abilities to undertake detailed checks, occasionally even when their suspicions might be raised. An example given was if a customer declared that they had no bank account, and due to time it might not be possible for staff to check for savings over the threshold.

In practice, FCOs and FAs recognised their role and responsibility for picking up on error and detecting fraud differently. FCOs and FAs systematically picked up errors through the questions they asked customers and the claim check and this fell well within what they were already doing/delivering. However, they found the detection of fraud much more difficult to fit into their roles and responsibilities, given the factors outlined in the bullet points above, and there was, to an extent, an assumption that fraud would be picked up by someone else.

### 6.3.1 First Contact Officers

FCOs discussed their role in terms of detecting fraud rather than whether/how they noticed any errors in customers’ claims. FCOs tended to base an identification of fraud on suspicion. They offered a range of possible scenarios that, from their experience or from standard guidance, might alert their attention to potential fraud including customers:

- trying to claim two different benefits with two National Insurance numbers (NINOs);
- without a NINO;
- with a ‘care of’ address;
- wanting to use ex-partners’ bank account;
- providing conflicting information;
- hesitating on giving information;
- who were unable to provide personal details easily; and
- who were separated but still in same house as their partner.

FCOs across sites usually paid particular attention to the lone parent customer group, especially those who were recently separated, as co-habitation issues were not uncommon. One FCO described a situation where they called a lone parent customer who said they were single. In this example, someone of the opposite sex answered the telephone and said the person in question would not be at home until five o’clock.

“We’ve had one this morning that he was saying in one breath he lived with his wife, the next minute he doesn’t live with his wife and wants to claim this. He had already said that she was claiming another benefit. So immediately alarm bells start ringing.”

(First Contact Officer)
FCOs’ confidence with identifying fraud varied and some found it quite difficult due to their lack of benefit knowledge or the fact that they followed an interview script. Those FCOs who were less confident about detecting fraud did not regard it as a significant part of their role.

### 6.3.2 Financial Assessors

FAs were picking up on errors in claims, typically incorrect or incomplete information. They used similar methods to find these as to detect any fraudulent claims, by adopting a systematic approach to checking through the information provided by customers in their completed claims. As noted earlier, time was a key factor in their ability to complete detailed checks, such as cross-checking the new and old forms of repeat claimants for inconsistencies or irregularities. For this reason, some FAs were more confident in their ability to identify error than fraud.

Any errors found in customers’ claim forms were corrected during the FA meeting, once the customer had confirmed the correct information. This meant that claims could be processed more quickly and that customers were able to receive their benefit payments more promptly.

Experienced FAs were skilled at detecting both fraud and error and the interview with customers was their main tool. Specific examples of what staff did in preparation for and during an interview included:

- checking the forms thoroughly;
- listening to customers’ responses;
- questioning customers to check all inconsistencies or gaps in information;
- cross-checking claim forms of customers claiming more than one benefit;
- being aware of mismatched payslips which could reveal working whilst claiming benefit;
- being aware of any job entries on Labour Market System (LMS);
- asking for original copies of all evidence to double check, for example, the hours that someone worked against their declared earnings; and
- one office used a UV scanner provided by the Home Office to check asylum seekers’ documentation.

There was an example of an office where FAs used a particular aide memoir called ‘Fast One’ which listed questions related to fraud and error and the potential need for a GI, such as those using a ‘care of’ address or co-habitation. The fraudulent issues that FAs most often referred for a GI were co-habitation, cases with child support interest, and self-employment.
Some FAs also acknowledged the role FCOs played in the detection of fraud and error and the fact that they were sometimes alerted to a potential fraud situation through notes that the FCO had entered into the ‘conversations’ box on the LMS. FAs followed this up by querying the inconsistency with the customer, taking particular note of their reaction and response.

FAMs also believed that the interview was the most valuable tool for detecting both fraud and error and acknowledged that FAs’ ability improved with experience. As a consequence, this raised the issue of new FAs’ ability. In an exceptional case, a customer claimed that they had no bank account but their wage slips showed wages paid by the Bank Automated Clearing System (BACS). The inexperienced FA did not notice this inconsistency.

‘A lot of it is experience…if you’re not confident in what you’re doing then you’re not going to tackle discrepancies on a form…So I will question and pull it out, but is someone with no experience going to be able to do that? We do need more training on it.’

(Financial Assessor Manager)

6.3.3 Personal Advisers

Whilst PAs believed that picking up on errors and detecting fraud were important, they tended to regard it as an extra responsibility on top of their usual work, instead of a priority. Therefore, they dealt with it in a much more informal manner than their FA colleagues.

Some PAs also believed it was easier for them/their colleagues on the Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) teams to find errors or spot fraud once the customer was further into the Jobcentre Plus process because they would have established some sort of rapport with customers or an understanding of their circumstances. Whilst some PAs believed this could be at the Restart interview, others regarded it to be on entry to New Deal.

PAs generally referred to ‘giveaway signs’ in customers’ behaviour that would lead them to probe further to find out whether there were errors or potential fraud in their claim. These included: customers who were constantly late to meetings; wanted an interview at a particular time; or were collected in a work van or were wearing work clothes. Other PAs noted inconsistencies in information given at different interviews such as customers stating that they lived alone and then referred to a partner or people who were claiming as a single person and then referred to children.

6.4 Next steps following identification of fraud and error

There was little consistency in the processes that FCOs followed once a GI had been identified, both between offices and in the same office. In one office, FCOs used different processes depending on the type of fraud. FCOs’ understanding of the processes to use following identification of fraud included:
• completion of a JCP 7 form – one FCO noted that they used this form when a home visit was necessary;

• notes to VANTIVE and the ‘conversations’ box on LMS for the FA to access when previewing customers’ records;

• following an instance where a customer claimed two different benefits, the FCO completed form QB21 with their team leader and informed the relevant Jobcentre Plus office;

• informing the team leader who would then contact the Counter Fraud Investigation Service (CFIS);

• informing CFIS directly; and

• sending ‘a Gateway’ to the FA who would deal with the customer.

There were FCOs who raised the issue of lack of available time to complete the necessary forms following suspicion of fraud.

The process that FAs followed once they identified a GI, depended on the local arrangements. FAs’ knowledge was insufficient for them to be able to offer detailed information on these processes, as can be seen from the following list of processes described by FAs:

• FAs sent a copy of the customer’s claim form and a pro-forma explaining the need for the GI to the GI team which operated out of a different office in the district. All payment was withheld until the GI team reported back on the claim’s outcome. FA also informed the customer of the need for a GI and a potential visit and explained the circumstances for this.

• Once the FA had identified the need for a GI, the claim was dealt with by the FAM or referred to the visiting section using form QB21 as the FAM did not undertake home visits. One FA noted that there was an overall decrease in home visits and that customers were being encouraged to attend an interview in the office.

• FAs would notify the visiting team directly of the potential need for a GI.

• FAs highlighted the relevant GI information on the claim form and then passed the details to their FAM who, in turn, contacted the Interventions Manager. The FAM commented that the FA role was limited due to their workload and there were FAs who were unclear of the process after their particular stage, even though they all received some training on the GI process. However, as they had had little practice of implementing the process, their knowledge was limited.

• FA completed a specific pro-forma called ‘Fast One’ and mark any need for GI on the back of the form which they then sent to Interventions team. This team then followed up all referrals and identified whether any further investigation or action was needed.
• FAs completed a GI form and then passed the claim onto their FAM who interviewed the customer. If necessary, the FAM conducted home visits.

• If a need for a GI was identified, the FA took a statement from the customer and once they had left the office, the FA completed a CC1 form for a referral to the GI team. They logged this referral with a note on the screen that included the risk category. FA involvement ended at this point in the process. The FAM undertook the GI interviews in the office, whilst the visiting team undertook any home visits. Once the second interview had been completed, all information and evidence was forwarded to the Decision Maker. In instances where there were outstanding issues remaining, the customer’s claim was referred to the Fraud Department for investigation. FAs were able to seek feedback on cases that had been referred several weeks earlier to determine whether benefit was paid.

In one office, time permitting, the FAM checked all the FA forms before they were sent to the processing section. The FAM believed the double-check was effective as they were more easily able to notice fraud and error without time pressures or the distraction of attending to customers.

In the instances of PAs suspecting fraud, they completed a QB21 form and referred the claim to their colleagues in the fraud department.

6.5 Staff confidence in identifying fraud and error

As noted in Section 6.3, the factors influencing the confidence of all types of staff were experience, their level of knowledge of the various benefits, and time constraints. FAMs were generally confident in their FAs’ ability to detect fraud and error, although many also related FAs’ confidence and effectiveness to their levels of experience.

FCO confidence in identifying fraud and error varied. In general, FCOs’ uncertainty with identifying fraud was due to a lack of knowledge on the rules and regulations of each benefit type which staff felt impacted on their effectiveness to identify fraudulent claims, as they might not be aware that the customer included incorrect information in their form. However, there were FCOs who gained confidence from their colleagues’ experience and knowledge, as they would question colleagues about anything they were unsure of. One FCO was uncomfortable with the issue rather than lacking in confidence, although they still preferred to err on the side of caution. Other reasons for FCOs’ lack of confidence were:

• insufficient training on the identification of fraud and error;

• the fact that identification was based on what customers tell you over the telephone and FCOs felt that a face-to-face interaction might provide ‘give away’ signs through customers’ body language;
• the number of factors that had to be taken into account during a first contact conversation; and

• an understanding that the Fraud team did not pursue certain suspicious calls/information, which led to reluctance to pursue these.

FAs were generally confident in picking up errors, and in identifying cases which required a GI. Whilst some FAs had aide memoirs or forms that helped to remind them of the requirements for further investigation or for the need for a GI, other FAs gained confidence from the guidance material/presentations from the GI team and the support they received from colleagues who worked in the processing section. In one area, this support for FAs had been in the form of training from their processing colleagues in what evidence was required. However, there were FAs who were only confident in identifying more common fraud and error issues such as co-habitation and cases for referral to the CSA.

With regard to raising fraud and error issues with customers, FAs had mixed levels of confidence and different ways of dealing with this. There were examples of staff with greater experience who felt confident in raising issues with customers. Whilst they did not explicitly explain that to the customer that they were being investigated for fraud, they would tell them that they needed to go through the GI process, otherwise it could affect their benefit. Other FAs chose not to raise fraud and error issues with customers because they worked within an unscreened environment and they were concerned about their safety if the customer responded negatively to a suggestion of a fraudulent claim. In these instances, FAs sought clarification from the customer. If they were unable to gain a full explanation from them, they would then refer them to their colleagues in the fraud section. There were also FAs who referred customers who they suspected of fraud directly to the FAM without drawing the issue of fraud to customers’ attention.

6.6 The impact of Jobcentre Plus on eliminating fraud and error

On the whole, staff believed they were effective in detecting fraud and error. FAs and FAMs across the board believed they were doing their best in the interview time available to them. Some, however, would welcome the option to lengthen some interviews in order to probe customers further and seek clarification on ambiguities.

‘It would be nice for an extra ten minutes then you could really do some digging.’

(Financial Assessor Manager)

All types of staff were keen to highlight the value of face-to-face interviews and the effectiveness of conversation at drawing information out of customers. Staff also noted the value of seeing the paper-based documents in addition to computerised information as they were able to see how customers completed the forms.
When asked about possible improvements to the fraud and error process, staff suggested the following:

- ID cards with photographs for customers;
- additional and ongoing training in fraud and error;
- feedback from processors/fraud team which might assist in making FAs more stringent in their checking of claim forms as they would be aware that their referrals had led to a correct identification of fraud;
- more simplified claim forms;
- FCOs to re-emphasise to customers the need to take all relevant and up to date information to FA meetings; and
- more guidelines to increase FA confidence to challenge customer statements.

6.7 Conclusions

Office Managers and FAMs consistently recognised the importance of detecting fraud and error. Whilst FCOs found the detection of fraud quite difficult to undertake during a First Contact conversation over the telephone, they were able to deal with any errors that might arise at that stage.

FAs in particular found that the detection of fraud and error fitted well with their other responsibilities. The main tool that they used to identify both errors and fraud was the interview process. This enabled them to seek clarification on any inconsistencies on claim forms and what customers described, and to take notice of customers’ body language and signs.

PAs regarded the identification of fraud and error as mainly being the responsibility of FAs. Whilst they recognised the importance of their detection, they viewed it as an additional responsibility to their job role rather than a priority within their area of work.

Progress was evident in raising staff awareness and understanding of the potential circumstances of fraud and error. All staff believed their effectiveness in detecting both fraud and error was bound by certain factors including their levels of experience of both interviewing and seeking clarification from customers, the interview time available to them, and their knowledge of all the different types of benefit. There remain gaps in the knowledge of staff and inconsistencies across offices in terms of the processes to be taken once fraud and error are identified.
7 The office environment

This chapter examines customer and staff views of the Jobcentre Plus office environment, including the issue of safety. Customers’ initial impressions of the Jobcentre Plus office are covered first (Section 7.1) before customer and staff views of, and interaction with, the office layout are presented (Section 7.2). Customers’ perceptions of safety in the Jobcentre Plus office are then examined (Section 7.3), followed by a comparison between legacy and new office environments (Section 7.4). The chapter concludes with an overview of individuals’ thoughts and reactions to the new environment of Jobcentre Plus.

The findings presented in this chapter are based on interviews with both staff and customers of Jobcentre Plus. Staff were not asked directly about the office environment, but issues emerged during the course of interviews and these are reflected here. Customers’ perceptions of safety in Jobcentre Plus offices are also presented, to build on and complement other research conducted for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on staff safety. For the purpose of this report, safety refers to customers’ perceptions of their physical safety within the Jobcentre Plus office, with a specific focus on security features such as security guards and Closed Circuit Television (CCTV).

7.1 Initial impressions

In general, customers’ initial impressions of the Jobcentre Plus office environment were positive. Customers from all groups consistently remarked on the ‘niceness’ of the office, that the office was clean, tidy, modern and pleasant. Customers’ views of the office were usually made in combination with references to the friendliness of staff. Customers with no prior experience of the service sometimes noted that the office was not what they had expected.

‘It is not like a government building...I don’t know there is something about them.’

(Male with depression, age unknown)
Security guards, reception staff or floor walkers routinely greeted customers on arrival at the office and directed them to an interview desk or waiting area. Some customers recalled that their names were checked against a list on arrival. In some cases, a member of staff actually took the customer to the location of their interview.

Some customers, with no prior experience of visiting a jobcentre, felt anxious or unsure about going into a public office. These customers were reassured by a member of staff greeting them on arrival and were positive about being directed around the office to waiting areas. This approach avoided customers feeling uncomfortable or disorientated if they were not sure where they should be.

7.2 Office layout and privacy

Customers generally liked the availability of reception areas and separate waiting areas. Waiting areas offered customers somewhere to sit down whilst waiting for their interviews, avoiding the need to queue. This was particularly important for some lone parents and customers with health or mobility problems who found it difficult to stand for long periods or who wanted to feel comfortable with their children.

Despite the generally positive comments regarding the layout of the office, staff and customers alike raised concerns about the level of privacy in an open plan office. Customers, from all groups, and staff were consistently concerned that other people could overhear their personal conversations. This was a concern for both face-to-face conversations with staff, during Financial Assessor (FA) meetings and work-focused interviews (WFIs), and when customers used the warm phones to speak to Contact Centre staff. Lone parents and some carers, in particular, felt uncomfortable that they had to discuss personal circumstances where other customers could overhear. Customers from all groups felt uncomfortable discussing their finances during a FA meeting in an open plan office. Others, also from all groups, were concerned about disclosing personal information, such as National Insurance numbers (NINOs), over the telephone due to the potential for fraud.

Customers suggested that conversations could be overheard for the following reasons:

- **Location of waiting areas**

  Some customers noted that waiting areas were located too close to the interview desks and warm phones, and suggested that these should be repositioned to provide greater privacy.

- **Proximity of adjacent interview desks**

  Staff and customers also felt that interview desks were too close to each other. As a result, other customers’ conversations could be overheard.
In general, customers were uncomfortable giving personal information to staff during conversations if they felt that they could be overheard. There was little evidence, however, to indicate whether or not this influenced the amount or level of information customers provided.

‘No I don’t think so but I probably wasn’t as forthcoming with information as I would have been.’

(Male with heart disease, age unknown)

In a highly exceptional case, a lone parent did not like the open plan nature of the office as she was concerned someone might see her making a claim for benefit. This customer felt that there was a stigma attached to claiming benefits and so was embarrassed to be attending a jobcentre.

Despite these concerns about privacy, customers did not tend to raise them at the time of their meetings or telephone conversations with the Contact Centre via the warm phones. As a result, there were no examples of customers offered the use of a private room.

7.3 Office facilities

Customers’ views about the facilities provided in Jobcentre Plus offices were mixed. During interviews about the office environment, customers raised issues relating to the following office facilities: Job points; waiting areas; toilet facilities; and access to facilities for people with disabilities.

7.3.1 Job points

Job points are banks of touch-screen computers that enable customers to search for jobs and print off suitable vacancies. This facility replaced the job vacancy display boards used in legacy offices.

In general, jobseekers were aware of the job points provided in Jobcentre Plus offices. PAs routinely advised these customers of the availability and location of job points during the WFI, explaining how they could help with job seeking. Similarly, lone parents and customers claiming health-related benefits, who were actively looking for work were also told about the job points by their PA. In some of these cases, PAs showed customers how to use the job points.

There was mixed evidence that customers actually used the job points available. Individuals, typically jobseekers, who were already aware of the job points prior to attending their appointment, were familiar with the job points and how they worked. These customers used the job points to search for work while waiting to be called over for either their FA meeting or their WFI. If a customer was early for an interview, for example, a floor walker routinely directed jobseekers to the job points.

While all customers were aware of the job points, some customers did not find the
facility effective for finding work. Some customers, from all groups, preferred the old system of cards. This system allowed customers to search more flexibly for vacancies, by looking across all areas of work. Other customers were apprehensive about using new technology.

‘Me I wouldn’t personally go in there and use them, because I can’t use computers. I like the old thing with the fellows at the desk that you see and you say - that job there and they sort you out there and then.’

(Male with physical injuries, age unknown)

In general, customers found the waiting areas in Jobcentre Plus offices to be comfortable and bright. Some customers highlighted items that were made available to customers in the waiting areas:

- **Children’s toys**

  Children’s toys were provided in some, but not all, Jobcentre Plus offices. Lone parents who attended meetings with young children welcomed the availability of toys so they could keep young children entertained while they waited. In one office where toys were not available, a lone parent explicitly stated that the introduction of children’s toys would be an improvement to the office.

- **Magazines**

  Reading material such as magazines and leaflets were also made available to customers in waiting areas.

Some customers raised the lack of toilet facilities in Jobcentre Plus offices as an issue. One lone parent noted how she was told to take her daughter to the public toilet that was located close to the office and as result left the interview before the end:

‘My little girl wanted to go to the toilet and they didn’t have a toilet facility. Now if that’s a lone parent office and you’ve got children, then there are no facilities at all for children, so I had to leave the appointment to trail across town to find a toilet.’

(Female lone parent with three children, ages unknown)

Some customers with physical health problems who experienced mobility problems and lone parents who attended with young children in pushchairs were concerned about physical access to their meetings. These customers were required to attend FA meetings and WFls that were not located on the ground floor of a building. Access to their meetings was difficult because they had to use the stairs in order to reach an adviser. In other offices, lifts were available but customers had to seek the assistance of staff to use them. Individuals found this inconvenient, especially when they experienced difficulty in finding a member of staff to help. In one Pathfinder office where lift facilities were not available, staff delivered the FA meeting and WFl at a desk on the ground floor. One difficulty with this arrangement reported by staff concerned access to the computer system and other sources of information while conducting the interview away from their usual desk.
7.4 Safety and security

The general atmosphere of the office environment affected customers’ perception of safety. One lone parent noted that they felt safe in the office because it was a calm and clean environment.

In general, customers rarely felt unsafe in Jobcentre Plus offices. Customers who were aware of the security guards welcomed their presence in the office. They tended to feel safer as a result of the presence of security guards and believed that they were needed due to the type of other customers who would be present.

‘I think they need them [security guards]...Because the type you get down the jobcentre down there now is ridiculous. There are so many druggies down there now and they’re just there with their cans in their hands and it’s just not right.’

(Male with physical injuries, age unknown)

In some cases, customers did not see the need for a security guard in the jobcentre because they felt the office was safe anyway. These customers had usually visited a Jobcentre Plus office on a number of previous occasions and so felt comfortable with the environment as it was more familiar.

A small number of customers, however, reported that security guards made no difference to safety. These customers tended to view the office as a pleasant or safe environment and had not witnessed any incidents. In one case, a customer felt that the security guard would not be physically able to assist if an incident occurred.

‘Well the guy looked about 90 so if a couple of fights…I didn’t think he would get into fisty cuffs or things like that.’

(Male with unspecified health problems, age unknown)

In other instances, customers found a security guard’s presence in the office intimidating. Customers felt they were under suspicion and not trusted.

‘I found it intimidating with the security guard standing behind this lady. I’ve never hit anyone in my life, especially a lady. I might say things under my breath, but I wasn’t rude to her.’

(Male with mental health problems, aged 51 years)

Other security features mentioned by customers included CCTV cameras and panic buttons. Customers were generally less aware of these features and there was limited evidence of any impact on their perceptions of safety or behaviour while in the jobcentre.

Other customers expressed concerns for the safety of staff members in the office given the removal of screens and the more open plan office environment.
'I was amazed in one respect that the woman came out face-to-face. I thought I could be anyone coming in here really.'

(Male with unspecified health problems, age 55 years)

For other customers, across all groups, the removal of screens was believed to be a positive change. Customers typically felt there was less aggression in the office. The environment was perceived to be calmer as a result of the removal of screens because customers did not have to shout at staff behind the screen in order to be heard. At the same time, customers also felt comfortable in the accounts area of the office because it was a less open. This was an area where customers received emergency payments of benefits. With this in mind, individuals felt more comfortable receiving payments in areas with fewer customers and more security features.

7.5 Comparison to the legacy office environment

The overall office environment of Jobcentre Plus was considered to be an improvement on the previous office environment. The main exception here was in relation to privacy.

Customers who offered a comparison between legacy and new offices typically commented that new offices were cleaner, and more modern than legacy offices. Legacy offices were often described as ‘dirty’ in comparison.

‘My initial impressions were that it was extremely business-like and smart, not at all like the old dole office, filthy and glass like a bank, glass counters and doors.’

(Male with depression, age unknown)

Some staff and customers felt that the removal of screens was a positive move as it removed the ‘them and us’ scenario created by the glass screens. As a result, staff and customers alike observed specific improvements around the office:

- customers and staff were more polite to each other;
- customers were considered by staff to be more relaxed; and
- customers felt they were treated with more respect.

As a result, staff in one office perceived that customers gained more from the service as a whole. They believed it created an environment that encouraged greater participation and engagement on the part of customers.

Customers and staff also felt that the new Jobcentre Plus offices were better organised than the legacy offices. They observed that there was less queueing and there was a general perception amongst customers that there were fewer people ‘hanging’ or ‘drifting’ about.
'Before you could wander round, go in and out and you didn’t even have to speak to anybody, whereas here people seemed to have either an appointment or they seemed to be there for a reason. There wasn’t that casual drifting in and drifting out feeling. It was more of a purpose for being there.’

(Female lone parent, aged 42 years with three children aged ten, eight and three years)

7.6 Conclusions

Customers were generally positive about Jobcentre Plus offices, describing them as pleasant, clean and calm environments. Both staff and customers were, however, concerned about their privacy during meetings or while using warm phones. They were aware that others could overhear their conversations due to the proximity of interview desks and waiting areas. As a result, some customers felt uncomfortable and may be less forthcoming about giving out personal information.

Customers rarely felt unsafe in the Jobcentre Plus office. Security features such as security guards and CCTV, however, had a mixed impact on customers’ perceptions of safety. Where these features were noticed, customers tended to feel safer but there was limited evidence that customers changed their behaviour as a result.

Changes to the office environment led some customers to change their attitudes about attending a jobcentre with customers generally feeling more comfortable. There was, however, little evidence that the office environment directly influenced the way in which customers behaved in the Jobcentre Plus office.
8 The impact of Jobcentre Plus

The impact of the experience of the Jobcentre Plus process on different customer groups is explored in this chapter. More specifically, the chapter looks at the impact of customers' experiences on their perceptions and understanding of the process for claiming benefits, their understanding of the services available through Jobcentre Plus, their propensity to access these services, and how their experience affected their attitudes and behaviour towards work. The findings presented in this chapter are largely based on interviews with customers and, to a lesser extent, observations of contact with the Jobcentre Plus service.

8.1 Jobseekers

Some variable impact was evident in jobseekers' attitudes to claiming benefits as a result of their experience of the Jobcentre Plus process. The views of jobseekers with either no experience or experience of claiming under the old system changed. Prior to their claim, these customers tended to hold negative views about claiming, either because of the stigma they associated with claiming benefit or because of the way staff treated them. Under the new Jobcentre Plus process, these customers were more positive:

‘They’ve just got a bad name and I think they’re trying their hardest to make it more friendly and more relaxed.’

(Female jobseeker, age unknown)

Good explanations of the process at each stage were a key factor in this change of views. Such explanations gave jobseekers confidence in their knowledge of what to expect at each stage and reassured them that all customers had to participate in each stage of the process. For other jobseekers, the approach and manner of staff was a key factor in changing their negative views of claiming benefit. Where staff were helpful in answering queries and interested in an individual’s situation, jobseekers perceived that staff were treating customers with respect. This was felt to
be important in overcoming the stigma attached to claiming benefit and having to visit a jobcentre. For some customers, this increased their propensity to access the additional job search services available. For others, it simply made the need to attend the Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) meetings easier as they were assured that it was not going to be an unpleasant experience.

There were exceptional examples, however, of jobseekers who held negative views of claiming benefits following their experience of the process. The manner of particular members of staff at Financial Assessor (FA) meetings and work-focused interviews (WFIs) was felt by these jobseekers to have a direct impact on their negative experience. These isolated examples highlight that where customers felt that they did not receive good customer service in terms of the approach of individual staff, it impacted on their overall views of the service:

‘To me it looked like she was looking down her nose because she was sat there with a job and I didn’t, that’s how it felt.’

(Female jobseeker, age unknown)

Where Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) customers did not feel that they built a rapport with staff in the Jobcentre Plus public office, they felt they were unable to ask Personal Advisers (PAs) or FAs questions to resolve any queries. This meant some jobseekers left the Jobcentre Plus office with unresolved queries. These customers were also less likely to access any additional job search support from Jobcentre Plus and restricted their contact with Jobcentre Plus to the required FJR meetings.

There was little change in jobseekers’ views of claiming benefit amongst those who regularly contacted Jobcentre Plus as a result of working in sectors that involved short-term, contract work. These jobseekers were largely indifferent to the process, given it was familiar and they knew what to expect. These customers tended to have clear job goals and were confident that they would secure employment without direct help from Jobcentre Plus. They perceived the service to be irrelevant to their needs as they found vacancies from other sources. As a result, these customers made little use of the services available from Jobcentre Plus. There was also some evidence that these customers did not fully engage in the WFI process as there was little need to complete a new Jobseeker’s Agreement (JSAg) and only a brief reminder of the job search services available was given.

Jobseekers were largely confident about which benefit was appropriate to claim. This knowledge was either due to prior experiences of claiming or, for others it was confirmed early in the process. First Contact Officers (FCOs) typically informed jobseekers that JSA was the most appropriate benefit if the individual was available and actively looking for work. Some customers were made aware of the difference between income- and contributions-based JSA by the FA. In these cases, jobseekers were given an idea of whether they were eligible to receive any benefit. Some FAs were able to tell customers if they felt they had made sufficient contributions or if there was any reason why their income level might affect their eligibility to receive benefit. Customers with no prior experience of unemployment, were reassured to be informed that there was a benefit they could claim whilst looking for work.
In exceptional cases, jobseekers left the office with unresolved queries regarding their eligibility for benefit. Although FAs informed customers of the type of JSA they were likely to receive, they were not able to confirm it for the customer as the final decision was made by staff who processed the claim. This was frustrating for some customers who faced financial difficulty at the time of their appointment, and the uncertainty distracted from their focus on finding work. Others understood that staff in the jobcentre were not responsible for decisions regarding eligibility and so it had less impact on their views:

‘I still didn’t know at that time whether I was going to be eligible, but I guess I came out feeling that I’d achieved everything that I could achieve in that particular office.’

(Male jobseeker, age unknown)

Jobseekers had a good understanding of the process for the payment of JSA benefits and the timescales for payment. Explanations of the fortnightly signing process were commonly linked to explanations of payment. The level of benefit was also typically reported as being known after visiting the Jobcentre Plus office, although for some customers, this was due to their previous experience. There were exceptional cases where customers were not aware of the level of benefit or the timescale for payment after their FA and WFI. These individuals remained concerned about this after their meetings at the jobcentre.

All customers were in receipt of benefit at the time of the research interview. Although some experienced delays in receiving payment, they did not feel that this would impact on their views of claiming in the future. Jobseekers were more aware of the likely timescale for payment and the eligibility criteria for JSA. In isolated cases, customers felt that their experience put them off claiming in the future. These customers believed that staff did not treat them well, reinforcing any views that there was a stigma attached to claiming benefits.

There was evidence that Jobcentre Plus increased some jobseekers’ awareness of ways to look for work. PAs consistently gave customers claiming JSA information about the FJR process and the availability of job search support during this meeting. Other customers, typically those who had no previous experience of attending the jobcentre, found out about new or different ways to look for work through WFI discussions with their PA. These sources included job points in the jobcentre, Jobseeker Direct, other on-line services, and specialist sources of vacancies such as trade magazines:

‘I think the most useful thing they let me know was the different ways of actually applying for jobs instead of just sending in the application forms...they were just letting me know there was more than one route of finding out what job vacancies are on offer.’

(Female jobseeker, age unknown)
Some jobseekers changed their job search activity as a result of the advice and information given by the PA. In some cases, the new or additional information provided increased the intensity of some jobseekers’ job search activity. For others, the information increased customers’ confidence that they could secure employment as they felt they weren’t missing out on any vacancies. Where PAs provided advice on specialist sources of vacancies, some JSA customers adopted a more targeted job search strategy. These customers were more confident that their job search activity would secure employment that was more appropriate to their interests and skills.

Some jobseekers were told about external job brokering agencies, where they could access job search support and facilities. There was no evidence, however, that PAs formally referred these individuals to such services. Customers were not concerned about this as they could access the services in their own time. There was also no evidence, however, that any JSA customers did use these services in the time between their meetings at the Jobcentre Plus office and the research interview. Their awareness of different job-related services available may, therefore, have increased but it did not have a direct impact on the actual ways they looked for work.

PAs outlined additional services available through Jobcentre Plus, such as IT training, for other jobseekers. Again, there was no evidence that customers were either referred to such training or that customers enrolled themselves. PAs’ explanations tended to be general, and limited information was given about how and when customers could actually access these courses. Customers who were interested in training were disappointed that more detailed information was not given. As a result, there is no evidence to indicate whether or not customers’ propensity to access these services or other training courses through Jobcentre Plus was affected.

Other jobseekers did not find their PAs’ help useful in assisting them to look for work. They felt that the PA did not provide information or advice on different types of jobs or offer training to allow customers to change the type of work they looked for. These customers felt this was a contributory factor to their failure to secure employment since their WFI:

‘They were friendly, but as I said it was just that if you wanted to go in a different direction, it wasn’t very helpful.’

(Male jobseeker, age unknown)

The impact of Jobcentre Plus on jobseekers’ engagement with the labour market was also mixed. There were examples of JSA customers moving into employment soon after their experience of Jobcentre Plus. These customers tended to be highly motivated prior to attending the WFI and they found work through sources other than Jobcentre Plus. Their experience of the WFI, therefore, had no direct impact on their movement into work.

Some JSA customers successfully pursued a vacancy that was identified during the job search conducted during the WFI. In some cases, the job did not last and individuals were claiming benefits again at the time of the research interview. In
other cases, the employment was only temporary. These customers did not feel their experience of the Jobcentre Plus process could be different to increase the sustainability of their work.

### 8.2 Lone parents

There were examples of lone parents who had no previous experience of claiming benefits under Jobcentre Plus whose negative views of the service changed:

> ‘I mean I haven’t had any contact with the jobcentre for about 20 years or so and it just seemed to be much more acceptable and friendly than my experience in the past.’

(Female lone parent, with two children aged ten and 12 years old)

The approach and manner of staff at all stages of the process was a key factor in lone parents feeling reassured that there was no stigma attached to claiming benefits. Lone parents were open to the advice and information given by the PA as they felt staff were there to help them. There were no examples of changed attitudes amongst lone parents who had claimed benefit previously, either under Jobcentre Plus or the former Benefits Agency (BA). These customers also found their PA to be helpful in offering information and advice, and felt comfortable making a repeat claim if necessary.

At the end of the Jobcentre Plus process, lone parents typically had a good understanding of the appropriate benefit to which they were eligible. Some lone parents were aware due to previous experience of claiming. Others were informed through the early stages of the Jobcentre Plus process. Lone parents who were experiencing financial difficulty as a result of a relationship breakdown were reassured that they could take some time to consider their options when a FA told them they were eligible for Income Support (IS).

> ‘To know what I was entitled to there and then, to know that I was actually entitled to Income Support and Child Tax Credit was a useful thing, I knew I could think about what I wanted to do.’

(Female lone parent, aged 37 years living with daughter and grandchild)

In some cases, lone parents’ queries about their eligibility for benefit were unresolved until they received their first payment of benefit. While FAs informed some of these customers that decisions were made by the processing section, others left the Jobcentre Plus office without knowing what was going to happen:

> ‘Just knowing what your entitlements were really would have been useful, because nobody was sure and that’s what people are supposed to go in there for.’

(Female lone parent with one child, ages unknown)
During these periods of uncertainty, lone parents did not feel able to make plans regarding work or training as their attention focused on their financial security.

Some lone parents were also concerned about the payment processes following their experience of Jobcentre Plus. This was generally found amongst lone parents with no prior experience of claiming and those who had not claimed since the introduction of child tax credits. Confusion centred around the removal of the child element of IS. As a result, some lone parents did not know how much each element would be worth and when it could be paid. This confusion was compounded by having to deal with different agencies for the separate payments. In exceptional cases, lone parents felt frustrated that FAs could not give information about how long it would take to receive payment of tax credits. This situation also distracted and delayed lone parents from considering their future plans.

The extent to which Jobcentre Plus impacted on lone parents’ attitudes and behaviour towards work varied. For lone parents who were currently employed or who were already highly motivated to look for work, there was little evidence of a direct impact. There were isolated examples of lone parents reporting that they undertook more active job search following their WFI. In these cases, the encouragement and reassurance of the PA further boosted their confidence and motivation to find work. Some of these lone parents changed their job search activity to include the job points or the Jobseeker Direct service they had been told about during the WFI. As a result, a small number of lone parents had moved into a job at the time of this research.

The WFI had limited impact on other lone parents who were clear in their view that work was not appropriate at the time. The reassurance from the FA that they would receive benefit gave these lone parents the space to take time to consider their options. Some of these lone parents perceived that the WFI had been useful in gathering information about other options such as training in preparation for work in the future. Being informed about the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) meant that lone parents were more aware of the work-related support and services available through Jobcentre Plus for the future. There was limited evidence, however, that lone parents with very young children were active in accessing these services at the time of the WFI or in the weeks immediately following the meeting.

For other lone parents, including some with very young children, the WFI had a positive impact in terms of encouraging them to consider work as an option in the medium-term, such as when their children started school. These lone parents were positive about the reassurance and understanding they received from the PA and the lack of pressure to consider work:

‘That she never forced me to get a job, she understood and agreed that I would not be better off doing this, this and this. That’s what I expected.’

(Male lone parent aged 39 years old, with two children)
The time the PA spent discussing the different options available to lone parents and the range of services available was a key factor in lone parents beginning to consider work as an option. Lone parents also built a good rapport with their PA where the PA took time to understand the customer’s circumstances. As a result, these customers felt open to returning to see their PA as they were confident that the PA would provide them with relevant help and advice again:

‘I came away really happy. They’re really friendly and down to earth, they were happy to answer any questions I had to ask. I came away with peace of mind knowing that if I needed any help that they were there.’

(Female lone parent, with two children aged three years and seven months old)

For other lone parents the positive experience with the PA made them think more actively about work or training for the future.

In some cases, however, options other than work were not explored and limited information was given about the services available. As a result, lone parents in these cases perceived the WFI to be of limited use:

‘It was very short and brief and really to me I didn’t get anything out of it. If I’d been wanting work then she’d have been brilliant.’

(Female lone parent, aged 25 years old with one child aged five years old)

These lone parents were not disappointed that further options were not discussed in any detail at their WFI as it was not appropriate at the time. It was evident, however, that they were more uncertain as to whether they would visit the PA at a later date.

8.3 Customers claiming health-related benefits

Following their experience of the Jobcentre Plus process, there were examples of customers with no prior experience of claiming health-related benefits who held negative views of the process for claiming benefits. The approach and attitude of some staff was a factor in customers reporting negative views. Where FAs did not appear interested in the customer’s claim or did not give in-depth explanations of the process, customers felt uncomfortable with claiming benefits:

‘I would say that someone who has to go like myself it is still very demeaning going down there.’

(Male with respiratory problems and arthritis, age unknown)

Having to attend a WFI was also perceived negatively by other customers who were either currently employed or by those with physical illnesses. This included customers with back problems, arthritis or other physical ailments as a result of work accidents. These customers perceived that their illness made work inappropriate at the time of the claim as they were experiencing ongoing physical pain. Customers felt having to discuss work was inappropriate and the information and advice PAs gave was
irrelevant to their situation as they were not considering work. These views impacted on the extent to which customers participated fully in the discussions during the WFI. These customers were also less aware and interested in the services available.

The attitudes of some people with physical or mental health problems or disabilities did change as a result of a positive experience of Jobcentre Plus. Customers with experience of the old benefits system, believed their experience under Jobcentre Plus was much better. They found staff at all stages of the process to be helpful and friendly, and felt that they understood the individual’s personal circumstances:

‘I was quite surprised by how friendly people actually were and how sympathetic and understanding they were because I’ve had past dealing with Social Security but nothing like that.’

(Male with unspecified health problems, age unknown)

The new office environment also made customers claiming health or disability-related benefits feel more positive and comfortable about claiming. Customers felt the open plan office layout was more relaxed and friendly and so they felt more comfortable while in the office. Individuals who felt more comfortable with claiming benefits and visiting the office also felt more likely to access further services in the future. There were isolated examples of customers with physical health problems who reported that access to the location of their meetings was difficult because they had to use the stairs (see Section 7.3). There was no evidence, however, that this experience affected a customer’s propensity to return to the Jobcentre Plus public office.

In general, people claiming health-related benefits, regardless of the nature of their condition, were aware of the most appropriate benefit for them to claim. In some cases, this was due to prior experience. In others, however, information on the difference between inactive and active benefits provided by FCOs at First Contact, helped customers to understand the different benefits available. Some customers with no prior experience of the process increased their awareness of the range of benefits available. For customers who were currently employed but claiming as a result of the ending of employer’s Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), the process also provided reassurance that they would continue to receive financial support during their illness.

Some customers claiming health-related benefits also had a good understanding of the timescales for payment of benefit following the Jobcentre Plus process. In these cases, FAs informed the customers of any anticipated local delays in processing or gave an estimate of when customers could expect to receive benefit. These individuals were, therefore, confident in their knowledge of when and how they would receive benefit, and felt that there was no need to ask further questions at the FA meeting or WFI:

‘I’ve got no gripes about it, they’ve did what they’re supposed to do. I’ve got my benefit and I knew what I was getting so it’s all clear cut.’

(Male with physical injuries from a road traffic accident, age unknown)
Where customers had unresolved queries or experienced an unexpected delay in the payment of their benefit, they delayed making any decisions about their future plans. Their immediate need for financial security was not met and as such they were not prepared to consider work as an option. It also undermined customers’ confidence in the overall service and affected their propensity to access Jobcentre Plus services in the future.

The impact of the Jobcentre Plus service on the attitudes and behaviour towards work of people claiming health- or disability-related benefits varied. Little direct impact was evident for customers with physical and mental health conditions who were currently employed and planned to return to the same job once they recovered from their illness or injury. These individuals usually made this clear to the PA during the WFI and so detailed work-related discussions were not pursued. These customers were aware, however, of the job-related services available from the jobcentre as a result of their participation in a WFI. Some of these claimants felt that they would consider returning to access the services if their plans changed and they were unable to return to the same job.

For other customers with long-term physical health conditions such as arthritis or back problems who were already motivated to look for work, the WFI did not impact directly on their plans to look for work. Instead, the WFI encouraged them to continue along the same route. Some of these customers developed a greater awareness of different ways to approach job search activity. Customers were informed of a range of specialist support services including: job brokers, training services, specialist Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs), as well as general job search facilities including job points and Jobseeker Direct. Some customers were particularly positive that vacancies could be accessed through Jobseeker Direct without having to visit the jobcentre, they used this service more regularly. There was limited evidence, however, that any customers contacted an external agency at the time of the research.

Some customers’ attitudes or thoughts about work did change after the WFI amongst people who initially felt that their illness or disability made work inappropriate. This, typically, included customers who previously had undertaken heavy manual work and who now were experiencing back problems or arthritis which meant their usual type of work was no longer an option. In exceptional cases, some customers became more open to considering other types of work which would be possible despite the customers’ particular illness:

‘Most useful thing to come out was you know just because I had arthritis it didn’t mean I was on the scrap heap, I could still work and if I couldn’t do the job that I had always done there were other jobs that I perhaps could do. It was just finding ways round things instead of sort of going straight down and saying, I can’t do that and I can’t do this.’

(Female with arthritis, aged 54 years)
PAs’ suggestions of alternative jobs and the advice given about what practical support was available, made these customers realise that work was a potential option for them. Being made aware of the practical help available made them think more positively about their future prospects in terms of work:

‘Well it certainly made me think about going back to work, which I would like to do.’

(Male with unspecified health problems, age unknown)

There was no evidence, however, that these customers sought or secured employment after the WFI. Instead, these individuals were motivated and confident that they could work in the future.

PAs did not always fully explore with customers experiencing mental health problems how their illness affected them or whether there were any alternative types of work they could do. In these cases, customers’ outlook towards work was unchanged. Customers felt that if PAs did not understand this, they were unlikely to be able to offer useful information and advice about work. Customers were, therefore, concerned that PAs would push the customer towards inappropriate work:

‘They don’t know how I actually feel, about my disability, they just know its depression. They didn’t ask how the depression affected me. I’ve had social phobia as well and they don’t know that. Well I think it’s important for the type of job I would get. They sort of want me to apply for any kind of job. They didn’t ask.’

(Female with depression, age unknown)

Customers who experienced a more positive relationship with the PA were open and willing to access the services available through Jobcentre Plus in the future. Where customers felt the PA did not understand their illness or situation, they were less likely to return to see the PA for advice and support at a later date.

8.4 Carers

Some carers experienced difficulties in securing benefit payment. Others left the Jobcentre Plus office with unanswered queries. In these cases, carers did not find Jobcentre Plus to provide swift access to benefits or a helpful service. Customers reported that FAs were not always able to answer queries about eligibility for benefit, when customers could expect payment and the level of benefit they could anticipate to receive. Customers also typically experienced frustration and difficulty in contacting a separate department to have these queries answered:

‘When I was phoning I got the impression that one department didn’t talk to the other sometimes, if they’re somewhere nearer you could sort these things out.’

(Female caring for daughter with physical disabilities)
Carers were usually under financial pressure at the time of making their claim, and felt the process could have eased these concerns if information was given about how much and when they might receive their benefit. Their experience did not give them confidence that Jobcentre Plus staff would be helpful if they contacted them again in the future. They were, therefore, less likely to return.

Carers’ perceptions of the appropriateness of attending a WFI also influenced how they felt about the usefulness of the service overall. Some carers appreciated the need to attend the Jobcentre Plus office in person as part of the process for checks to be made. Customers, therefore, engaged with the FA. However, where customers did not perceive the WFI to be relevant to their needs as they were not considering work as an option, they did not participate fully in the WFI:

‘From my personal point of view because of my circumstances, the trip to the jobcentre was a waste of time, I could have done without going but I could fully understand they can’t take all these claims at face value, they want to know, probably a face-to-face interview to realise what you’re saying is in fact true, so I don’t object to that.’

(Female caring for elderly mother)

The Jobcentre Plus process typically delivered little direct impact on carers’ behaviour in terms of work. In exceptional cases, PAs informed carers of the potential to combine work with their claim for CA. For some, carers began to perceive part-time work as an option for them:

‘Well I’d like to go and make some more of myself; I don’t like just claiming off the State, so to speak, no one does. I would like to go back to work now.’

(Female, aged 23 years, caring for partner with Chrones Disease)

At the time of the research, there was little evidence that carers moved closer to work. In highly exceptional cases, a very small number of carers were more active in looking for work as a result of being informed about Permitted Work.

For other carers, the impact on attitudes to work was more indirect. Some customers with caring responsibilities were more aware of the work-related services available from Jobcentre Plus. These individuals were open to returning to a Jobcentre Plus public office to access these services if work became an option in the future. Where PAs perceived that the caring responsibilities of a customer made work an inappropriate option, there were examples of customers appreciating this understanding and corresponding reassurance that the PA gave them:

‘When they realised my circumstances then that matter was closed basically but I felt that there was somebody there that I could chat to and if I needed any help or wanted to get back to work…I know that I can go up there now and there will be somebody there to help me.’

(Female, aged 31 years old, caring for daughter with physically disabilities)
In other cases, PAs did not pursue discussions about work as they perceived it was inappropriate for carers. In highly exceptional cases, some customers were disappointed that there was no further discussion about the possibility of work. These customers did want to work in the future and would have appreciated more information on the options or benefits available if they were to consider work. PAs, therefore missed opportunities to promote the benefits of work to these carers:

‘I suppose now I would have liked to know more about, like the jobseeker’s thing, maybe for the future if my mother goes to day care a bit more, when I would have a bit more time, and what you can do without losing any money.’

(Female carer, age unknown, caring for elderly mother)

Although disappointed, these customers did report that they would not rule out returning to a Jobcentre Plus office in the future to further explore the work-related services available.

8.5 Conclusions

The impact of Jobcentre Plus varied across, and within, customer groups.

Mixed impact was evident in terms of customers’ perceptions and understanding of the process for claiming benefits. The experience of the Jobcentre Plus process had a generally positive impact on the views and attitudes of customers across all groups who had no prior experience of claiming benefits. However, customers across all groups reported some unresolved queries following their experience of the Jobcentre Plus process in terms of the status of their claim. This impacted on the extent to which customers were able to consider their options and make plans immediately following their experience of Jobcentre Plus if they were facing financial uncertainty at the time of their claim.

Customers’ awareness of the services available from Jobcentre Plus was increased as a direct result of participation in a WFI. Information about internal job search support was routinely given to individuals from all customer groups. Knowing what was available helped to increase non-JSA customers’ propensity to return to the jobcentre and access services at a later date. The extent to which this occurred by the time of this research was, however, limited.

There was also evidence that Jobcentre Plus changed the attitudes and behaviour of some customers regarding work, helping them to move closer to the labour market. The impact achieved was partly dependent on customers’ position in the labour market at the time of their claim and the strength of their views as to whether work was an appropriate option for them. For customers who were highly motivated to move into work, Jobcentre Plus had little direct impact other than to confirm their plans and offer additional encouragement. For some non-JSA customers, the impact was achieved by ensuring customers had the financial security to allow them space to consider their work options. PAs’ perceptions of the circumstances facing certain customers, however, meant that potential opportunities to promote work to customers claiming health-related benefits or carers were sometimes missed.
9 Conclusions

This chapter concludes the report by bringing together the key findings. It starts by examining the experiences of different customer groups (Section 9.1) before drawing some overall conclusions about the delivery of the Jobcentre Plus process (Section 9.2).

9.1 The experience of different customer groups

There was considerable variation in the experience of Jobcentre Plus customers, both across, and within, the four groups covered by this research: jobseekers; lone parents; people with health problems or disabilities; and carers. Differences were particularly evident in the benefit information received, and the depth and nature of work-related discussions held at different stages of the process. The following sections summarise the overall experience of each customer group.

9.1.1 Jobseekers

Jobseekers experienced relatively little difficulty identifying the most appropriate benefit to claim. Customers were either already aware as a result of previous experience of claiming benefits or advised by family and friends. Discussions about work at First Contact were evident with the focus principally on employment history. Jobseekers were also more likely to be offered a job search at First Contact, although time constraints limited the depth of the search conducted. Explanations given by First Contact Officers (FCOs) as to the purpose of the work-focused interview (WFI) were typically focused on work or the requirements to complete a Jobseeker’s Agreement (JSAg).

Jobseekers were given information about their potential eligibility to Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) benefit by the Financial Assessor (FA) and had a good understanding of the payment process as a result of explanations of the fortnightly signing regime. It was rare that jobseekers were given information during the FA meeting about additional benefits to which they were eligible. Explanations of the purpose of the WFI given by FAs were also typically work-related but tended to be relatively brief.
Personal Advisers (PAs) did not routinely provide detailed explanations of the purpose of the WFI, but the subject of work was typically raised with jobseekers at the outset of the meeting. The need to complete a JSAg tended to shape the overall structure of discussions with jobseekers. Job searches were consistently provided, except where JSA customers were looking for contract work in particular industries. Jobseekers’ engagement in WFIs varied. The level of engagement depended on customers’ previous experience of the process, interest in work, and English language ability. Jobseekers were typically given information about job-related services during the WFI, however there was little evidence that they were routinely referred to external job search agencies.

Jobseekers’ experience of the Jobcentre Plus process had most direct impact in raising awareness of ways to look for work. Given most jobseekers were looking to move into work, the experience had mixed impact on jobseekers’ engagement with the labour market, although there was evidence of customers successfully pursuing a vacancy identified during the WFI.

### 9.1.2 Lone parents

Lone parents typically received advice from friends or family about the most appropriate benefit to claim, otherwise the FCO identified Income Support (IS) without difficulty. Discussions about work with lone parents at First Contact were limited unless a customer clearly stated that they were looking for work. FCOs tended to make assumptions as to whether it was appropriate to discuss work further with lone parents as a result of their circumstances at the time, such as if they had experienced a recent relationship breakdown or very young children.

Lone parents were given limited information about the status of their claim, with the exception of estimates of payment timescales where FAs were aware of local delays in processing or where customers asked about levels of benefit they could expect to receive. Lone parents routinely received information about tax credits from FAs, although the depth of this information varied.

PAs’ explanations of the purpose of WFIs tended to include an explicit focus on work. As such, discussions about work began from the outset of meetings between lone parents and PAs. Subsequent discussions about work were determined by assessing customer interest and the appropriateness of work given customers’ circumstances. Where work was not perceived to be an option, discussions focused on the services customers could access in the future, when work did become an option. Job searches were only conducted where customers were ready to move into work immediately. Lone parents were routinely given information about the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) as a whole programme or about individual services available under the programme. There was limited evidence, however, that information about training was given in any depth or that lone parents were active in accessing services after their initial WFI.
The impact of the Jobcentre Plus process on lone parents’ engagement with the labour market was mixed. For some lone parents who were clear in their view that work was not appropriate at the time of the WFI, the experience had no direct impact. Similarly, for others who were highly motivated to move into work, the process simply served to encourage lone parents to continue with their plans. There was evidence that for some lone parents the WFI had a positive impact in encouraging them to consider work as an option in the medium-term by informing them that there was support available.

9.1.3 Customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits

Appropriate benefits for customers with health problems or disabilities were typically identified by the FCO. For some customers, additional benefit queries were not answered given gaps in knowledge on the part of FCOs. Meaningful discussions about work did not routinely occur at First Contact for customers with health problems. The focus for most customers was principally on previous work and FCOs did not routinely challenge customers’ assumptions about their ability to consider work now or in the future.

Customers claiming health-related benefits did not consistently receive information about the status of their claim from FAs. Some customers were made aware of the level of benefit they could expect to receive and their potential eligibility, while others had unresolved queries following their FA meeting.

Explanations of the purpose of the WFI given by PAs varied. Some explanations focused on work while other PAs adopted a softer approach by emphasising that the focus would be on customers’ options and the support available. Discussions with customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits tended to begin with an exploration of the customer’s circumstances and specifically the nature of their illness. This then led to work being raised where PAs asked about the impact of their illness on the type of work customers could do. There were examples of PAs not challenging customers’ assumptions about their ability to work. In isolated cases, the issue of work was not raised explicitly at any point in the discussion as PAs did not feel it was appropriate and were concerned about discouraging customers from attending in the future.

Where customers’ assumptions were not challenged, the Jobcentre Plus process delivered limited impact on customers claiming health-related benefits. There was evidence that participation in the WFI did, however, have a positive impact on other customers. Being aware of the help and support available through Jobcentre Plus made these customers think more positively about their future.
9.1.4 Carers

Carers typically received advice from friends or support organisations about the possibility of claiming Carer’s Allowance (CA). FCOs reported some gaps in their knowledge concerning CA and so were not able to answer all customers’ queries about eligibility to CA. Discussions about work with carers at First Contact were relatively limited and there was no evidence that job searches were conducted.

Knowledge of CA was also limited among some FAs, either because they did not have much experience with this benefit or because they had infrequent contact with the processing department. As a result, carers tended to have unresolved queries about their eligibility and payment processes following the FA meeting. These customers also reported some frustration in contacting the central processing department to resolve these queries.

Explanations of the purpose of the WFI were not consistently given to carers and, when given, PAs did not focus on work. The circumstances of carers and the extent to which work was an option largely determined the approach PAs took in the discussions about work. Discussions about work with carers were limited once it became apparent that customers were not in a position to work due to their caring responsibilities. In some cases, this was an assumption made by the PA rather than a direct assertion by the customer. As a result opportunities were missed to hold more meaningful and substantive discussions with carers who were interested in work.

Carers generally did not take any direct action as a result of participation in the Jobcentre Plus process. There were only isolated cases where carers were more interested in looking for work as a result of being informed about Permitted Work.

9.2 Overall conclusions

A key issue emerging from the findings of this phase of the research is the continued variation in the delivery of a work focus at different stages of the process. PAs made progress in discussing work with customers from across all groups who were immediately ready to start work, but there remains inconsistency in the depth and nature of discussions with lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits, and carers.

Time pressures at some stages are perceived to be a barrier to more substantive discussions overall. At First Contact, for example, FCOs had targets to meet in terms of the number of telephone calls answered and the length of time customers waited. This led to pressure to move onto the next telephone call, which resulted in job searches and other work-related discussions being limited.

It was also clear that staff confidence in pursuing discussions with non-JSA customers remains a key barrier. Some FCOs, FAs and PAs felt uncomfortable in promoting the work-focused elements of the process. This led to brief explanations
of the purpose of the WFI without a direct focus on work, and limited explanations of the compulsory requirement to participate in the WFI. Discussions in the WFI were limited as PAs did not challenge customers’ assumptions about the extent to which work was an option. PAs reported particularly lacking confidence where customers were experiencing current pain as a result of their condition or where a customer had a long-term physical or mental health problem. Staff were conscious of the potential reaction of the customer and wanted to avoid discouraging the customer from participating in subsequent stages of the process or returning at a later date. There was, however, also limited engagement of customers in discussions about work because staff made assumptions themselves about what was appropriate. In some cases, customers were disappointed that work was not discussed further and, as such, staff missed opportunities to engage in more meaningful discussions.

Across all stages of the process, the level and nature of information given to customers was also a key issue. Gaps remain in staff knowledge of certain benefits and customers left meetings with unresolved queries as a result. Both FCOs and FAs who have no background in benefits, reported gaps in their knowledge of what they perceive to be more complex benefits including Incapacity Benefit (IB) and CA. Although knowledge increased from day-to-day experience and consulting colleagues, staff believed they would benefit from further training to address their gaps in knowledge. Staff ability to give information about the status of a customer’s claim is more difficult to resolve, given that eligibility decisions are generally dealt with by a separate processing department. Time constraints were a further barrier to FAs conducting benefit calculations to give customers an idea of the level of benefit they could expect to receive. Where parallel processing was conducted, FAs were generally able to give more accurate information as to the status of a customer claim. Wider introduction of this process or equipping FAs with information to allow them to give an estimate of the processing times may help to avoid customers having unresolved queries which are carried forward into the WFI.

PAs demonstrated progress in the breadth of knowledge they hold about services and support available for different customer groups, particularly in terms of lone parents and customers claiming health-related benefits. PAs routinely gave information about job search support available through Jobcentre Plus but there were some cases where they were not able to supply significantly detailed information about other services, such as training. In other cases, PAs were able to signpost customers to other external agencies and organisations but they were limited in their ability to fully inform customers about the nature of the services. The expectation that PAs should hold detailed knowledge of all services may be unrealistic. Nevertheless, PAs would benefit from further support in terms of their knowledge of Jobcentre Plus – provided services as this would enhance their ability to actively promote the service to customers.

There was also evidence that progress was made in staff’s ability to deliver information and advice as a result of undertaking specialist roles. FAs, for example, who specialised in a particular benefit, were generally more able to provide benefit
advice as they dealt with the same benefit everyday. These staff were also in frequent contact with processing departments and were able to supply more accurate information on processing timescales. Similarly, PAs who specialised in delivering WFIs to a particular customer group were more confident in giving information as a result of their day-to-day experience. This was evident, for example, in PAs delivering tax credit advice to lone parents. PAs dealing specifically with customers claiming health-related benefits were also more able to signpost customers to local support services due to increased experience. Local managers did, however, prefer to maintain a mix of both generalist and specialist staff so that they maintained flexibility to meet changing customer demand.

Some circumstances beyond the control of individual staff also impacted on the delivery of Jobcentre Plus services. The potential restructure of Contact Centres affected staff morale and was reported to lead to local resource and budgetary constraints. Staff resources in other offices influenced the extent to which FAs and PAs could pursue specialist roles to enhance delivery of services to particular customer groups. Smaller offices, in particular, need to maintain a degree of multi-skilled staff to cover for staff absences. A lack of downtime in PAs’ workloads was felt to affect the degree to which they delivered caseload support. Given time constraints, staff tended to focus on the customers who were ready to move into work immediately rather than those customers who would benefit from longer-term support.

Overall, while some progress was evident across all stages of the Jobcentre Plus process, there remained key areas where delivery of Jobcentre Plus services could be improved. The provision of benefit information and advice, and the delivery of a meaningful and substantive work focus for some non-JSA customers, were key areas where greater consistency is required in the delivery of services to all customer groups.
Appendix A
Methodology

Phase 4 of the evaluation of Jobcentre Plus was conducted in six clusters or districts. In total nine Jobcentre Plus public offices and six Contact Centres were visited. Four of the nine Jobcentre Plus public offices were Pathfinder offices and five were day two offices. Only one Pathfinder office visited in Phase 3 was revisited in this phase of the research.

The overall aim of this evaluation was to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus offices were delivering the policy vision. More specifically, the research objectives were to:

- examine the effectiveness of Jobcentre Plus offices in delivering services to customers and moving customers towards the labour market;
- consider the impact on people’s propensity to use the services and make the transition into work;
- assess the ability of Jobcentre Plus staff members to offer appropriate explanation and advice;
- consider customers’ understanding and perception of the service received; and
- examine the extent to which the work-focused interview (WFI) moves people towards the labour market.

In addition, this fourth phase of the qualitative evaluation sought to:

- further examine the role of First Contact Officers (FCOs) in Contact Centres;
- explore the role of Financial Assessors (FAs);
- consider customer perceptions of safety in Jobcentre Plus public offices;
- explore the extent to which Personal Advisers (PAs) perform generalist and/or specialist roles, including what works best for different customer groups;
- examine caseloading meetings;
- consider the feedback and actions following unsuccessful submissions both in terms of WFI and Fortnightly Job Reviews (FJR);
- explore issues relating to non-attendance at WFI;
- consider issues of fraud and error (for example, how preventing fraud and error fits with the role and responsibilities of FCOs, FAs and PAs); and
- include a greater examination and discussion of the impact of Jobcentre Plus on different customer groups, covering jobseekers, lone parents, customers claiming health- or disability-related benefits, and carers.

A. 1 Methodological approach

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured qualitative depth interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff members. In addition, depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with customers drawn from specific ‘customer groups’ determined by the benefit claimed. These groups were jobseekers, lone parents, customers claiming sickness or disability benefits, and carers. In addition, a series of non-participative observations in Contact Centres and Jobcentre Plus public offices were conducted.

A.1.1 Qualitative interviews

As with previous phases of the research, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were chosen as the principal research method, alongside non-participatory observations, to gather information about experiences and views of Jobcentre Plus staff and customers.

The interview topic guides for use with members of staff were structured to obtain, for example, details about their role and the process followed by customers at their stage of the Jobcentre Plus process. Staff were also asked about the Jobcentre Plus vision and any changes they have encountered in delivery.

Managers suggested the names of staff members to be interviewed and participants were made aware of the nature of the research by the researcher and/or the manager. It was made clear to the participants that any information provided would be treated in the strictest of confidence and that no individual could be identified from the findings presented. Interviews were recorded, provided the researcher had obtained permission from the staff member.

The interview topic guides used with customers were designed to obtain comprehensive details of the customer’s contact with the Jobcentre Plus office and Contact Centre. A separate guide for used with JSA and non-JSA customers. The topic guides were also designed to draw out customer opinion and perception of their Jobcentre Plus experience, whilst also gaining an appreciation of their experience.
background circumstances. The interview was structured in a logical order, so that the customer was taken through the process of making the claim step-by-step.

**A.1.2 Observations**

Observations were carried out in order to gain a deeper understanding of the process, issues and to gain further insight into the delivery of the Jobcentre Plus service. Observations of first contact at the Contact Centre, the WFI and the FA meeting were undertaken by the researchers in each area.

Researchers endeavoured to remain unobtrusive when conducting the observations in order to minimise any effect on participant behaviour, during staff contact with the customer. Following the First contact call, WFI or FA meeting, researchers engaged the staff member in a brief discussion about the overall contact with the customer to extract the staff member’s perceptions of the meeting/call.

**A.2 Fieldwork**

Jobcentre Plus office managers and Contact Centres managers were initially contacted by letter, which was followed up with a telephone call. They were advised of the research agenda and suitable dates were negotiated with managers. The contact person (usually the office manager) was asked to organise the timetable for the interviews and observations and suggested staff members to participate. The managers were also asked to inform their staff about the purpose of the research.

As in previous phases of the research, a range of staff were interviewed in order to gain different staff viewpoints.

**A.2.1 Staff interviews**

Staff interviews were conducted face-to-face and on a one-to-one basis. Where possible, arrangements were made with managers for a private room to be made available for the staff interviews. The interviews with staff members covered similar broad themes but were tailored to individual’s role and office type. Tables A.1 and A.2 summarises the interviews conducted with staff members by type of staff and by public office area.
Table A.1  Summary of Jobcentre Plus public office staff interviewed by type of staff member and by public office area (A-I)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OM/DM</th>
<th>PA</th>
<th>FA</th>
<th>FAM</th>
<th>PAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A.2  Summary of Contact Centre staff interviewed by type of staff and by area (A-F)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Office Manager</th>
<th>First Contact Officer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations

Observations were conducted of WFI and FA meetings at the Jobcentre Plus offices and of First Contact conversations at Contact Centres. Every effort was made to ensure that observations of all customers’ types were obtained. The observations conducted of WFI, FA meetings and at First Contact are shown in Tables A.3 and A.4.
Table A.3  Summary of observations conducted at First Contact with customers by customer group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of customer</th>
<th>No. of observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jobseekers</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone parents</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers claiming health related benefits</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A.4  Summary of observations conducted of WFI and FA meetings by customer group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of customer</th>
<th>WFI</th>
<th>FA</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jobseekers</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone parents</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers claiming health related benefits</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>46</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>86</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researchers recorded the conversation in the form of a ‘transcript’ and completed a schedule of the conversation. Information noted by the observer on the schedule included, for example, issues raised by both the customer and staff, language and terms used, call duration, depth of explanations provided, and process followed by staff. Copies of the observation schedules can be found in Appendix I.

After the meeting/call had ended, the researcher took the opportunity to spend a few minutes talking to the staff member and, if possible, the customer, to gain their perspective of the interview/conversation. The researcher noted any comments onto the schedule. This was not always possible, for example, if FCOs went straight into the next First Contact call without a break.
A.2.2 Customer research

The customer groups approached in Phase 4 research were as follows:

Table A.5 Customer groups approached in the research by benefit type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer Group</th>
<th>Benefit type claimed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jobseekers</td>
<td>(Jobseeker’s Allowance) JSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone parents</td>
<td>Usually (Income Support) IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers claiming health related benefits</td>
<td>Usually (Incapacity Benefit) IB or IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers</td>
<td>(Carers Allowance) CA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Customers were drawn from a database supplied by the Department of Work and Pensions. The database provided a sample of customers by benefit claim type who had attended a WFI with in the last couple of months. Customer groups were identified based on the type of benefit claimed (Table A.2). The sampling list was cleaned to remove any individuals who were identified as being outside of the designated ‘district’ and to remove any duplication in the sampling list.

Targets for each customer group had been determined based on the objectives of the research.

Table A.6 Customer targets per public office area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer group</th>
<th>Numbers required/public office area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jobseekers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone parents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers claiming health-related benefits</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where the numbers of customers claiming a benefit type were low, every unit provided was included from the sampling list, where the number of customers claiming benefit was more generous, a random sample was obtained. Additional customer numbers were requested if all of the units from the original sampling list had been used. This was only required where customer numbers (units) on the original sampling list were low.

Overall targets for each customer group were achieved in most public office areas. There was a small number of areas where the sample overall or the list for particular customer groups was particularly low. Additional interviews were conducted in other case study areas to ensure the overall totals were achieved.
Table A.7  Summary of interviews conducted with Jobcentre Plus customers, by customer group and public office area (A-I)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>JSA customers</th>
<th>Lone parents customers</th>
<th>Sick or disabled customer</th>
<th>Carers</th>
<th>Total/public office area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Customer recruitment

There were two main aims when recruiting customers for Phase 4, to ensure that the customer was in receipt of the relevant benefit type and to ensure that the customer had been through the whole Jobcentre Plus process, i.e. had attended a WFI.

An introductory ‘opt out’ letter was sent out to customers sampled from the database, explaining the purpose of the research and that an interviewer would be in contact some time during the next few weeks to ask whether the customer would like to take part in this study. A copy of this ‘opt out’ letter can be found in Appendix C. A freephone number was provided on the letter for customers to call if they wanted to opt out or if they required further information. A small number of customers chose to ‘opt out’ by calling the free phone number and these customers weren’t contacted again. A few customers also ‘opted in’ by phoning the freephone, these customers were called back by a member of the team.

A screening questionnaire was used at the recruitment stage in order to check the type of benefit claimed by the customer and the eligibility of the customer to take part in the research. A copy of the recruitment questionnaire can be found in Appendix G. It is also worth noting at this point, that an incentive payment of £15 was offered to customers for participating in the research.

An appointment was made for a researcher to interview the customer, if the customer was eligible and willing to take part in an interview. A convenient date and time was arranged with the customer. Interviews were arranged to take place at the home of the customer. Confirmation letters were sent out to customers at their home address (where possible) confirming the date and time of the interview.
Customer interviews

Interviews with customers were conducted on a one-to-one basis and recorded, provided the permission of the customer was obtained. The customer was informed that the recording was for the convenience of the researcher.

The topic guide covered similar issues with JSA and non-JSA customers (lone parents, customers claiming health-related benefits and carers). The topic guide also included prompts for the researcher to enquire about specific issues. This was to ensure a degree of consistency was achieved amongst the interviews conducted. A copy of the interview guides used for JSA and non-JSA customers can be found in Appendix H.
Appendix B
Must Dos guidance

B.1 Introduction

Jobcentre Plus introduced for the first time (other than on a pilot basis) a work-focused service and benefit conditionality for non-JSA customers of working age claiming Income Support (IS), Incapacity Benefit (IB), Severe Disability Allowance (SDA), Carers Allowance (CA) and Bereavement Benefit (BB). The purpose of this work-focused service is to help non-Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) customers return to work as soon as they can.

Conditionality for customers claiming JSA is not affected by the introduction of Jobcentre Plus.

We are conscious that this work-focused service and benefit conditionality is new for our non-JSA customers and staff. In order to help you deliver a work-focused service to all customers, we have produced this list of things that Personal Advisers (PAs), Financial Assessors (FAs) and First Contact Officers (FCOs) must do in order to help non-JSA customers return to work as soon as they can.

None of this is new: indeed everything here will be covered somewhere in operation guidance and training. What it aims to do through is help us relate what we do each day with each customer to the strategy for delivering a work-focused service.

We have also included a reminder of the main differences from JSA and some key operational requirements. These are mainly about making sure we record accurately and promptly the help we give customers and that our systems work well.

The list can be used as a work aide for staff delivering the service and for their managers to support and develop their staff and to monitor the quality of the service their staff are providing. A self-assessment stencil is attached to help managers monitor delivery of the ‘Must Dos’ in their offices.
B.2 First Contact

To deliver the Work-Focused Service the First Contact Officer must:

- actively promote the work-focused services of Jobcentre Plus;
- explain that a work-focused meeting is a compulsory condition of benefit entitlement;
- explain the purpose of the work-focused meeting;
- discuss any current job search activity;
- allocate a Personal Adviser (PA) able to deal with a customer’s particular needs, for example, Lone Parent or IB customer;
- book a work-focused meeting to take place within four working days of First Contact if not waived or deferred;
- decide if a work-focused meeting should be appropriately waived/deferred;
- do a job search for all customers who are job-ready and undertake a submission if there is a suitable vacancy.

**Operational requirement**

To act as a first point of contact.

Redirect non-Jobcentre Plus customers as appropriate.

Advise customers of Jobcentre Plus work-focused services and work-focused benefit conditionality.

Identify the most appropriate benefit(s).

Identify 16/17 year old customers and take the appropriate action.

Identify if rapid reclaim is appropriate.

Gather labour market information to inform the work-focused meeting and ensure that all IT and clerical customer records are created and updated as appropriate, for example, Labour Market System (LMS) marker set, JES record created and the reason for waiver/deferral is recorded.

As an output customers must receive the correct interview notifications and claim forms.

**Difference from JSA**

JSA customers are subject to stricter conditionality and the work-focused meeting/New Jobseeker Interview cannot be waived or deferred. First Contact for JSA customers will concentrate on the requirement to look for work as a compulsory condition of entitlement to JSA and referral to suitable vacancies.
B.3 Financial Assessor meeting

To deliver the work-focused service the FA must:

- explain that the benefit claim is dependent on satisfactory completion of a work-focused meeting;
- thoroughly check the benefit claim for content and completeness, raising and resolving queries with customers while the customer is present;
- gather all evidence and verification to reduce opportunities for fraud and error;
- answer customers’ queries about benefits so that these will not be carried forward into the work-focused meeting;
- advise the customer of the status of their claim before they leave the office and tell them of any further evidence needed before the claim can be processed;
- alert the PA if it appears that a work-focused meeting might not be appropriate.

**Operational requirement**

When appropriate, to undertake a follow up meeting with the customer after the work focus meeting if the PA has identified the need for additional action before the claim can be processed. For example if the customer refuses to participate in the work-focused meeting. The output of all FA meetings will be for claims to be passed to processing teams for benefit assessment and payment.

**Difference from JSA**

A work-focused meeting/new jobseeker interview will always be appropriate for JSA customers. The FA will explain that JSA customers must be available for and actively seek employment.
B.4 Personal Adviser meeting

To deliver the work-focused service the PA must:

- be trained to deal with customers’ circumstances (e.g. IB customer, one parent);
- consider if a waiver/deferral is appropriate and take the necessary action;
- conduct the work-focused meeting at a more convenient location if the customer cannot get to the office;
- explain the purpose of work-focused meeting and the requirement to participate;
- discuss any current job search activity;
- have a **meaningful and substantive** discussion of the customer’s work options and work prospects based on an assessment of their skills, experience, qualifications, barriers and caring responsibilities;
- undertake a job search for those ready for work and make a submission if there is a suitable vacancy;
- focus on an IB customer’s residual capacity not their incapacity; what they can do, not what they cannot and be prepared to challenge assumptions;
- actively promote in-work benefits and tax credits and other advantages of being in work for the customer and their family;
- carry out an in-work benefit calculation wherever possible, either using known figures or hypothetical examples;
- actively promote and encourage the customer to take-up the New Deals and other help to enable them to prepare for work and refer them to appropriate specialist provision – Progress2Work, debt counselling, etc;
- encourage the customer to develop a Customer Action Plan setting out what they will do to prepare themselves for work and what we will do to help them;
- tell the customer about mandatory trigger meetings and set an appropriate workflow or reminder on LMS;
- offer continuing contact with the customer and encourage further meetings before the mandatory repeat work-focused meeting to discuss their work options;
- advise the FA whether the customer has participated in the work-focused meeting so that benefit processing is not delayed.
Operational requirement
To create or update a record of the customer’s qualifications, skills, employment history, job submissions, health problems, disabilities, caring responsibilities and barriers to employment to facilitate the provision of ongoing help advice and support to return to work and to monitor and follow up deferrals, caseload and trigger meetings and set appropriate workflow/reviews for the next time bound trigger meeting and update LMS and JES record.

Difference from JSA
Only JSA customers are required to be available for and actively seek work. However, it is crucially important that the PA focuses on work-related issues for both JSA and non-JSA customers alike. In such cases, that will mean challenging assumptions (‘I’ll never work again’/’There are no jobs for people of my age’) head on. The aim should be to identify pathways back to work wherever possible.
B.5 Trigger meetings

Trigger meetings are **mandatory**. They are either time bound, for example, 6/12 month anniversary for lone parents or triggered by a life event such as receipt of a Personal Capability Assessment (PCA) for an IB customer. They are **not** the same as caseload meetings (see Section B.6).

To deliver an effective trigger meeting the PA must:

- ensure the meeting is work-focused and builds on previous work-focused meetings and activity;
- review progress, including against the Customer Action Plan if one has been drawn up;
- update work prospects, progress and records from the previous work-focused meeting;
- update the customer on in-work benefits tax credits and other support available to help them return to work;
- conduct in-work benefit calculations wherever possible, either using known figures or hypothetical examples;
- undertake job search and referral when the customer is job-ready;
- actively encourage customers who previously declined to take up caseload now.

**Trigger meeting operational requirement**

To: update assessment, and records of customer’s skills, experience, qualifications, barriers etc; discuss customer’s work options and help and support available to enhance their skills, experience and overcome their barriers and review and update their Customer Action Plan and any progress they have made against it and set the workflow for the next time-bound trigger meeting.

**Difference from JSA**

Only JSA customers are required to be available for and actively seek work. However, it is crucially important that the PA focuses on work-related issues for both JSA and non-JSA customers alike. In such cases, that will mean challenging assumptions (‘I’ll never work again’/’There are no jobs for people of my age’) head on. The aim should be to identify pathways back to work wherever possible.
B.6 Caseload meetings

Caseloading is voluntary. It includes preparation for work and job search help from a PA or DEA and participation in a New Deal or other programme.

To deliver effective caseloading the PA must:

- actively promote and encourage take-up of help from New Deals, e.g. New Deal for Lone Parent (NDLP), other programmes, and DEA if customer is disabled and needs specialist services;
- understand and actively promote New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) to sick/disabled customers;
- provide information/advice about help from other organisations;
- monitor and encourage progress against Customer Action Plan;
- undertake job search and referral as soon as the customer is job ready;
- explain in-work support available where appropriate (in NDLP and NDDP only);
- conduct in-work benefit calculations wherever possible, either using known figures or hypothetical examples.

Caseloading operational requirement

To provide advice/information about available help from other organisations, monitor the customer’s progress against their Customer Action Plan and undertake job search matching and submission as soon as the customer is ready for work and update relevant IT records.

Difference from JSA

Only JSA customers are required to be available for and actively seek work. However, it is crucially important that the PA focuses on work-related issues for both JSA and non-JSA customers alike. In such cases, that will mean challenging assumptions (‘I'll never work again’/‘There are no jobs for people of my age’) head on. The aim should be to identify pathways back to work wherever possible.
Appendix C
Opt out letter to Jobcentre Plus customers

Name>
<Address 1>
<Address 2>
<Address 3>
<Address 4>

Dear <Name>

Research on Jobcentre Plus services

I am writing to ask for your help with an important study about people’s experiences of Jobcentre Plus services. The Department for Work and Pensions wants to improve services provided to people who are claiming benefits and have commissioned two independent research organisations, ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd and Insite Research and Consulting to carry out some research with people who recently made a claim for benefit. The research will explore how Jobcentre Plus services work and how they address your needs.

Your name was randomly selected from the Department’s records of people who recently contacted Jobcentre Plus. It would be very helpful if ECOTEC or Insite could come and talk with you. The interview would last for about 45 minutes to one hour. All researchers will carry an identity card.

An interviewer from ECOTEC will contact you some time in next few weeks to check you are eligible to take part in this study and to arrange a suitable time and date for the interview. If you do take part, we would like to offer you £15 as a ‘thank-you’ gift for your help with this study. This will not affect your entitlement to benefits in any way. Even if you are no longer claiming benefit we would still be interested to hear your views. We would like to emphasise that ECOTEC and Insite
are completely independent of government departments and political parties. Anything you tell the interviewer will be treated in the strictest of confidence and the results will be presented in such a way that no-one will be able to identify you or your family.

I do hope you will be able to help with this important study and that you enjoy the opportunity of giving your views. This is a voluntary study, however, and you do not have to take part. If you do not wish to take part, please call ECOTEC on a free phone number [telephone no] remembering to give your name and address, or notify us in writing using the freepost envelope enclosed. Whatever your decision, we can assure you that it will not affect your benefit entitlement or any dealings you may have with Jobcentre Plus, either now or in the future.

If you would like to know more about the research, please do not hesitate to contact Katharine McKenna at ECOTEC on [telephone no]. Alternatively, you can call me on [telephone no]. We would be pleased to answer any queries you may have. We look forward to meeting with you soon.

Kind regards

Kim Shrapnell

Jobcentre Plus Evaluation and Strategy Development Team
Appendix D
Confirmation letter to
Jobcentre Plus customers

Name
Address line 1
Address line 2
Address line 3
Address line 4

[Insert Date]

Dear [Customer’s name]

Research on Jobcentre Plus services

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. I am writing to confirm that [insert researcher’s name] from ECOTEC Research & Consulting/Insite Research and Consulting [delete as appropriate] will visit you on [insert day, date and time]. The interview will last for about one hour, and in appreciation of your time you will receive a ‘thank you’ gift of £15.

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

We look forward to meeting with you.

Yours sincerely

[Recruiter’s signature]
Appendix E
Letter of introduction to Jobcentre Plus Office Managers

Ref.: KS/KM / [case study area] / [office]

Name
Address line 1
Address line 2
Address line 3
Address line 4

February 2004

Dear [Insert name]

Evaluation of Jobcentre Plus – Wave 4

Kim Shrapnell from the Jobcentre Plus Evaluation Strategy and Development Team recently wrote to [insert the district] Manager to secure agreement for your office to take part in the fourth wave of Jobcentre Plus Evaluation research.

The overall aim of this qualitative research is to explore whether Contact Centres, Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder and Day 2 public offices are delivering the policy intent. Therefore, we are particularly interested to meet with your staff and yourself to hear your views and experiences of delivering Jobcentre Plus services. All information provided by staff and managers will be treated in confidence and the research results will be presented in such a way that no one will be able to identify individual members of staff or offices. In addition, we would like to spend some time in your offices observing how services are delivered so that we fully understand the process and how things work. Further details of the research are attached at Annex A.
A researcher from ECOTEC Research and Consulting will contact you within the next 14 days to provide you with more details about the fieldwork and to discuss local administration and management arrangements, so that we can minimise the disruption to the work of your teams. Meanwhile, if you have any queries regarding our research please do not hesitate to contact me on [telephone no.] or Kim Shrapnell on [telephone no.] at the Jobcentre Plus Evaluation and Strategy Development Team.

We look forward to meeting with you soon.

Kind regards

Katharine McKenna
Research Manager, ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd
Appendix F
Topic guides for interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff
Jobcentre Plus Evaluation Phase 4
Topic Guide for Office Managers

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim is:

- to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and new offices are delivering to policy intent;
- interviews with Office Managers seek to understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in Public Offices/Contact Centres.

Interviews with Office Managers will cover the following topics:

- office organisation and management;
- delivery of services to customers;
- views of service delivery and how it could be improved;
- views about any changes implemented;
- views about progress towards the vision;
- good practice and the lessons to be learned.

Part 1: Introductions

- Introduction: yourself, independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.
- Purpose of the research:
  - [AT DAY 2 OFFICES] to explore the bedding in process of Jobcentre Plus.
  - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed over the last year.
- Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff.
- If re-interviewing the same member of staff say that the interview will repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred.
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews.
- Ask permission to tape the interview.

NOTE:

- Where appropriate, explore differences in the delivery of work-focused interviews to each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows).
Part 2: Background

2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus?
   - Confirm length of time in current role and previous roles held

2.2 What are your main roles and responsibilities as an Office Manager?
   - Collect a brief overview of the job

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES AND CONTACT CENTRES:

2.3 Have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed over the past year?
   - Why?
   - Views towards this – positive/negative?

ASK ALL:

2.4 Do you feel you have any current training needs in respect of Jobcentre Plus or your specific role as an Office Manager?
   - What areas of training and why?
   - Are there any plans in place to provide this?

2.5 To what extent are the work-focused ‘must dos’ used to guide practice?
   - How clear/workable are they in practice?
   - How is awareness raised among staff?
   - Why are they/why are they not being used?
   - Is their use monitored?
   - Are they used as a tool for monitoring?

Part 3: Office organisation and management

3.1 Can you describe for me how your office is set up and managed?
   - Staff management – line/team management responsibilities
   - Staffing arrangements within teams e.g. specialist or generalist staff
   - Factors influencing these arrangements? Is this in response to local or previous office issues e.g. fraud, targets
   - Explore any influence of IB pilots in how the office deals with IB customers

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES AND CONTACT CENTRES:

3.2 Has this changed over the past year?
   - IF YES: How/Why?
   - Managers views towards this – positive/negative
ASK AT PUBLIC OFFICES:
3.3 What are the benefits of having specialist or generalist PAs in the team?
   – Explore pros/cons of the approach adopted
   – What works best for customers—explore differences for individual customer groups?

ASK ALL:
3.4 When recruiting staff what key skills or experience are sought?
   Explore as appropriate:
   – background/experience of FCOs
   – background/experience of FAs/PAs

3.5 How closely do you work with colleagues in the Contact Centre/Jobcentre Plus offices and other key contacts?
   – Areas of close working
   – Frequency and nature of contact
   – Existing working relationships or new?

3.6 How are the different aspects of Jobcentre Plus prioritised?
   – Benefits versus employment
   – Fraud/error and labour market focus

ASK AT PUBLIC OFFICES ONLY:
3.7 Do they know how their region/district is performing with regards to fraud?
   – How is this communicated to them?
   – What action have they taken based on this knowledge?
   – Which elements of the Jobcentre Plus process did you consider to be key in addressing fraud and error? Why?
   – How have practices changed in your office since Jobcentre Plus was rolled out with regards to frequency of home visits? Why?

3.8 What are the key messages you try to acquaint staff with?
   – How is this done?

3.9 How do staff handle ‘down time’? How are staff advised to utilise this time?
   – Any problems/solutions?
Part 4: Delivery of Services to customers

**The following questions must be tailored to the role and responsibilities of each respondent**

ASK AT CONTACT CENTRE ONLY:

4.1 Can you briefly outline how Jobcentre Plus services are currently being delivered at the Contact Centre?
   - What are the procedures?
   - Who is involved?

4.2 How has this changed/developed since July 2003?
   - Why?
   - Probe on moves to independent management/probe on moving over to CMS
   - Managers views towards this – positive/negative

4.3 What are the key changes you envisage happening to your call centre over the next year?
   - what processes/practices/training has been put in place to begin to accommodate these change?

ASK AT PUBLIC OFFICES ONLY:

4.4 Can you briefly outline how Jobcentre Plus services are currently being delivered at this public office?
   - What are the procedures for setting up WFI and FA meetings
   - And the procedures for setting up trigger meetings? Explore any differences for individual customer group. (except lone parents) Probe on any problems.
   - Who is involved? Role of FA and PA
   - Communication links between FAs and PAs
   - Liaisons with the Contact Centre/Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES ONLY:

4.5 How has this changed/developed over the past year?
   - Why
   - Managers views towards this – positive/negative
ASK AT ALL PUBLIC OFFICES:
4.6 What impact has Jobcentre Plus had on the delivery of pre-existing services e.g. New Deals, JSA fortnightly signings, job search and payment of benefits?
   - In particular explore any changes relating to fortnightly signings following introduction of Jobcentre Plus, such as sharing of information/working with FCO/PAs
   - What steps are being taken to overcome any problems?

Financial Assessor Meetings:
4.7 What do you perceive to be a FA’s role in their meetings with customers?
   - Explore perceptions for individual customer groups
4.8 How successful do you feel the FA benefit element of Jobcentre Plus has been so far?
   - Any difference for individual customer group?
   - Identify any difficulties/problems in delivering the benefit element and reasons why e.g. FA knowledge/confidence
   - How confident are staff in delivering the benefit element to individual customer?
4.9 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a FA meeting?
   - Explore outcomes relating to specific customer groups.
4.10 What role do you feel Financial Assessors play in detecting fraud and error?
   - Explore targets/key work objectives associated with FA role

Work-focused interviews:
4.11 What do you believe to be the purpose of the work-focused interview?
   a) Does this vary by client types?
   b) Or, active/inactive benefits?
4.12 How successful do you feel the work-focused element of Jobcentre Plus has been so far for different customer groups?
   - Identify any difficulties/problems in delivering a work focus and reasons why
   - Identify any examples of good practice and reasons why successful
   - How confident are staff in delivering a work focus to non-JSA customers?
   - Is there any flexibility around how the WFI is organised?
4.13 To what extent is failure to attend at WFIs and FA meetings an issue?

- Explore instances and extent of customers failing to attend WFI/FA meetings - which customers are more likely to fail to attend?
- How do you feel the new WFI regime is working for non-JSA customers? Are you able to follow the procedures? Has it impacted on failure to attend?
- What else is done to minimise failure to attend? (E.g. telephoning customers/ghost diaries)-Any good practice examples?

4.14 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a work-focused interview for customers?

- Highlight where responses relate to specific customer groups.
- Attendance to interviews
- Willingness to engage in work-focused discussions with advisers
- Changed attitudes about work or the benefit service
- Training/Referrals to support services
- Voluntary caseloading
- Identifying instances of fraud and error

4.15 How are New Deal and non-New Deal caseloading being managed by the office?

- Identify and problems/difficulties in providing caseloading services
- How is this managed at the office level and for each adviser?
- What customer groups are being targeted for caseloading services and why?

**Part 5: Overall views**

**Each question must be tailored to the role and responsibilities of each respondent**

**ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES AND CONTACT CENTRES:**

5.1 Has the way services are delivered to customers changed over the past year?

- Why? How is this better/worse?
- Collect concrete evidence by example

5.2 Which elements of the Jobcentre plus process did you consider to be key in addressing fraud and error? Why?
ASK ALL:
5.3 How close are you to delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision?
   - Explore perceptions/understanding of the vision
   - To what extent have you moved closer over the past year?
   - And what still remains to be done?

5.4 What aspects of Jobcentre Plus do you feel work particularly well, and why?
   a) for customers?
   b) for staff? Prompt: ensure OM covers FA as well as PA
   - Contributory factors - i.e. what has facilitated these aspects to work well

5.5 And what works less well, and why?
   a) for customers?
   b) for staff?
   - Contributory factors - i.e. what has facilitated these aspects to work less well

5.6 How could delivery of services to customers be improved?

ASK AT PATHFINDERS AND CONTACT CENTRE ONLY:
5.7 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year?

5.8 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the rollout of further Jobcentre Plus offices?

5.9 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

THANK AND CLOSE
Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim is:

- to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and new offices are delivering to policy intent;
- interviews with PA Managers seek to understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in Public Offices.

Interviews with PA Managers will cover the following topics:

- office organisation and management;
- PA training needs;
- content and delivery of work-focused interviews;
- caselisting;
- staff views about the impact of the intervention;
- staff views about any changes implemented;
- good practice and the lessons to be learned.

Part 1: Introductions

- Introduction: yourself, independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.

- Purpose of the research:
  - [AT DAY 2 OFFICES] to explore the bedding in process of Jobcentre Plus.
  - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed over the last year.

- Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff.

- If re-interviewing the same member of staff say that the interview will repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred.

- Stress confidentiality of the interviews.

- Ask permission to tape the interview.

NOTE:

- Where appropriate, explore differences in the delivery of work-focused interviews to each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows).
Part 2: Background

2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus?
   – Confirm length of time in current role and previous roles held

2.1 What are your main roles and responsibilities as a PA manager?
   – Collect a brief overview of the job

ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES:

2.2 Have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed over the past year?
   – Why?
   – Views towards this – positive/negative?

ASK ALL:

2.1 Do you feel you have any current training needs in respect of Jobcentre Plus or your specific role as a PA Manager?
   – What areas of training and why?
   – Are there any plans in place to provide this?

Part 3: Office organisation and management

3.1 Can you describe for me how your office is set up and managed?
   – Line/team management responsibilities
   – Staffing arrangements within teams e.g. specialist or generalist PAs
   – Factors influencing these arrangements? Is this in response to local or previous office issues e.g. fraud, targets

ASK AT PATHFINDERS:

3.2 Has this changed over the past year?
   – IF YES: How/Why?
   – Managers views towards this – positive/negative

ASK ALL:

3.3 What are the benefits of having specialist or generalist PAs in the team?
   – Explore pros/cons of the approach adopted
   – What works best for customers-exploring differences for individual customer groups?
   – Has the emphasis on dealing with IB customers been influenced by the IB pilots?

3.4 How are the different aspects of Jobcentre Plus prioritised?
   – Benefits versus employment
   – How does fraud/error fit with the work focus elements of the process delivered by your staff?
3.5 What are the key messages you try to acquaint staff with?
   – How is this done?

3.6 How do staff handle ‘down time’? How are staff advised to utilise this time?
   – Any problems, if so, how are these resolved?

3.7 What links do PA have with service providers?
   – Type of provider and extent of contact

**Part 4: PA training needs**

4.1 How do you identify and seek to resolve PAs’ learning and development needs concerning Jobcentre Plus?
   – Is there a formal or informal process/procedure?
   – Is this a reactive or proactive process – how regularly are staff training needs assessed?

4.2 Do you feel PAs in your team have any current training needs in respect of Jobcentre Plus or their specific role as a PA?
   – What areas of training and why?
   – Any particular customer circumstances or customer types where more support/advice/training is needed?
   – Training to undertake specialist PA roles?
   – Are there any plans in place to provide this?
   – Any problems/difficulties in accessing/delivering training?

4.3 To what extent are the work-focused ‘must dos’ used to guide practice?
   – How clear/workable are they in practice?
   – Why are they/why are they not being used?
   – How is awareness raised among staff?
   – Is their use monitored?
   – Are they used as a tool for monitoring?

**Part 5: Delivery of services to customers**

*WFIs and Trigger meetings*

5.1 To what extent do you monitor how WFIs and trigger meetings are set up?
   – Is there any flexibility around how the WFI is organised?
   – Explore any problems/difficulties in booking WFIs
   – Prompt for comments about communication links between FAs and PAs, and liaisons with the Contact Centre/Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder
   – Explore procedures for different customer groups
ASK AT PATHFINDER OFFICES ONLY:

5.2 How have these procedures changed over the past year?
   - Why?
   - PAM views about any changes – positive/negative

5.3 To what extent are WFIIs monitored and quality assured?
   - How do PAMs monitor the quality of interviews being delivered by PAs?
   - How do PAMs satisfy themselves that the ‘must dos’ are being delivered?
   - How they identify areas of weakness in the services being delivered and seek to overcome them/how they improve quality of services being delivered?
   - How PAMs use the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) in monitoring the quality of interviews?
   - How often do PAMs sit in on meetings and how do they go about feeding back on the PA’s performance?

ASK ALL:

5.4 What difficulties have been experienced with the process of setting up and monitoring WFIIs?
   - Collect concrete evidence by example
   - What action has been taken by PAM to address these?
   - Has this resolved the problem? If not, what could?

5.5 To what extent is failure to attend at WFIIs an issue?
   - Explore instances and extent of customers failing to attend WFI - which customers are more likely to fail to attend?
   - Are recommendations being made to decision makers for customers to be sanctioned if they fail to attend?
   - Are benefit processors notified if a customer fails to attend a WFI - Any instances of benefits being processed without confirmation of attendance at WFI?
   - How do you feel the new WFI regime is working for non-JSA customers? Are you able to follow the procedures? Has it impacted on failure to attend?
   - What else is done to minimise failure to attend? (E.g. telephoning customers beforehand)- Any good practice examples?
Part 6: Content and delivery of work-focused interviews

**Explore differences in the impact on each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows)**

6.1 What do you perceive to be a PA’s role in delivering the work-focused interview?
   a) Does this vary by customer types?
   b) Or, active/inactive benefits?

6.2 Do PAs ever see non-JSA customers for a work-focused interview who they think should have been deferred?
   - How do you decide whether to continue with the work-focused interview or to defer the customer?

6.3 What do PAs discuss with customers during interviews?
   - Collect an overview of the topics covered (E.g. work, benefits, information/advice given)
   - How does this differ for different customer groups?

**Discussing work**

6.4 Are there any customers who are particularly difficult for PAs to deal with/deliver the work focus to?
   - Individual customers or customer types
   - What happens in these cases – Ask for examples

6.5 How confident are your staff in delivering a work focus to non-JSA customers?
   - What do they think is the role of a PA in encouraging less job-ready customers – to motivate/encourage, or to only give information/explore options?

6.6 How do PAs decide whether or not it is appropriate to conduct a job search/submit customers to vacancies?
   - Collect examples of circumstances when job search would be conducted and job submissions made
   - How is feedback given to customers following unsuccessful job submissions
   - What information is shared with other staff (E.g. for Fortnightly Job Reviews) following unsuccessful job submissions
Providing Advice and Information

6.7 To what extent are PAs able to supply specialist information and advice during WFIs?
- How knowledgeable are they about help for disabled customers e.g. role of DEA, NDDP, Workstep, Workprep, Access to Work?
- Does this vary depending on the extent to which PA has a specialist/generalist role?
- Explore any training delivered to provide specialist/tailored information and advice (E.g. any feedback/good practice from IB pilots)

6.8 What happens when a customer presents a problem or issue that PAs are not familiar with?
- Steps taken to find the information
- Gaps in information
- Variation by customer group

6.9 How do PAs close meetings with customers?
- Establish what information is given, actions undertaken, and agreements made
- Referrals to other organisations/service providers
- Explanation of follow-up arrangements for customer to return to PA at any time
- Formal or informal agreements – (Probe for differences between JSA and non-JS customers: JSA – Jobseeker’s Agreement; and Non-JSA – Customer Action Plan)

ASK PAMs WHO DEAL WITH JSA CUSTOMERS:
- What information is passed to FJR intervention officers about JSA customers-
  Any change in procedures in terms of ways of working/information sharing since Jobcentre Plus rolled out (DAY 2 OFFICES)/since July 2003 (PATHFINDER OFFICES)

Part 7: Caseloading

7.1 What do you understand to be the purpose of caseloading for non-JSA customers?
- Explore PAM definitions of caseloading
- Are there any other forms of follow-up contact instigated by PA or customer?
- What forms does this take? How often does this occur?
- Does it eventually lead to caseloading?
- Are there any targets associated with caseloading?
7.2 How does caseloding differ from other forms of follow-up contact?
- Intensity of support
- Format of contact/support – telephone or face to face contact
- Services offered – how this compares to what is offered in WFI
- How does New Deal compare to other forms of caseloding?

7.3 How do PAs decide whether or not to caseload a non-JSA customer?
- What criteria are taken into account?
- Determine under what circumstances a PA would caseload a customer – and why? E.g. Following an unsuccessful job submission?
- How are customers encouraged to join a caseload? What works and with whom?

7.4 What types of customer are caseloaded?
- Do PAs concentrate on the more job-ready, or the less job-ready – and why?
- What types of customer are not caseloaded?
- Who benefits most, and least from caseloding?

7.5 How effective is caseloding?
- involving non-JSA customers?
- achieving outcomes?

Part 8: Impact of intervention

**Explore differences in the impact on each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows)**

8.1 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a work-focused interview for customers?

**Explore outcomes for individual customer groups**

E.g.
- Attendance to interviews
- Willingness to engage in work-focused discussions with advisers
- Changed attitudes about work or the benefit service
- Training/Referrals to support services
- Voluntary caseloding
- Identifying instances of fraud and error

8.2 How successful do you feel the work-focused element of Jobcentre Plus has been for non-JSA customers?
- Effectiveness in re-focusing customers on work
- How have PA’s views changed since the service was launched?
8.3 What role do you feel PAs play in detecting fraud and error?

- Explore perceptions of importance of PA role in fraud and error
- How does this fit with other responsibilities?
- Explore whether they remind customers of the responsibilities they carry as a benefit recipient e.g. reporting changes in circumstances, does this vary by client group?

### Part 9: Overall views

**ASK AT PATHFINDER ONLY:**

9.1 Has the way PAs conduct WFI changed over the past year?

- Why? How is this better/worse?
- Collect concrete evidence by example
- Explore changes in PA roles and responsibilities

**ASK ALL:**

9.2 How close are you to delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision?

- Explore perceptions/understanding of the vision
- ASK AT PATHFINDER ONLY: To what extent have you moved closer over the past year?
- And what still remains to be done?

9.3 What impact has the introduction of Jobcentre Plus had on you and your job? Has it improved or worsened?

- Workload
- Ability to manage time
- Attitudes to the policy vision
- Personal development

9.4 What aspects of Jobcentre Plus do you feel work particularly well, and why?

- Explore what works well for different customer groups and for staff?
- And what works less well, and why?

9.5 How could WFI with customers be improved?

9.6 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the rollout of further Jobcentre Plus offices?

9.7 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**THANK AND CLOSE**
### Research aims/objectives:

**The overall aim is:**
- **to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and new offices are delivering to policy intent**
- **interviews with PAs seek to understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in Public Offices.**

Interviews will cover the following topics:
- preparing for the WFI;
- the content and delivery of WFls in terms of:
  - discussing work;
  - job search/job submissions;
  - discussing benefits;
  - information and advice;
  - how the meeting ends;
- caselancing;
- staff views about the impact of the intervention;
- staff views about any changes implemented;
- good practice and the lessons to be learned.

### Part 1: Introductions

- **Introduction:** yourself, independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.
- **Purpose of the research:**
  - [AT DAY 2 OFFICES] to explore the bedding in process of Jobcentre Plus.
  - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed over the last year.
- Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff.
- If re-interviewing the same member of staff say that the interview will repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred.
• Stress confidentiality of the interviews.
• Ask permission to tape the interview.

NOTE:
• Where appropriate, explore differences in the delivery of work-focused interviews to each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows) and the PA’s confidence, ability and experience in delivering to these groups.
• Tailor questions as appropriate based on the extent to which the respondent performs specialist/generalist PA roles.

Part 2: Background

2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus?
   – Confirm length of time in current role and previous roles held

2.2 What are your main roles and responsibilities as a PA?
   – Collect a brief overview of the job
   – Explore relationships with other PAs/Public Office staff
   – Is the adviser dedicated to Jobcentre Plus or have wider responsibilities?

2.3 To what extent do you consider you perform a specialist or generalist PA role?
   – What types of customer do they see?
   – Explore extent and nature of specialist role or responsibilities
   – What training have they received to undertake a specialist PA role?
   – Explore perceptions of specialist/generalist roles—what works best for which customer groups?

ASK GENERALIST PAS:
2.4 How confident are you with dealing with different customers groups?
   – What factors that affect this confidence?
   – Information sources/other resources accessed to assist these customers

ASK ALL:
2.5 Do you feel you have any current training needs in respect of Jobcentre Plus or your specific role as a PA?
   – What areas of training and why?
   – Any particular customer circumstances or customer types where more support/advice/training is needed?
   – Are there any plans in place to provide this?
2.6 To what extent are the work-focused ‘must dos’ used to guide practice?
   – How clear/workable are they in practice?
   – Why are they/why are they not being used?
   – How is awareness raised among staff?

2.7 How do you handle ‘down time’? How are you advised to use this time?
   – Any problems/solutions?

Part 3: Preparing for the WFI

3.1 Are customers seen immediately following their FA meeting?
   – Identify and explore any differing procedures

3.2 To what extent is failure to attend at WFIs an issue?
   – Explore instances of customers failing to attend WFI following a FA meeting—which customers are more likely to fail to attend
   – Explore instances of non-JSA customer failing to attend WFI/trigger review meetings and PA perceptions of why
   – Are recommendations being made to decision makers for customers to be sanctioned if they fail to attend?
   – Are benefit processors notified if a customer fails to attend a WFI-Any instances of benefits being processed without confirmation of attendance at WFI?
   – How do you feel the new WFI regime is working for non-JSA customers? Are you able to follow the procedures? Has it impacted on failure to attend?

3.3 How much information do you have about the customer before you meet them?
   – Is this sufficient – why/why not
   – Explore differences in the information received by each individual customer group
   – How much preparation are you able to do?
   – IF NOT SUFFICIENT: How does this affect your ability to conduct the WFI? How could this be improved?
Part 4: Content and delivery of work-focused interviews

**Discuss all questions for Part 4 in relation to each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows) **

4.1 What do you believe to be the purpose of the work-focused interview?
   a) Does this vary by customer types?
   b) Or, active/inactive benefits?

4.2 How do you explain the purpose of the interview to customers?
   - What words/phrases are used?
   - Does this explanation vary by customer group?

4.3 Do you ever see non-JSA customers for a work-focused interview who you think should have been deferred?
   - How do you decide whether to continue with the work-focused interview or to defer the customer?

4.4 How do you begin the interview?

4.5 What do you discuss with customers during interviews?
   - What is the main focus of the meeting?
   - How are interviews structured
   - Who defines the agenda?
   - Prompt for topics covered:
     - Work/job goals in short, medium or long-term
     - Barriers to work
     - Childcare
     - Training needs
     - Other support needs
   - How does this differ for different customer groups?

Discussing work

4.6 How do you assess/determine customers’ needs in relation to work?

4.7 What do you discuss with customers in relation to work?
   - What topics are covered e.g. employment history, career aspirations?
   - How does this differ for different customer groups?

4.8 Are there any customers who are particularly difficult to deal with / deliver the work focus to?
   - Individual customers groups or customer types (e.g. those with mental/physical health difficulties)
   - What happens in these cases - Probe: examples?
4.9 How do you feel about discussing work issues with non-JSA customers?
   - Explore levels of confidence
   - Probe for any differences in discussing work with different customer groups

4.10 How do you encourage less ‘job ready’ customers to talk about work?
   - Probe: what words/phrases/techniques are used
   - Probe for differences between:
     - lone parents
     - carers
     - widows
     - sick and disabled (e.g. those with mental/physical health difficulties)

4.11 What do they do if a customer is not very responsive or interested in talking about work?
   - Why?
   - What do they think is the role of a Personal Adviser in encouraging less job-ready customers – to motivate/encourage, or to only give information/explore options?

4.12 In what circumstances would you undertake in-work benefit calculations for customers? (**No information required for lone parents**)
   - How/when are these used?
   - Does their use vary between sick and disabled and widow customer groups
   - Explore knowledge of new tax credits (Working Tax Credit/Child Tax Credit)/Housing Benefit rules

Job search/job submissions

4.13 How do you decide whether or not it is appropriate to conduct a job search for customers?
   - Collect examples of circumstances when job search would be conducted - and reasons why
   - Establish whether there are particular groups of customers for whom job search would not be conducted – Why?

4.14 How do you decide whether to submit customers to vacancies following job searches?
   - What actions are taken following unsuccessful job submissions?
   - For all customer groups probe on feedback/caseloading/training.
   - For JSA customers probe on whether information is passed onto FJR.
Discussing Benefits

4.15 In what circumstances are benefits discussed?
   - Explore where active/inactive benefits are discussed—why?

4.16 How do you feel PAs contribute to the detection/prevention of fraud and error?
   - Probe on requirements to notify Jobcentre Plus of changes in circumstance. Explore customer group.
   - Probe on how these responsibilities fit within their responsibilities.

Providing Advice and Information

4.17 What information or advice do you give to customers?
   - Subjects covered e.g. childcare, training.
   - Format of information and advice
   - Is advice given reactively or pro-actively?
   - Referral to other services e.g. external agency/New Deal
   - How is it tailored to meet the customers’ needs?

4.18 To what extent are you able to supply specialist information?
   - How knowledgeable are they about help for disabled customers e.g. role of DEA/Workstep, Workprep, Access to Work, NDDP?
   - Does this vary depending on the extent to which PA has a specialist/generalist role?
   - Explore any training received to provide specialist/tailored information and advice (E.g. any feedback/good practice from IB pilots)

4.19 What happens when a customer presents a problem or issue that you’re not familiar with?
   - Information sources accessed, including colleagues
   - Steps taken to find the information
   - Gaps in information

Part 5: Ending the conversation

5.1 How do you close meetings with customers?
   - Establish what information is given, actions undertaken, and agreements made:
   - Formal or informal agreements/action plans including job search activity –
     (Probe for differences between JSA and non-JSA customers: JSA – Jobseeker’s Agreement; and Non-JSA – Customer Action Plan)
   - Referrals to other organisations / service providers
5.2 How do you explain the next steps for customers?

- Explanation of fortnightly signings/further mandatory reviews over time/trigger meetings

5.3 What is the procedure for setting up trigger meetings? (**No information required for lone parents**)

- Are there any difficulties relating to setting up trigger meetings?

5.4 How have these procedures changed since Jobcentre Plus was rolled out in your District?

- Why?
- PAs views towards this – positive/negative

ASK ALL:

5.5 How long do meetings with customers tend to last?

- Identify factors that influence length of meetings. Prompt for any time constraints
- Who determines the length?
- On average do lengths vary for different customer groups?
- Are the allocated time slots adequate to complete the WFI?

5.6 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a work-focused interview for customers?

- Highlight where responses relate to specific customer groups.

Part 6: Caseloading

6.1 What do you understand to be the purpose of caseloading for non-JSA customers?

- Explore PA definitions of caseloading
- Are there any other forms of follow-up contact instigated by PA or customer?
- What forms does this take? How often does this occur?
- Does it eventually lead to caseloading?
6.2 How does caseloading differ from other forms of follow-up contact?

- How does New Deal compare to other forms of caseloading?
- Intensity of support
- Format of contact/support – telephone or face to face contact
- Services offered – how this compares to what is offered in WFI

6.3 How do you decide whether or not to caseload a non-JSA customer?

- What criteria are taken into account?
- Determine under what circumstances a PA would caseload a customer – and why? E.g. Following an unsuccessful job submission?
- How are customers encouraged to join a caseload? What works and with whom?

6.4 What types of customer are caseloaded?

- Do they concentrate on the more job-ready, or the less job-ready – and why?
- What types of customer are not caseloaded?
- Who benefits most, and least from caseloading?

6.5 To what extent have non-JSA customers who were not caseloaded or job ready at the time of the interview, voluntarily contacted you or returned to see you at a later date?

- Probe: - which non-JSA customer groups
- Collect examples of when this has happened and reasons why the customer re-contacted the PA (what had changed?)
- How long after their original work-focused interview was this?

6.6 How effective is caseloading?

- involving non-JSA customers?
- achieving outcomes?

Part 7: Overall views

ASK AT PATHFINDER ONLY:

7.1 Has the way you conduct WFI's changed over the past year?

- Why? How is this better/worse?
- Collect concrete evidence by example
- Explore changes in PA roles and responsibilities
ASK ALL:
7.2 How close are you to delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision?

- Explore respondent’s perceptions of the vision
- [ASK AT PATHFINDERS] To what extent have you moved closer over the past year?
- And what still remains to be done?

7.3 What aspects of Jobcentre Plus do you feel work particularly well, and why?

- Explore what works well for different customer groups and for staff?
- And what works less well, and why?
- How could WFI with customers be improved?

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:
7.4 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year?

ASK AT DAY 2 OFFICES ONLY:
7.5 What are the main lessons that have been learnt since roll out in your district?

ASK ALL:
7.6 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the rollout of further Jobcentre Plus offices?

7.7 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

THANK AND CLOSE
Jobcentre Plus Evaluation Phase 4
Topic Guide for FA Highers/Managers

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is:

• to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and new offices are delivering to policy intent;

• interviews with FA Managers seek to understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in Public Offices.

Interviews with FA Higher/Manager will cover the following topics:

• monitoring the FA meeting;

• the content of FA meeting in terms of:
  – benefit claim;
  – detecting fraud;

• staff views about the FA meeting and its delivery;

• staff views about any changes implemented;

• good practice and the lessons learnt.

Part 1: Introductions

• Introduction: yourself, independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.

• Purpose of the research:
  - [AT DAY 2 OFFICES] to explore the bedding in process of Jobcentre Plus.
  - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed over the last year.

• Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff.

• If re-interviewing the same member of staff say that the interview will repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred.

• Stress confidentiality of the interviews.

• Ask permission to tape the interview.

NOTE:

• Where appropriate, explore differences in the delivery of FA meetings to each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows).
Part 2: Background

2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus?
   - Confirm length of time in current role and previous roles held

2.2 What are your main roles and responsibilities as a Financial Assessor Manager?
   - Collect a brief overview of the job
   - Explore any specialist roles or responsibilities

ASK AT PATHFINDER:
2.1 Have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed since July 2003?
   - Why?
   - Views towards this – positive/negative?

ASK ALL:
2.2 Do you feel you have any current training needs in respect of Jobcentre Plus or your specific role as a FA Manager?
   - What areas of training and why?
   - Any particular customer circumstances or customer types where more support/advice/training is needed?
   - Are there any plans in place to provide this?

3.4 How are the different aspects of Jobcentre Plus prioritised?
   - Benefits and employment
   - Fraud/error and labour market focus

3.5 Can you describe for me how your team is set up and managed?

3.6 What are the key messages you try to acquaint staff with?
   - How is this done?

Part 3: Content of the FA Meeting

3.1 How are the procedures for booking FA meetings working?
   - Explore any problems/difficulties in booking FA meetings in advance of WFI

3.2 To what extent are FA meetings monitored and quality assured?
   - How do FAMs monitor the quality of interviews being delivered by FAs?
   - How does the FAM satisfy themselves that the ‘must dos’ are being delivered?
   - How they identify areas of weakness in the services being delivered and seek to overcome them/how they improve quality of services being delivered?
– How FAMs use the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) in monitoring the quality of interviews
– How often do FAMs sit in on FA meetings and how do they go about feeding back on the FA’s performance?
– Whether they ever sit in on – or conduct – interviews with difficult clients

3.3 To what extent is failure to attend at FA meetings an issue?
– Explore instances and extent of customers failing to attend FA meetings – which customers are more likely to fail to attend?
– What is done to minimise failure to attend? (e.g. telephoning customers beforehand) Any good practice examples?

3.4 In what circumstances would you conduct the role of an FA?
– E.g. check claim/evidence etc with these customers?

3.5 In what circumstances would the FA Manager conduct the full FA meetings themselves?
– Prompt for. self employment, habitual residence tests, follow up CSA interviews

3.6 How much information do you have about the customer before you meet them?
– Is this sufficient – why/why not?
– IF NOT SUFFICIENT: How could this be improved?

3.7 In general, are customers completing benefit claim forms in advance of their meetings?
– What action is taken if they haven’t?
– What difference does it make if the customer has not completed the claim form?
– Are claim forms ever received that have not come through the FC route? How are these dealt with?

3.8 What is the procedure for checking customers’ benefit claim forms?
– What supporting evidence do they supply?
– Is it sufficient? If not what happens next and how is this resolved?
– Do FAMs ask any supplementary questions to verify or check the information provided?
– Have FAMs ever discovered information concealed by the customer during routine checking, and how do they go about verifying this?

3.9 What supporting evidence do you ask for to check the customer’s identity?
– Do they supply sufficient evidence? If not what happens next and how is this resolved?
3.10 What role do you feel you and your FA team play in detecting fraud and error?

- Explore perceptions of importance of FA role in fraud and error
- How does this fit with other responsibilities?
- Explore understanding of MVFE (monetary value fraud error) probe on whether it is a Key Work Objective for FAMs
- Explore whether they remind customers of the responsibilities they carry as a benefit recipient e.g. reporting changes in circumstances, does this vary by client group?

3.11 How do you identify a claim that might be fraudulent or contain an error?

3.12 Can you describe what happens when a need for a Gateway Intervention is identified?

- Explore procedure for setting up FA meeting when Gateway Intervention required-explore role of FCO/FA.
- Probe on when FCOs flag the necessity for a GI-. Explore process when GI identified at FCO stage.
- Explore process when GIs are identified by FA
- Explore FA ability/confidence to identify need for Gateway Intervention
- Explore process when an error is identified?
- Any problems/difficulties with the process?
- Explore when FAM undertakes Gateway Interventions-any problems/difficulties with the process?
- When might a FAM as opposed to a visiting officer conduct a home visit? Explore any change in frequency of home visits since rollout? - Explore FAMs confidence in terms of conducting visit. Any problems.
- Explore other actions e.g. referral to Counter Fraud Intelligence Service-what happened, collect examples for the types of claims referred.

3.13 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a Gateway Intervention?

- Explore outcomes for specific customer groups
- Explore FAMs perceptions of successful outcomes e.g. discovering an undisclosed fact that means benefit is not paid

3.14 How confident are you in your benefit knowledge to identify inconsistent information?

- Explore confidence to raise fraud/error with customers
- Explore satisfaction with guidance
- In what circumstances might you withhold a payment?
3.15 Do you think the processes for checking identity and benefit claim forms are working in terms of eliminating benefit errors and fraud?

- Is there room for improvement, and if so, what improvements could be made
- How could FAs/FAMs do more to impact on immediate error or fraud

3.16 What happens next to the benefit claim following the FA meeting?

- How is the information processed?
- How is the information passed onto benefit processing colleagues? Any problems/difficulties?
- What happens in circumstances where outstanding evidence is required? Explore FA/benefit processor roles

**Part 6: Overall views**

*ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:*

6.1 How has the way FA meetings with customers are conducted changed since July 2003?

- Why? How is this better/worse?
- Collect concrete evidence by example

*ASK ALL:*

6.2 How close are you to delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision?

- Explore perceptions/understanding of the vision
- [ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY] To what extent have you moved closer over the past year?
- What still remains to be done?

6.3 How successful do you feel the delivery of benefit services to customers under Jobcentre Plus has been so far?

- Identify any difficulties/problems in delivering the benefit element and reasons why
- Does the delivery process emphasise getting the claim paid quickly or to confirm entitlement?

6.4 What aspects of Jobcentre Plus do you feel work particularly well, and why?

- Explore what works well for different customer groups and for staff?
- And what works less well, and why?

6.5 How could FA meetings with customers be improved?

*ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:*

6.6 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year?
ASK ALL:

6.7 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the rollout of further Jobcentre Plus offices?

6.8 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

THANK AND CLOSE
Jobcentre Plus Evaluation Phase 4

Topic Guide for Financial Assessors

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is:

- to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and new offices are delivering to policy intent;
- interviews with FAs seek to understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in Public Offices.

Interviews will cover the following topics:

- preparing for the meeting;
- the content of FA meeting in terms of:
  - benefit claim;
  - detecting fraud;
  - information and advice;
  - how the meeting ends;
- staff views about the FA meeting and its delivery;
- staff views about any changes implemented;
- good practice and the lessons learnt.

Part 1: Introductions

- Introduction: yourself, independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.
- Purpose of the research:
  - [AT DAY 2 OFFICES] to explore the bedding in process of Jobcentre Plus.
  - [AT PATHFINDER OFFICES] to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed over the last year.
- Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff.
- If re-interviewing the same member of staff say that the interview will repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred.
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews.
- Ask permission to tape the interview.
NOTE:

- Where appropriate, explore differences in the delivery of FA meetings to each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows) and the FA’s confidence, ability and experience in delivering to these groups.

### Part 2: Background

2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus?
- Confirm length of time in current role and previous roles held

2.2 What are your main roles and responsibilities as a Financial Assessor?
- Collect a brief overview of the job
- Explore any specialist roles or responsibilities
- Explore relationships with other Public Office/Contact Centre staff

**ASK AT PATHFINDER:**

2.3 Have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed since July 2003?
- Why?
- Views towards this – positive/negative?

**ASK ALL:**

2.4 Do you feel you have any current training needs in respect of Jobcentre Plus or your specific role as a Financial Assessor?
- What areas of training and why?
- Any particular customer circumstances or customer types where more support/advice/training is needed?
- How would this help with undertaking the FA role?
- Are there any plans in place to provide this?
- Any training/feedback/good practice received from IB pilots?

2.5 To what extent are the work-focused ‘must dos’ used to guide practice?
- How clear/workable are they in practice?
- Why are they/why are they not being used?
- How is awareness raised among staff?

2.6 How do you handle ‘down time’? How are you advised to use this time?
- Any problems/solutions?
Part 3: Preparing for the FA Meeting

3.1 How much information do you have about the customer before you meet them?
   - **Is this sufficient – why/why not?**
   - **IF NOT SUFFICIENT: How could this be improved?**

3.2 In general, are customers completing benefit claim forms in advance of their meeting with FAs?
   - **What action do you take if they haven’t?**
   - **What difference does it make if the customer has not completed the claim form?**
   - Are claim forms ever received that have not come through the FC route? How are these dealt with?

Part 4: Content of the FA Meeting

**Explore differences in the delivery of FA meetings to each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows)**

4.1 Does a customer attend the FA meeting immediately on arrival at the Jobcentre?
   
   Explore the extent of failure to attend at FA meetings. Are their certain types of customers more likely to fail to attend? Do they know why customers FTA?

4.2 How do you introduce the FA meeting to the customer and explain its purpose?
   - **Does this vary with customer type and/or active/inactive benefits?**

4.3 What do you discuss with customers during the meeting?
   - **What is the main focus of the meeting?**
   - **What influence do customers have in deciding what is discussed?**

Benefit claim

4.4 What is the procedure for checking customers’ benefit claim forms?
   - **What supporting evidence do they supply?**
   - **Is it sufficient? If not what happens next and how is this resolved?**
   - Do FAs ask any supplementary questions to verify or check the information provided?
   - Have FAs ever discovered information concealed by the customer during routine checking, and how do they go about verifying this?

4.5 What supporting evidence do you ask for to check the customer’s identity?
   - **Do they supply sufficient evidence? If not what happens next and how is this resolved?**
4.6 What role do you feel Financial Assessors play in detecting fraud and error?
- Explore perceptions of importance of FA role in fraud and error
- How does this fit with other responsibilities
- Explore understanding of MVFE (monetary value fraud error) role as a Key Work Objective for FAs
- Explore whether they remind customers of the responsibilities they carry as a benefit recipient e.g. reporting changes in circumstances, does this vary by client group?

4.7 How do you identify a claim that might be fraudulent or contain an error?

4.8 Can you describe what happens when you identify a need for a Gateway Intervention?
- Explore procedure for setting up FA meeting when Gateway Intervention required-explore role of FCO/FA.
- Probe on when FCOs flag the necessity for a GI-. Explore process when GI identified at FCO stage.
- Explore process when GIs are identified by FA
- Explore FA ability/confidence to identify need for Gateway Intervention
- Explore process when an error is identified
- Any problems/difficulties with the process?
- Explore when FAM undertakes Gateway Interventions-any problems/difficulties with the process
- When might a FAM as opposed to a visiting officer conduct a home visit? Explore any change in frequency of home visits since rollout? - Explore FAMs confidence in terms of conducting visit. Any problems.

Explore other actions e.g. referral to Counter Fraud Intelligence Service-what happened, collect examples for the types of claims referred.

4.9 How confident do you feel about picking up on fraudulent claims?
- Explore level of FA benefit knowledge to identify inconsistent information
- Explore confidence to raise fraud/error with customers
- Explore satisfaction with guidance
- In what circumstances might you withhold a payment?
- Explore under what circumstances FAM may carry out the role of a FA (checking evidence/claim form etc).

4.10 Do you think the processes for checking identity and benefit claim forms are working in terms of eliminating benefit errors and fraud?
- Is there room for improvement, and if so, what improvements could be made?
- How could FAs do more to impact on immediate error or fraud?
Information and Advice

4.11 What information or advice do you give to customers?

- Specialist or general benefit advice
- Explanation of housing benefit/new tax credits (Working Tax Credit/Child tax Credit)
- Any signposting to other services?
- How is this advice tailored to meet the customers’ needs?

4.12 How confident do you feel about giving benefit information and advice to customers?

- Explore levels of benefit knowledge/expertise across all benefit types
- Explore differences in dealing with different customer groups,

4.13 What happens when a customer presents a problem or issue that you’re not familiar with?

- Information sources accessed
- Steps taken to find the information
- Any gaps in information?
- What are the responsibilities of the claimant when a problem/issue arises?

Part 5: Ending the meeting

5.1 How does the conversation end?

- What information is given to customers about their benefit claim:
  - type of benefit?
  - anticipated amount of benefit?
  - expectation of when will receive benefit?
- Follow-up arrangements
- Formal or informal agreements
- What information is passed on to the PA?

5.2 Do you ever see customers who you think should have had their WFI deferred?

- IF YES: What do you do in these circumstances?
- Is this information passed on to the PA?

5.3 How is the customer handed over to the PA?

- How is the WFI explained to customers?
- How confident are FAs in explaining the mandatory nature of the WFI?

5.4 In what circumstances would you meet with customers again after the work-focused interview?

- What is discussed on these occasions?
5.5 What happens next to the benefit claim?
- How is the information processed?
- How is the information passed onto benefit processing colleagues? Any problems/difficulties?
- What happens in circumstances where outstanding evidence is required? Explore understanding of FA and benefit processor roles in these circumstances.

5.6 How long do meetings with customers tend to last?
- Identify factors that influence length of meetings?
- Who determines the length?
- On average do lengths vary for different customer groups? What are typical lengths for meetings with sick and disabled customers?

5.7 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a FA meeting with customers?
- Explore outcomes for specific customer groups
- Explore FA perceptions of successful outcomes e.g. discovering an undisclosed fact that means benefit is not paid

Part 6: Overall views

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:
6.1 How has the way you conduct FA meetings with customers changed since July 2003?
- Why? How is this better/worse?
- Collect concrete evidence by example

ASK ALL:
6.2 How close are you to delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision?
- Explore perceptions/understanding of the vision
- [ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY] To what extent have you moved closer since July 2003?
- [ASK AT DAY 2 ONLY] To what extent have you moved closer since roll out?
- What still remains to be done?

6.3 How successful do you feel the delivery of benefit services to customers under Jobcentre Plus has been so far?
- Identify any difficulties/problems in delivering the benefit element and reasons why
- Does the delivery process emphasise getting the claim paid quickly or to confirm entitlement?
6.4 What aspects of Jobcentre Plus do you feel work particularly well, and why?
   – Explore what works well for different customer groups and for staff?
   – And what works less well, and why?

6.5 How could FA meetings with customers be improved?

ASK AT PATHFINDERS ONLY:

6.6 What are the main lessons that have been learnt over the past year?

ASK ALL:

6.7 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the rollout of further Jobcentre Plus offices?

6.8 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

THANK AND CLOSE
Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is:

• to assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices and new offices are delivering to policy intent;

• interviews with FCOs seek to understand exactly how Jobcentre Plus services are being delivered in Contact Centres.

Interviews will cover the following topics:

• the content of First Contact conversations in terms of:
  – benefit claim;
  – detecting fraud and error;
  – discussing work;
  – job search;
  – how the conversation ends;
  – arranging the WFI;
• staff views about the first contact stage and its delivery;
• staff views about any changes implemented and progress towards the vision;
• good practice and lessons learnt.

Part 1: Introductions

• Introduction: yourself, independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.

• Purpose of the research:
  – to see how the delivery of Jobcentre Plus has changed/developed.
  – to see whether Jobcentre Plus is being delivered to policy intent and explore staff views of the delivery and impact of Jobcentre Plus.

• Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff.

• If re-interviewing the same member of staff say that the interview will repeat some questions which were asked last time, but that it is important to go through things again in order to see what changes have occurred.

• Stress confidentiality of the interviews.

• Ask permission to tape the interview.
NOTE:

- Where appropriate, explore differences in the delivery of First Contact services to each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, widows) and the FCO’s confidence, ability and experience in delivering to these groups.

**Part 2: Background**

2.1 How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus?
   - Confirm length of time in current role and previous roles held

2.2 What are your main roles and responsibilities as a First Contact Officer?
   - Collect a brief overview of the job
   - Explore any specialist roles or responsibilities

2.3 Have your roles and responsibilities changed or developed since July 2003?
   - Why?
   - Views towards this – positive/negative?

2.4 What are the key changes you envisage happening to your call centre over the next year?
   - What processes/practices/training has been put in place to begin to accommodate these changes?

2.5 Do you feel you have any current training needs in respect of Jobcentre Plus or your specific role as a First Contact Officer?
   - What areas of training and why?
   - Any particular customer circumstances or customer types where more support/advice/training is needed?
   - How would this help with undertaking the FCO role?
   - Are there any plans in place to provide this?

2.6 Have you received any feedback or good practice from IB pilots to help deal with IB customers?

2.7 To what extent are the work-focused ‘must dos’ used to guide practice?
   - How clear/workable are they in practice?
   - Why are they/why are they not being used?
   - How is awareness raised among staff?

2.8 How do you handle ‘down time’? How are you advised to use this time?
   - Any problems/solutions?
**Part 3: Content of First Contact Telephone Conversations**

**Explore differences in the delivery of First Contact services to each individual customer group (JSA, lone parents, sick and disabled, carers, and widows)**

3.1 Can you describe how conversations with customers who want to start a new or repeat claim for benefit begin?

3.2 What do you discuss with customers during the telephone conversation?
   - What is the main focus of the discussion? (E.g. benefit claim, work/job search, work-focused interview, capturing customer details)
   - What influence do customers have in deciding what is discussed?
   - Explore differences in content for different customer groups

**Benefit claim**

3.3 How do you determine customers’ benefit needs?
   - Do you take the customers’ lead?
   - What information do you need to collect from customers?

3.4 What information or advice do you give to customers about benefits?
   - Information/advice on Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit
   - Any signposting to other services?
   - How is this advice tailored to meet the customers’ needs?

3.5 How confident do you feel about giving benefit information and advice to customers?
   - Explore levels of knowledge/expertise across all benefit types/dealing with different customer groups
   - Determine where this confidence comes from and any perceived areas of weakness

**Detecting fraud and error**

3.6 What role do you feel First Contact Officers play in detecting fraud and error?
   - How does this fit with other responsibilities?

3.7 How do you identify a claim that might be fraudulent or contain an error?
   - What information/factors considered?
   - Explore FCO confidence in identifying the need for Gateway Interventions
3.8 What happens if you suspect a claim to be fraudulent or to contain an error?

- Explore the process if a fraudulent claim is suspected? E.g. completing a JCP 7 form/notifying FA.
- Has this procedure changed- how and why? Any difficulties with this process?
- What information is passed onto PAs?

3.9 How confident do you feel about picking up on fraudulent/erroneous claims?

Discussions about work

3.10 How do you introduce the subject of work in the conversation?

3.11 What do you discuss with customers in relation to work?

- What topics are covered e.g. employment history, career aspirations
- What information or advice do you to give customers about work and job search?

3.12 How does the discussion vary for different customer groups? And why?

3.13 What information is given about new tax credits?

- Explore FCO levels of knowledge / expertise/confidence in giving information on new tax credits

Job search/job submissions

3.14 How do you decide whether or not it is appropriate to conduct a job search for a customer?

- Establish whether job search is being conducted by FCO - Explore differences for individual customer groups
- What information is collected?
- Collect examples of circumstances when job search would be conducted - and reasons why

3.15 To what extent are you able to conduct job searches for all customers?

- What factors influence your ability to conduct job searches? (E.g. FCO confidence, experience, perceptions of the job readiness of different customer groups.)

3.16 How do you decide whether to submit customers to vacancies?

- Establish whether customers are being submitted to job vacancies- Explore differences for individual customer groups
- What information is collected?
- Collect examples of circumstances when job submissions would not be undertaken- and reasons why
3.17 Do you see job submissions as an important part of your role?
   - What actions are taken following unsuccessful job submissions e.g. who provides the client with feedback/Is info passed on for Fortnightly Job Reviews?

3.18 What further contact do you have with customers after First Contact?
   - Does the FCO contact customers if any suitable vacancies came up?
   - What do you understand to be the purpose of caseloading?
   - How is caseloading explained to customers?
   - Explore differences for individual customer groups

3.19 Is there anything else that you discuss with customers?

3.20 To what extent do you use the VANTIVE scripts to guide the conversation?

3.21 What happens when a customer presents a problem or issue that you’re not familiar with?
   - Information sources accessed, including colleagues
   - Steps taken to find the information
   - Gaps in information

### Part 4: Arranging the WFI

4.1 What do you believe the purpose of the FA meeting and the work-focused interview to be?
   - Does this vary by client type or active/inactive benefits?

4.2 What information do you give customers about the FA meeting/work-focused interview?
   - At what point in the conversation is the work-focused interview raised?
   - How do you explain the purpose of the interviews to customers-words/phrases used?
   - What other information is given to customers? E.g. length of meetings, mandatory requirement to attend/sanctioning/benefits not being processed if customer fails to attend?
   - Explore differences for individual customer groups

4.3 How do you feel about explaining the work-focused element of the Personal Adviser meeting to customers?
   - Explore confidence of FCOs in explaining mandatory nature of WFI and implications of failing to attend.
   - Are there any differences in confidence to explain to different customer types and/or active/inactive benefits?
4.4 What is the current procedure for setting up work-focused interviews with advisers and who is responsible for this?

- How are PAs allocated to customers – customers booked to any PA or to specialist PAs?
- Explore FCO knowledge of specialist PAs in public offices
- What kind of information is passed onto the FA and PA? Do you think this helps them to deal with the customer?
- Is consideration given to allowing sufficient time for the customer to collect the necessary information/evidence for the FA meeting?

4.5 How do you feel this works? Why do you say that?

4.6 How do you decide whether or not to defer/waive a customers’ WFI?

- Explore FCO’s confidence to defer/waive customers’ WFI and explain it to customers

### Part 5: Ending the conversation

5.1 How does the conversation end?

- What information is given to the customer?

5.2 How long do telephone conversations with customers tend to last?

- Identify factors that influence length of meetings
- Who determines the length?
- On average do lengths vary for different customer groups? What are typical lengths for conversations with sick and disabled customers?
- Under what circumstances are call backs offered?

### Part 6: Overall views and impact

6.1 How has the way you conduct first contact telephone conversations with customers changed over the past year since July 2003?

- Why? How is this better/worse?
- Collect concrete evidence by example

6.2 How close are you to delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision?

- Explore perceptions/understanding of the vision
- To what extent have you moved closer over the past year since July 2003?
- And what still remains to be done?

6.3 What aspects of Jobcentre Plus do you feel work particularly well, and why?

- Explore what works well for different customer groups and for staff?
- And what works less well, and why?
6.4 What do you regard as a successful outcome following a First Contact conversation?
   – *Explore outcomes for specific customer groups*

6.5 How could first contact telephone conversations with customers be improved?

6.6 What suggestions or examples of good practice do you have that would be useful for overcoming problems in the rollout of further Jobcentre Plus offices?
   – *Explore main lessons learnt over the past year*

6.7 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**THANK AND CLOSE**
Appendix G
Recruitment questionnaire
Jobcentre Plus Evaluation – Phase 4

RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CUSTOMER DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Introduction

- Introduce self and research organisation.
- Explain that the Department for Work and Pensions recently sent them a letter asking if they would be interested in taking part in some research which looks at the new services provided at their local Jobcentre Plus office, and that ECOTEC/Insite are carrying out the research interviews for DWP – check whether they recall receiving the letter.
- The research is being conducted among people who recently made a new claim for benefit and who attended (or are due to attend) a meeting at their local Jobcentre Plus office with a Personal Adviser.
- The aim of the research is to find out what people think about the new services being provided.
- May I ask you a few questions first to check if you would be eligible to take part? (Please emphasise that this is an initial screening questionnaire, not the main interview.)

Reassure if necessary:

- It will only take a couple of minutes to answer.
- All answers are completely confidential, are for ECOTEC’s use only and will not be passed onto any third party.

1. Have you had an interview within the last 3 or 4 months, or are you waiting to have an interview at your local Jobcentre Plus office with a Personal Adviser **TICK ONE BOX ONLY**

   Yes [ ] Go to 2

   If YES can you recall when it was/is due? (WRITE IN)

   No [ ] CLOSE

2. And at which Jobcentre Plus office did you attend/are you due to attend? **ENSURE THAT THE JOBCENTRE THEY WENT TO/ARE DUE TO GO TO IS THE CORRECT JOBCENTRE PLUS SITE FOR YOUR AREA.**

   Yes, is the correct site [ ] Go to 3

   No, is not the correct site [ ] CLOSE
3. Who else lives with you in your household? **TICK ALL BOXES THAT APPLY**

- Nobody else
- Cohabitant/Partner/Spouse
- Son(s)/daughter(s) aged under 16
- Son(s)/daughter(s) aged 16+
- Parent/Parent-in-law
- Brother/Sister/Brother-in-law/Sister-in-law
- Grandchild
- Other related (WRITE IN)
- Boarder/lodger
- Friend/House mate
- Other unrelated (WRITE IN) ............................................

4. Do you have an illness, health problem or disability that affects your ability to take-up paid employment? **TICK ONE BOX ONLY**

- No
- Yes

**IF MENTIONED, WRITE IN TYPE OF ILLNESS/DISABILITY** .................................................................

5a. Do you care for someone either in your family, or household, or for a friend who is sick or disabled? **TICK ONE BOX ONLY**

- No
- Yes

**IF MENTIONED, WRITE IN WHO THEY CARE FOR** ...........................................................................
5b. *IF YES AT 5a ASK* Do you care for this person for 35 hours or more per week, which affects your ability to take up paid employment? 
*TICK ONE BOX ONLY*

Yes [ ]  
No [ ]

6. Can you tell me which of the following benefits you made a claim for when you visited the Jobcentre Plus office? *REASSURE IF NECESSARY*  
Don’t worry if you are not sure. *READ OUT. TICK ONE BOX ONLY*

- Jobseekers’ Allowance [ ]
- Income Support [ ]
- Incapacity Benefit [ ]
- Carer’s Allowance [ ]
- Bereavement Benefits [ ]
- Don’t know [ ]
- Other (WRITE IN) ............................................

7. And what benefits are you now receiving? *REASSURE IF NECESSARY*  
Don’t worry if you are not sure. *READ OUT. TICK ONE BOX ONLY*

- Jobseekers’ Allowance [ ]
- Income Support [ ]
- Incapacity Benefit [ ]
- Carer’s Allowance [ ]
- Bereavement Benefits [ ]
- Don’t know [ ]
- Other (WRITE IN) .............................................
Appendices – Recruitment questionnaire

8. And finally, which of the following age groups do you fall into? **READ OUT. TICK ONE BOX ONLY** (or write in age if given)

- 18-24
- 25-39
- 40-49
- 50-60/65

(Write in age if given)

CHECK CUSTOMER TYPE AND QUOTA:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit Claimed (from sample list)</th>
<th>People in Household</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>No. Interviewees Required (per Public Office)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jobseeker</td>
<td>JSA</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone Parent</td>
<td>Income Support</td>
<td>Child/children aged under 16, and no partner/spouse</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick or disabled</td>
<td>Incapacity Benefit or Income Support</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Has an illness, health problem or disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer</td>
<td>Carer’s Allowance</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Is responsible for caring for a sick or disabled person for 35+ hours/week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total = 13

IF NOT NEEDED, THANK THEM FOR THEIR TIME AND CLOSE.

IF ELIGIBLE, WILLING TO TAKE PART AND NEEDED - RECRUIT:

- **Provide an outline of the study:** the Department for Work and Pensions want to improve the services provided to people claiming benefit. They are funding [Research Organisation] to talk to people like yourself to find out more about your experience of the new services provided by Jobcentre Plus.

- We are particularly interested to find out whether you found the service useful, whether it was tailored to your needs and whether the service made you think differently about being on benefit and looking for work (either now or in the future).
Arranging an interview appointment:

- Check fieldwork schedule and let them know when we will be in the area.
- Agree a date and time for the interview to take place and give the name of the researcher that will be visiting.
- Ensure that appointment date is after their work-focused interview.
- When recruiting emphasise the £15 cash gift for the customer’s time, but that this will not affect their entitlement to benefits.
- Inform that will confirm details in writing.

APPOINTMENT DATE & TIME: ............... April/May 2004, at ............ am / pm.

NAME: Mr / Mrs / Ms .................................................................

ADDRESS: ..................................................................................
..................................................................................
..................................................................................

TEL. NUMBER:

CUSTOMER TYPE: Jobseeker [ ] Sick/disabled [ ]
Carer [ ] Widow [ ]

Thank respondent, leave contact name and tel. number and send confirmatory letter.
Appendix H
Topic guides for interviews with Jobcentre Plus customers
Topic Guide for Jobseekers Allowance Customers

Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is:

- to explore ongoing progress in delivering to the policy vision across offices at different stages of the national rollout of Jobcentre plus.

The specific objectives of the customer research are to:

- establish in a chronological sequence of ‘what happened next’, the exact nature of the actual service which customers received, at all stages of the process;
- explore customers’ views of the service they received;
- explore the impact of the Jobcentre Plus service on the customers’ attitude to work and benefits; and
- explore customer perception of PA’s knowledge and understanding of their circumstances.

Note:

- Where interviewee expresses dissatisfaction with any aspect of the process or their experience, please explore how this impacted on their attitude and behaviour towards staff and other customers.

Part 1: Introductions

- Introduction: yourself, independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.

- Purpose of the research:
  - to improve the services provided to people claiming benefit; to find out more about customers’ experience of the Jobcentre Plus service and whether the service received was appropriate to their needs.

- Stress confidentiality of the interview.

- Ask permission to record the interview.

- Check details on telephone screener Age, benefit claimed.
Part 2: Background

[Note: ensure that the customer is referring to their most recent claim]

2.1 What were the background circumstances leading up to the most recent claim for benefit?
   – Nature of health problem, caring responsibilities, reason why job ended?

2.2 What were the customer’s immediate plans at the time of making the claim?
   Probe:
   – Job search strategies
   – Action taken prior to meeting with personal adviser
   – Type of work sought
   – Any barriers to finding appropriate work
   – Establish whether customer felt ready to work at time of claim. (i.e. appropriateness of JSA)

2.3 Establish whether the recent claim was the first time that the customer had made a claim through the Jobcentre Plus process? Have they ever claimed benefit before?

Tell the customer that the interview will go through each stage of the process, in detail, in order to establish exactly what services they received.

Part 3: First Contact

Objective:
– to establish the route customers took to get to the Contact Centre
– to establish the exact content of the telephone conversation; customer’s understanding of the process; and their views of using a telephone service.

3.1 Who did they contact initially about their recent benefit claim?
   e.g. - telephoned the Contact Centre
   – visited or telephoned a Jobcentre Plus public office
   – visited or telephoned an ex-BA office
   – contacted others e.g. social workers, charity, medical professional
IF DID NOT TELEPHONE THE CONTACT CENTRE DIRECTLY:

3.2 Explore fully what information were they given about what they needed to do and what happened next

E.g.
- given the Contact Centre telephone number to call
- were directed to a ‘warm phone’

3.3 How did they feel about using a call centre as part of the process of making a benefit claim?

- Explore perceptions – effective, easy, difficult confusing, role within process – is it a good idea?
- Explore any impact on attitude/behaviour towards FCOs

Part 4: Content of conversation with First Contact Officer

4.1 What information was collected by the FCO about their personal details?

E.g.
- Name, NI number etc.
- Current circumstances/reason for type of benefit wanting to claim
- Change in contact details

4.2 What questions were asked/information given during the telephone conversation about benefits?

- How did you decide which benefit to claim? Influenced by customer or FCO?
- Did the benefit claim identified change after discussion with the FCO?
- Any difficulties in identifying which claim was most suitable?
- What information/advice were they given about benefits they could apply for?
- How confident was the FCO in offering advice?
- Were they told anything that you did not already know?

4.3 What questions were asked/information given during the telephone conversation about work?

- To what extent was work discussed?
- What areas were covered?
  E.g. customer’s employment history, previous experience, aspirations?
- How did they feel about discussing work?
4.4 Were any jobs suggested that they could apply for?
   - Explore whether a job search conducted
   - Who instigated the job search? – how did customer feel about this?
   - Was any other job search action suggested that the customer should take?
   - Did they feel it was appropriate to do a job search at that point in their claim?

4.5 Did you apply for any jobs - if yes, what jobs?
   - Who instigated the job submission?
   - How did the customer feel about job submission?
   - Was information given about the jobs/what would happen next?
   - Did the customer attend the interview-if not why? Any actions as a result of not attending e.g. sanctioning/benefit not being processed.
   - If unsuccessful, what feedback was given/by whom?

4.6 Did the FCO tell them that they would be contacted if any vacancies came up?
   - Explore caseloading at the first contact stage
   - How did the FCO explain this?
   - What information was given?
   - What was the customer’s understanding of these arrangements?

Part 5: Arranging an appointment

Next Steps

5.1 What information were they given about attending an interview/appointment at the Jobcentre?
   ** ** Probe fully** **
   - the purpose of attending an interview
   - how long the appointment would be for
   - who they would be seeing (a Financial Assessor and a Personal Adviser)
   - was it explained that it was compulsory to attend the meeting.
   - Any information on the need to notify change in circumstances?

5.2 How did they feel at the time about having to attend a work-focused interview?
   - Was it appropriate?
   - Explore attitude towards work at time of WFI
   - Explore any impact on attitude/behaviour towards Jobcentre Plus staff
If customer has limited understanding of what a WFI is, please explain that a WFI is an interview with a Personal Adviser at a Jobcentre Plus office to discuss your personal circumstances and any support that you might need in moving back into work.

5.3 What were they told would happen if you did not attend the meeting at the Jobcentre Plus office?

*Probe:*
- What did they think would happen?
- Why did they think this?

**Booking set up**

5.4 Was the first offered appointment time/date taken?

*Probe:*
- Was it convenient, was the appointment set up efficiently?
- Reason for not taking first appointment
- If appropriate: explore any customer perception of need for deferral at this point

5.5 How many days later was the appointment scheduled for?

- Any delays in arranging an appointment?

5.6 How did the conversation end?

- Were they told what information they would receive in advance of the meeting?
- What information were they given with regards to completing claim forms e.g. were they told to complete claim forms before the meeting?

**Receiving documentation/ evidence required**

5.7 What written information did they receive in advance (either in the post, or in person – if first contact was made at a Jobcentre Plus office)?

*Probe:*
- Relevant claim forms
- letter confirming appointment details
- any problems e.g. didn’t receive claim forms, had to re-arrange appointment date?
- Was there sufficient time to complete claim forms prior to attending the Jobcentre?
5.8 What were they told about what to take to the interview and where to go?

   e.g. proof of identify, sick notes, completed claim forms.

   Probe:
   – Was the customer clear about what they had to bring?
   – Any difficulties encountered in collecting the information, completing the forms?

### Part 6: Overall Views and understanding of process

6.1 What was the customer’s overall understanding of what would happen next?

   E.g.:
   – regarding what would happen at their appointment:
   – regarding their benefit claim
   – understanding of FA meeting
   – understanding of WFI/Personal Adviser meeting - explore awareness of mandatory requirement to attend the WFI.

6.2 Did they clarify/ask questions about the information they were given?

   If not: why not? e.g. weren’t given the opportunity, didn’t feel able to

6.3 What were their overall views of the telephone procedure?

   Probe: Preference, convenience, length, and any probs.

   E.g.:
   – telephone as opposed to face to face
   – more/less convenient – why/why not?
   – length of telephone conversation
   – any problems encountered

6.4 How useful did you find the service that you received at the Contact Centre?

   – Probe: content of conversation; views on service provided by staff e.g. helpful, efficient, knowledgeable etc

6.5 What do you think of this aspect of the new service compared to the old Jobcentre/Benefits Agency service?

   – If dissatisfied-explore impact on behaviour and attitudes towards staff and other customers.
Part 7: Arrival at the Jobcentre

Objective: to explore exactly what happened upon arrival, perception of the Jobcentre environment safety and efficiency of process.

7.1 Were there any difficulties in attending the meeting at the time and date arranged?
   - Explore circumstances/reasons if an appointment was missed
   - Explore impact of missing appointment on processing of benefit

7.2 What did they think of the office when they first arrived?
   
   Explore:
   - Perceptions upon arrival of the office environment
   - How did it make them feel? – did they feel it was a safe environment?
   - Awareness of safety features e.g. security guards, CCTV – how did this make them feel?
   - If they express any concerns over safety - What could be done to enhance safety?

7.3 What do you think of the new environment compared to the old Jobcentre/BA office?
   - Prompt: absence of screens
   - How does the new environment impact on customer attitudes and behaviour towards staff and customers and views of the service?

7.4 What happened when they first arrived?
   
   E.g. –
   - Contact with Floorwalkers, reception staff and help received
   - Were they kept waiting for their appointment, or was it on time?
Part 8: Meeting with Financial Assessor

Objective: to explore exactly what happened during the FA meeting; customers' views of the service; and how customers were moved through the Jobcentre Plus process i.e. reception to FA to PA.

Checking Claim Forms

8.1 Did they see somebody who checked through their claim form?

   Probe:
   - At what point did this happen? e.g. on arrival, before/after Personal Adviser meeting
   - Was it a different person to who they saw for the other meeting (i.e. the WFI)?
   - Did they explain what their role was and how it fitted in within the process

8.2 Had they been able to complete the form prior to the meeting?

8.3 Had they brought all the necessary forms and supporting evidence with them?

   - If not: why not? e.g. forgot, had not been told to
   - If not: How was this resolved, did they have to rebook the meeting, i.e. go away and come back again with information for verification or were substitute documentation used?

8.4 What questions were asked/information given during the Financial Assessor meeting?

   **Probe fully**
   - checking of supporting evidence (sick note, proof of ID)
   - discussion about benefit entitlement

Information provided

8.5 What information/advice was given about any other benefits they could apply for?

   - Any information on new tax credits? (Working Tax Credit/Child Tax Credit)

8.6 Was the financial assessor familiar with their case/details?

   Probe: did the financial assessor appear to be confident in dealing with your benefit claim/circumstances?

8.7 How did the customer feel about talking about their finances – why?
IF NOT ALREADY MENTIONED:

8.8 Were there any complications with their claim?

Explanation of next steps

8.9 What did the financial assessor tell you about the meeting with the Personal Adviser, if anything?

Prompt:
- How was the WFI explained?
- Was the mandatory nature of the WFI explained?
- Did they hand over to PA for WFI?

8.10 What did the financial assessor tell them about the practicalities of their claim?

- Amount of money they could expect
- Payment process – when they would receive their benefits
- Any information on the need to notify change in circumstances?

Overall Views on contact with FA

8.11 What did you think of the service provided by the financial assessor?

  e.g. - perceived benefits of the service, positive/negative aspects of the service
  - why?

8.12 What do you think of this aspect of the new service compared to the old Jobcentre/benefits Agency service?

  - If dissatisfied - explore impact on behaviour and attitudes towards staff and other customers.

8.13 How long was the interview?

  - Explore views - was it sufficient?

8.14 What was the most useful thing to come from attending the meeting?

  - Anything learnt – that they didn’t already know?
  - Any other impacts?

8.15 Did the customer return to see the financial assessor after the Personal Adviser meeting?

  Probe:
  - what happened/what were they told?
  - how much benefit they would receive and when to expect it?
  - what would happen next to their benefit claim?
Part 9: Work-focused interview Meeting

Objective: to establish, in detail, the content of the Personal Adviser meeting; the extent to which the Personal Adviser meeting was work-focused; and customers’ views of the meeting.

9.1 Did they see somebody who talked about their current circumstances in relation to work and future employment options?

**Probe fully:
– At what point did this happen? e.g. before/after FA meeting
– Was it separate to the FA interview?
– Did they have to move to another desk?
– Did they have to wait?

Content of the meeting

9.2 How did the Personal Adviser explain the purpose of the interview?

– Explore customers’ understanding of purpose of WFI
– Information given on mandatory nature – consequences of not attending
– Collect words/phrases used

9.3 Was the Personal Adviser familiar with your circumstances?

– Probe: did they seem like they were prepared for the interview?

9.4 What questions were asked/information given during the Personal Adviser meeting?

– Ask customer to describe what was discussed in the meeting with the Personal Adviser.
– Probe fully – what else?

Discussions about work

9.5 How was the issue of work raised by the Personal Adviser?

– Probe fully: what words/phrases were used?

9.6 What (else) did they discuss with the Personal Adviser in relation to work?

Probe fully:
– their employment history
– their skills and experience
– their plans for starting/returning to work
– their barriers to work

9.7 How did the customer feel about talking about work?
Information/advice given

9.8 What information/advice were they given about services available through Jobcentre Plus?

Probe: - for any service mentioned what they were told, how useful was it e.g. - New Deal services
- training courses
- other one-to-one based services
- Contact details of other organisations who could help

9.9 What financial information/advice were they given about in-work benefit?

Probe: - for any advice mentioned what they were told, how useful was it e.g. – help with childcare
- information on new tax credits (Working Tax Credit/Child Tax Credit)
- Was a ‘better-off calculation’ conducted-how useful was it?

9.10 What other benefit issues were discussed?

- Explore if these were covered at the FA meeting, if not why?
- Any information on the need to notify change in circumstances?

Job search/job submissions:

9.11 What information/advice was given about applying for jobs?

9.12 Were any job searches conducted?

Probe: appropriateness of this, usefulness of job search

9.13 Did you apply for any jobs?

- if yes, what jobs?
- What was their understanding about the requirements to attend an interview?
- Did the customer attend the interview-if not why?
- Was the interview successful-have they taken the job?

9.14 Did they receive any feedback following an unsuccessful job submission?

- Was it useful, how did it help?
- Customer awareness of whether this feedback passed to other staff in the Jobcentre E.g. FJR
- Was any training discussed as a result of feedback

Overall views/ understanding of WFI

9.15 How long did the interview with a Personal Adviser last?

Probe: too long, too short – why?
9.16 What did they think of the PA work-focused interview overall?

_Probe:_
- appropriateness/usefulness of WFI - why/why not
- Personal Adviser familiarity with their case/details
- Personal Adviser understanding and responsiveness to customer’s personal circumstances, views and future plans
- Personal Adviser knowledge of services/help available
- any problems encountered?

9.17 What do you think of this aspect of the new service compared to the old Jobcentre/Benefits Agency service?

- If dissatisfied - explore impact on behaviour and attitudes towards staff and other customers.

9.18 What were they told about attending further mandatory Personal Adviser interviews in the future whilst on benefits?

9.19 Were they interested in taking up any of the services available through Jobcentre Plus?

_Probe:_ which ones and why? Under what circumstances would they take them up?

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**Part 10: Impact of Intervention**

**Objective:** Explore the impact of the meeting, including the impact on attitudes to work

**Agreed action/follow-up meetings**

10.1 What action was suggested or agreed following the WFI?

_Probe:_ for any agreed action explore appropriateness/usefulness of it/were they happy with this
E.g.: - written or verbal action plan agreed especially the Jobseeker’s Agreement
- referred to a New Deal programme
- referred to training programme/course
- referred to other services/providers
- agreed job search strategy

10.2 Was there anything that they would have liked more discussion about? If so, what?
10.3 Were further meetings offered or agreed with their Personal Adviser?

- Are they aware that they could visit their Personal Adviser at any time for further help whilst on benefits?
- Understanding of Jobseeker’s Agreement. Prompt: signing on meetings, review meetings (13 weeks and six months)
- Understanding of purpose/procedure for FJRs

10.4 What was the most useful thing to come out of the meeting for you?

- What did they gain from the meeting, key messages that they took away?
- Did the meeting change confidence/motivations/attitudes of customers (e.g. about work or training etc)
- Did the meeting change, or influence, the way they thought about anything? (E.g. childcare; part-time jobs; when they might start etc) In what ways?

10.5 Has any subsequent action been taken as a result of the meeting?

- Explore whether they would have done this anyway – with or without an Adviser meeting?

**Part 11: Keeping the Jobcentre informed**

11.1 Have their circumstances changed since the time of making your claim? How?

Probe: caring responsibilities; health; relationship with work

11.2 Do they believe that the Jobcentre has accurate information on their systems about them?

E.g. contact details and up to date record of their current circumstances?

11.3 Have they ever contacted the Jobcentre in order to inform them of changed contact details or circumstances, if so how?

- Examples of information given e.g. address, found work, change of status
- Who did they contact FCO/PA?

**Part 12: Overall Views**

12.1 What did they think about the service overall?

**Explore process and delivery**

E.g. how they felt that the process or delivery of service could be improved

12.2 Is there anything else to add?

THANK INTERVIEWEE AND GIVE INCENTIVE.
Research aims/objectives:

The overall aim of the research is:

- to explore ongoing progress in delivering to the policy vision across offices at different stages of the national rollout of Jobcentre plus.

The specific objectives of the customer research are to:

- establish in a chronological sequence of ‘what happened next’, the exact nature of the actual service which customers received, at all stages of the process;
- explore customers’ views of the service they received;
- explore the impact of the Jobcentre Plus service on the customers’ attitude to work and benefits; and
- explore customer perception of PA’s knowledge and understanding of their circumstances.

Note:

- Where interviewee expresses dissatisfaction with any aspect of the process or their experience, please explore how this impacted on their attitude and behaviour towards staff and other customers.

Part 1: Introductions

- Introduction: yourself, independent research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.
- Purpose of the research:
  - to improve the services provided to people claiming benefit; to find out more about customers’ experience of the Jobcentre Plus service and whether the service received was appropriate to their needs.
- Stress confidentiality of the interview.
- Ask permission to record the interview.
- Check details on telephone screener Age, benefit claimed.

Part 2: Background

[Note: ensure that the customer is referring to their most recent claim]

2.1 What were the background circumstances leading up to the most recent claim for benefit?

- e.g. nature of health problem, caring responsibilities, reason why job ended
2.2 What were the customer’s immediate plans at the time of making the claim?

E.g.
- to stay at home
- to look for work (paid or voluntary)
- to start some training or education
- Probe for details e.g. reasons for staying at home, type of work or training wanted

ASK IF WORK WAS NOT AN IMMEDIATE PLAN:
2.3 Was work an option at the time of making the claim for benefit?

- Probe – why/why not

ASK IF WORK WAS NOT AN OPTION:
2.4 Is work an option for you in the longer term?

- Probe – why/why not, when might work become an option

ASK IF WORK WAS AN OPTION:
2.5 Explore type of work customer is interested in and job-search activities undertaken

2.6 Establish whether the recent claim was the first time that the customer had made a claim through the Jobcentre Plus process? Have they ever claimed benefit before?

Tell the customer that the interview will go through each stage of the process, in detail, in order to establish exactly what services they received.

### Part 3: First Contact – The Contact Centre

Objective:
- to establish the route customers took to get to the Contact Centre
- to establish the exact content of the telephone conversation; customer’s understanding of the process; and their views of using a telephone service.

3.1 Who did they contact initially about their recent benefit claim?

* e.g. telephoned the Contact Centre
  - visited or telephoned a Jobcentre Plus public office
  - visited or telephoned an ex-BA office
  - contacted others e.g. social workers, charity, medical professional
IF DID NOT TELEPHONE THE CONTACT CENTRE DIRECTLY:

3.2 Explore fully what information were they given about what they needed to do and what happened next

  e.g. - given the Contact Centre telephone number to call
  – were directed to a ‘warm phone’

3.3 How did they feel about using a call centre as part of the process of making a benefit claim?

  – Explore perception – effective, easy, difficult confusing, role within process – is it a good idea?
  – Explore any impact on attitude/behaviour towards FCOs

Part 4: Content of conversation with a First Contact Officer

4.1 What information was collected by the FCO about their **personal details**?

  E.g.
  – Name, NI number etc.
  – current circumstances/reason for- type of benefit wanting to claim
  – Change in contact details

4.2 What questions were asked/information given during the telephone conversation about benefits?

  – How did you decide which benefit to claim? Influenced by customer or FCO?
  – Did the benefit claim identified change after discussion with the FCO?
  – Any difficulties in identifying which claim was most suitable?
  – What information/advice were they given about benefits you could apply for?
  – How confident was the FCO in offering advice?
  – Were they told anything that you did not already know?

4.3 What questions were asked/information given during the telephone conversation about **work**?

  – To what extent was work discussed?
  – What areas were covered? E.g. customer’s employment history, previous experience, aspirations?
  – How did they feel about discussing work?
4.4 Were any jobs suggested that they could apply for?
   - Was a job search conducted?
   - Who instigated the job search? – how did customer feel about this?
   - Was any other job search action suggested that the customer should take?
   - Did they feel it was appropriate to do a job search at that point in their claim?

4.5 Did the customer apply for any jobs?
   - If yes, what jobs?
   - Who instigated the job submission?
   - How did the customer feel about job submission?
   - Was information given about the jobs/what would happen next?
   - Did the customer attend the interview?
   - If unsuccessful- what feedback was given/ by whom?

4.6 Did the FCO tell them that they would be contacted if any vacancies came up?
   - Explore caseloading at the first contact stage?
   - How did the FCO explain this?
   - What information was given?
   - What was the customer’s understanding?

Part 5: Arranging an appointment

Next Steps

5.1 What information were they given about attending an interview/appointment at the Jobcentre?

** ** Probe fully**
   - The purpose of attending an interview
   - How long the appointment would be for
   - Who they would be seeing (a Financial Assessor and a Personal Adviser)-
     explore whether the customer was told they would see a specialist PA?
   - Was it explained that it was compulsory to attend the meeting – how did customer feel about this?
   - Any information on the need to notify change in circumstances?
5.2 How did they feel at the time about having to attend a work-focused interview?

- Was it appropriate?
- Explore attitude towards work at time of WFI
- Explore any impact on attitude/behaviour towards Jobcentre Plus staff

If customer has limited understanding of what a WFI is, please explain that a WFI is an interview with a Personal Adviser at a Jobcentre Plus office to discuss your personal circumstances and any support that you might need in moving back into work.

5.3 What were they told would happen if you did not attend the meeting at the Jobcentre Plus office?

Probe: what did they think would happen? Why did they think this?

Deferral/waiver

5.4 Was an appointment made, or was it deferred/waived?

Probe:
- Customer understanding of deferrals/waivers
- How long was it deferred for?
- Did they feel this was appropriate – why/why not?
- Were home visits offered – collect views on appropriateness of this?

Booking set up

5.5 Was the first offered appointment time/date taken?

- Was it convenient, was the appointment set up efficiently?
- Reason for not taking first appointment
- If appropriate: explore any customer perception of need for deferral at this point

5.6 How many days later was the appointment scheduled for?

- Any delays in arranging an appointment?

5.7 How did the conversation end?

- Were they told what information you would receive in advance of the meeting?
- What information were they given with regards to completing claim forms e.g. were they told to complete claim forms before the meeting?
Receiving documentation/evidence required

5.8  What written information did they receive in advance (either in the post, or in person – if first contact was made at a Jobcentre Plus office)?

Probe:
- Relevant claim forms
- Letter confirming appointment details
- Any problems e.g. didn’t receive claim forms, had to re-arrange appointment date.
- Was there sufficient time to complete claim forms prior to attending the Jobcentre?

5.9  What were they told about what to take to the interview and where to go?

  e.g. proof of identify, sick notes, completed claim forms.

Probe:
- was the customer clear about what they had to bring?
- any difficulties encountered in collecting the information, completing the forms?

Part 6: Overall Views and understanding of process

6.1  What was the customer’s overall understanding of what would happen next?

Probe:
- regarding what would happen at their appointment
- regarding their benefit claim
- understanding of FA meeting
- understanding of WFIPersonal Adviser meeting- explore awareness of mandatory requirement to attend the WFI
- explicitly explore whether new WFI regime was explained- e.g. WFI can be re-booked only once, after that customers failing to attend WFIs will have to show good cause or their claim will be withdrawn.

6.2  Did they clarify/ask questions about the information they were given?

- If not: why not? e.g. weren’t given the opportunity, didn’t feel able to

6.3  What were their overall views of telephone procedure?

  Probe: Preference, Convenience, length, and any probs.
  - telephone as opposed to face to face
  - more/less convenient – why/why not
  - length of telephone conversation
  - problems encountered
6.4 How useful did they find the service that you received at the Contact Centre?

- Probe: content of conversation; views on service provided by staff e.g. helpful, efficient, knowledgeable etc

6.5 If you are able to comment what do you think of this aspect of the new service compared to the old Jobcentre/Benefits Agency service?

- If dissatisfied-explore impact on behaviour and attitudes towards staff and other customers.

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**Part 7: Arrival at the Jobcentre**

**Objective:** to explore exactly what happened upon arrival, perception of the Jobcentre environment safety and efficiency of process.

7.1 Were there any difficulties in attending the meeting at the time and date arranged?

- Explore circumstances/reasons if an appointment was missed- Explore impact on benefits being processed

7.2 What did they think of the office when they first arrived?

Explore:
- Perceptions upon arrival of the office environment
- How did it make them feel?- did they feel it was a safe environment?
- Awareness of safety features e.g. security guards, CCTV –how did this make them feel?
- If they express any concerns over safety: What could be done to enhance safety?

7.3 If you are able to comment what do you think of the new environment compared to the old Jobcentre/BA office?

- Prompt: absence of screens
- How does the new environment impact on customer attitudes and behaviour towards staff and customers and views of the service?

7.4 What happened when they first arrived?

E.g.
- Contact with Floorwalkers, reception staff and help receive
- Were they kept waiting for their appointment, or was it on time?
Part 8: Meeting with Financial Assessor

Objective: to explore exactly what happened during the FA meeting; customers’ views of the service; and how customers were moved through the Jobcentre Plus process i.e. reception to FA to PA.

Checking Claim Forms

8.1 Did they see somebody who checked through their claim form?
    
    Probe:
    – At what point did this happen? e.g. on arrival, before/after Personal Adviser meeting?
    – Was it a different person to who they saw for the other meeting (i.e. the WFI)?
    – Did they explain what their role was and how it fitted in within the process?

8.2 Had they been able to complete the form prior to the meeting?

8.3 Had they brought all the necessary forms and supporting evidence with them?
    – If not: why not? e.g. forgot, had not been told to
    – If not: How was this resolved, did they have to re-book the meeting, i.e. go away and come back again with information for verification or were substitute documentation used?

8.4 What questions were asked/information given during the Financial Assessor meeting?
    
    **Probe fully**
    – checking of supporting evidence (sick note, proof of ID)
    – discussion about benefit entitlement

Information provided

8.5 What information/advice was given about any other benefits they could apply for?
    – Any information on new tax credits (Working Tax Credit/Child Tax Credit)?

8.6 Was the financial assessor familiar with their case/details?
    
    Probe: did the financial assessor appear to be confident in dealing with your benefit claim/circumstances?

8.7 How did the customer feel about talking about their finances – why?
IF NOT ALREADY MENTIONED:
8.8 Were there any complications with their claim?
8.9 Was the customer deferred or waived at this stage?

Explanation of next steps
8.10 What did the financial assessor tell you about the meeting with the Personal Adviser, if anything? Prompt:
   – how was the WFI explained?
   – Was the mandatory nature of the WFI explained?
   – Did they hand over to PA for WFI

8.11 What did the financial assessor tell them about the practicalities of their claim?
   – Amount of money they could expect
   – Payment process – when they would receive their benefits
   – Any information on the need to notify change in circumstances?

Overall Views on contact with FA:
8.12 What did you think of the service provided by the Financial Assessor?
   E.g. - perceived benefits of the service, positive/ negative aspects of the service
   – why?

8.13 If you are able to comment what do you think of this aspect of the new service compared to the old Jobcentre/Benefits Agency service?
   – If dissatisfied-explore impact on behaviour and attitudes towards staff and other customers.

8.14 How long was the interview?
   – explore views - was it sufficient?

8.15 What was the most useful thing to come from attending the meeting?
   – Anything learnt – that didn’t already know?
   – Any change in attitudes to work or did it lead to any other action?
   – Any other impacts?

8.16 Did the customer return to see the financial assessor after the Personal Adviser meeting?
   – what happened/what were they told?
   – how much benefit they would receive and when to expect it?
   – what would happen next to their benefit claim?
Part 9: Work-focused interview

Objective: to establish, in detail, the content of the Personal Adviser meeting; the extent to which the Personal Adviser meeting was work-focused; and customers’ views of the meeting.

9.1 Did they see somebody who talked about their current circumstances in relation to work and future employment options?

Probe fully:
- At what point did this happen? e.g. before/after FA meeting
- Was it separate to the FA interview?
- Did they have to move to another desk?
- Did they have to wait?

Content of meeting

9.2 How did the Personal Adviser explain the purpose of the interview?

- Explore customers’ understanding of purpose of WFI
- Information given on mandatory nature – consequences of not attending
- Collect words/phrases used

9.3 Was the Personal Adviser familiar with your circumstances?

- Probe: did they seem like they were prepared for the interview?

9.4 What questions were asked/information given during the Personal Adviser meeting?

- Ask customer to describe what was discussed in the meeting with the Personal Adviser.
- Probe fully – what else?

Discussions about work

9.5 How was the issue of work raised by the Personal Adviser?

- Probe fully: what words/phrases were used?

9.6 What (else) did they discuss with the Personal Adviser in relation to work?

- Probe fully:
  - their employment history
  - their skills and experience
  - their plans for starting/returning to work
  - their barriers to work

9.7 How did the customer feel about talking about work - why?

- e.g. whether able or not to consider work at this point in time
Information/advice given

9.8 What information/advice were they given about services available through Jobcentre Plus?

Probe: - for any service mentioned what they were told, how useful was it e.g. - New Deal services (NDLP, NDDP)
- training courses
- Disability Employment Advisers
- other one-to-one based services
- contact details of other organisations who could help

9.9 What financial information/advice were they given about in-work benefit?

Probe: - for any advice mentioned what they were told, how useful was it
- help with childcare
- Information on the new tax credits (Working Tax Credit/Child Tax Credit)
- Was a better off calculation conducted-how useful was it?

9.10 What other benefit issues were discussed?

- Explore if these were covered at the FA meeting, if not why?
- Any information on the need to notify change in circumstances?

Job search/job submissions

9.11 What information/advice was given about applying for jobs?

- Any discussion of job submissions/feedback from FCO stage

9.12 Were any job searches conducted?

Probe: appropriateness of this, usefulness of job search

9.13 Did the customer apply for any jobs - if yes, what jobs?

Probe:
- Appropriateness of this
- Who instigated the job submission?
- Did the customer attend the interview-if not why?
- How did the customer feel about job submission?

9.14 Did they receive any feedback following an unsuccessful job submission?

- Was it useful, how did it help?
- Was any other action taken as a result e.g. training/caseloading?
Overall views/understanding:

9.15 How long did the interview with a Personal Adviser last?

Probe: too long, too short – why?

9.16 What did they think of the work-focused interview overall?

Probe:
- Appropriateness/usefulness of WFI - why/why not
- Personal Adviser familiarity with their case/details
- Personal Adviser understanding and responsiveness to customer’s personal circumstances, views and future plans - Did they feel the PA had specialist knowledge?
- Personal Adviser knowledge of services/help available
- Any problems encountered?

9.17 If you are able to comment what do you think of this aspect of the new service compared to the old Jobcentre/benefits Agency service?

- If dissatisfied-explore impact on behaviour and attitudes towards staff and other customers.

9.18 What were they told about attending further mandatory Personal Adviser interviews in the future whilst on benefits?

9.19 Were they interested in taking up any of the services available through Jobcentre Plus?

Probe: which ones and why? Under what circumstances would they take them up?

Part 10: Impact of Intervention

Objective: Explore the impact of the meeting

Agreed action/follow-up meetings:

10.1 What action was suggested or agreed following the WFI?

Probe: - for any agreed action explore appropriateness/usefulness of it/were they happy with this
- e.g. - written or verbal action plan agreed
- referred to a New Deal programme
- referred to training programme/course
- referred to other services/providers
- agreed job search strategy
10.2 Was there anything that they would have liked more discussion about? If so, what?

10.3 Were further meetings were offered or agreed with their Personal Adviser?
   - Are they aware that they could visit their Personal Adviser at any time for further help whilst on benefits?
   - What were they told about further mandatory meetings? (e.g. lone parents – six monthly review meetings, trigger meetings. Sick or disabled clients – three year review/PCA (personal capability assessments)

10.4 What was the most useful thing to come out of the meeting for you?
   - What did they gain from the meeting, key messages that they took away?
   - Did the meeting change the confidence/motivations/attitudes of customers (e.g. about work or training etc)
   - Did the meeting change, or influence, the way they thought about anything? (E.g. childcare; part-time jobs; when they might start etc) In what ways?

10.5 Has any subsequent action been taken as a result of the meeting?
   - Explore whether they would have done this anyway – with or without an Adviser meeting?

**Part 11: Keeping the Jobcentre informed**

11.1 Have their circumstances changed since the time of making your claim? How?
   **Probe:** caring responsibilities; health; relationship with work

11.2 Do they believe that the Jobcentre has accurate information on their systems about them?
   **E.g. contact details and up to date record of their current circumstances?**

11.3 Have they ever contacted the Jobcentre in order to inform them of changed contact details or circumstances if so how?
   **Examples of information given e.g. address, found work, change of status**
   **Who did they contact FCO/PA**

**Part 12: Overall Views**

12.1 What did they think about the service overall?
   ****Explore process and delivery**
   **E.g. how they felt that the process or delivery of service could be improved**

12.2 Is there anything else to add?

THANK INTERVIEWEE AND GIVE INCENTIVE.
Appendix I
Observation guides
Notes for Observers

The aim of these direct observations is to provide the research with a concrete basis for understanding how telephone contact is conducted (with both JSA and non-JSA customers). More specifically the objectives are to determine:

- How FCOs identify the appropriate type of benefit to be claimed.
- The extent to which work is discussed and job-searches conducted.
- How FCOs explain to customers about attending a WFI and how they arrange appointments with customers.
- Indications of who defines the agenda.
- Ease of use and familiarity with IT systems and scripts used by contact centre staff.
- Other critical ‘incidents’ during the contact.

These observations will have been agreed with the relevant managers but we recommend that you explain to staff:

- that we are conducting an evaluation of Jobcentre Plus on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions;
- the purpose of the research is to understand how the initial process of contacting customers works and what it entails;
- assure the member of staff that we are in no way assessing or evaluating them or their work.

**IF POSSIBLE**, at the end of the telephone conversation spend a few minutes with the First Contact Officer to ask them for information about what the customer said that you were unable to hear and to get their views on how they thought the conversation went.

There are two elements to recording your observations:

1. Record the content of the first contact telephone conversation in full, as it happened. The aim is to provide a ‘transcript’ of the conversation, with lots of direct quotes, plus commentary on any non-verbal actions the First Contact Officer made. It is recommended that you write your notes as you go along onto a notepad and then transfer these notes onto the observation schedule. You are also asked to provide some reflection and additional observations as to how the telephone contact went, including what happened after the telephone conversation to process the customer’s details and benefit claim.
2. Complete the checklist covering the key aspects of delivery intended to take place at First Contact. As well as indicating whether a question or area was raised, please detail the context in which it was raised and the emphasis given to each aspect by the FCO or customer. Include as many quotes and phrases as possible.

Please tick box according to customer group.

- Lone Parent
- Carer
- JSA
- Sick/Disabled
- Widow

1. *Transcript* of the first contact conversation

Please record the conversation, word for word, as it occurred, noting any non-verbal actions or expressions made by the First Contact Officer. Use additional pages if required.

2. Checklist and contextual information for first contact discussions with customers

Please complete the checklist below, outlining when each aspect was raised, how, and the customer’s reaction to this. Include quotes and phrases used by the First Contact Officer and the customer to support your findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approximate length of First Contact conversation (in mins):</th>
<th>Tick or cross as appropriate</th>
<th>Outline how this was done, when it occurred in the conversation, and the customer’s reaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The FCO identifies the most appropriate benefit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer queries about benefit are addressed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is discussed at First Contact</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FCO gathers labour market information on the customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FCO discusses the customer’s current job search activity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A job search is conducted for the customer</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A job submission is made when suitable jobs are found</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer is sign-posted to work-related Jobcentre Plus services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FCO explains that a work-focused meeting is a compulsory condition of benefit entitlement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The purpose of the work-focused meeting is explained</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A work-focused meeting is booked to occur within four working days</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The work-focused meeting is appropriately deferred/waived</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Personal Adviser allocates the customer to a Personal Adviser who can meet their needs (pls indicate whether a specialist or generalist PA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The next steps are explained to the customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The customer is sent the claim forms and notification of the interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information is recorded onto VANTIVE/LMS?

The FCO records the reasons for waiver/deferral

IF POSSIBLE, AT THE END OF THE TELEPHONE CONVERSATION SPEND A FEW MINUTES WITH THE CONTACT OFFICER TO GET THEIR VIEWS OF HOW THEY THOUGHT THE CONVERSATION WENT [RECORD ANY NOTES UNDER ‘OTHER’].
A Draft Guide for Observations of Financial Assessor Interviews

Notes for Researchers

The aim of these direct observations is to provide the research with a concrete basis for understanding how face-to-face financial assessor interviews are conducted (with both JSA and non-JSA customers). This will enable the evaluation to independently assess the general assertions made by customers and assessors about the conduct and content of the meetings, and identify areas of confusion or misunderstanding. More specifically the objectives are to determine:

- How the FA starts the meeting
- How the FA determines customers’ benefit needs
- The level and type of information and advice given to customers
- How the FA checks customers’ evidence of identity
- The procedure in place for checking customers’ benefit claim forms
- What action and follow-up contact is agreed
- ‘Down-time’ spent by FAs when customers do not keep their appointments
- Indications of who defines the agenda/issues/problems
- Indications of whether the customer ‘buys into’ advice/suggestions of what to do
- Other critical ‘incidents’ during the interview

Additional elements to note in the observations include:

- Body language (moves towards or away, ‘closed’ postures etc) and eye contact
- Behavioural ‘events’ (to be questioned in follow up interviews)
- Length of meeting

Introduction to Observation

Permission to observe the meeting should have been secured with the Financial Adviser and their Line Manager beforehand. It is also imperative that we to seek the permission of customers to sit in and observe their meeting with an adviser.

- Explain that you work for [Insert relevant research organisation], an independent research organisation with no links to the benefits service, other government departments or political parties.
- Explain that you would like to sit in on the meeting to find out how they work and what is discussed.
- Assure the customer that anything discussed during the meeting will be treated as confidential and will not be shared with anyone else.
May we sit in and listen?

Check that it is OK for you to sit in on the meeting and make notes - again, reassure the individual that your notes will only record broadly what is discussed, not personal details, and will not be passed onto the benefits service or any other government department.

IF POSSIBLE, at the end of the work-focused interview try to spend a few minutes talking to the FA to gain their perspective of the interview.

There are two elements to recording your observations:

1. Record the content of the FA interview conversation in full, as it happened. The aim is to provide a ‘transcript’ of the conversation, with lots of direct quotes, plus commentary on any non-verbal actions the FA or customer made. It is recommended that you write your notes as you go along onto a notepad and then transfer these notes onto the observation schedule.

2. Complete the checklist covering the key aspects of delivery intended to take place during a FA meeting. As well as indicating whether a question or area was raised, please detail the context in which it was raised and the emphasis given to each aspect by the FA or customer. Include as many quotes and phrases as possible

Please tick box according to customer group.

Lone Parent □  Carer □  JSA □  Sick/Disabled □

1. ‘Transcript’ of the FA Interview

Please record the conversation word for word as it occurred, noting any non-verbal actions or expressions made by the FA or the customer. Use additional pages if required.

2. Checklist and contextual information for FA meetings

Please complete the checklist below, outlining when each aspect was raised, how, and the customer’s reaction to this. Include quotes and phrases used by the Financial Assessor and the customer to support your findings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approximate length of FA meeting (in mins):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The FA explains the purpose of the meeting</th>
<th>Tick or cross as appropriate</th>
<th>Outline how this was done, when it occurred in the conversation, and the customer’s reaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The FA thoroughly checks the benefit claim for content and completion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The information contained in the claim form is verified</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting evidence for the claim is collected and photocopied</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If evidence is missing, the FA tells the customer what to do and the consequences of not supplying the required information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FA advises the customer to inform the Jobcentre if there is a change in their circumstances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FA addresses queries raised by the customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FA advises the customer of the status of their claim (eligibility, amount of benefit they will receive, and when)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FA explains what will happen next with the claim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendices – Observation guides
There are no outstanding queries

FA alerts the PA if a work-focused meeting is not appropriate

The FA explains that the benefit claim is dependent on satisfactory completion of work-focused meeting

The FA explains the purpose of the WFI

The FA meets with the customer again, after the work-focused interview

For JSA customers, the FA explains that they must be available for and actively seek employment

**IF POSSIBLE, AFTER THE WORK-FOCUSED INTERVIEW ASK TO SPEAK TO THE CUSTOMER. THESE INFORMAL CHATS SHOULD BE HELD IN PRIVATE, AWAY FROM THE FINANCIAL ASSESSOR AND PERSONAL ADVISER, AND SHOULD ONLY LAST ABOUT 5 MINUTES.**

**ALSO, IF POSSIBLE, SPEND A FEW MINUTES WITH THE FA TO GET THEIR VIEWS OF HOW THEY THOUGHT THE INTERVIEW WENT.**

[RECORD ANY NOTES UNDER OTHER]
Notes for Researchers

The aim of these direct observations is to provide the research with a concrete basis for understanding how face-to-face work-focused interviews are conducted (with both JSA and non-JSA customers). This will enable the evaluation to independently assess the general assertions made by customers and advisers about the conduct and content of the meetings, and identify areas of confusion or misunderstanding. More specifically the objectives are to determine:

- How the PA starts the meeting
- How work is introduced and the extent to which the meeting is work-focused
- The level and type of information and advice given to customers
- Whether job-searches and job submissions are made
- What action and follow-up contact is agreed
- ‘Down-time’ spent by advisers when customers do not keep their appointments
- Indications of who defines the agenda/issues/problems
- Indications of whether the customer ‘buys into’ advice/suggestions of what to do
- Other critical ‘incidents’ during the interview

Additional elements to note in the observations include:

- Body language (moves towards or away, ‘closed’ postures etc) and eye contact
- Behavioural ‘events’ (to be questioned in follow up interviews)
- Length of meeting

Introduction to Observation

Permission to observe the meeting should have been secured with the Personal Adviser and their Line Manager beforehand. It is also imperative that we to seek the permission of customers to sit in and observe their meeting with an adviser.

- Explain that you work for [Insert relevant research organisation], an independent research organisation with no links to the benefits service, other government departments or political parties.

- Explain that you would like to sit in on the meeting to find out how they work and what is discussed.

- Assure the customer that anything discussed during the meeting will be treated as confidential and will not be shared with anyone else.
May we sit in and listen?

➔ Check that it is OK for you to sit in on the meeting and make notes - again, reassure the individual that your notes will only record broadly what is discussed, not personal details, and will not be passed onto the benefits service or any other government department.

IF POSSIBLE, at the end of the interview ask to speak to the customer for a few minutes – somewhere in private – to explore their perspective of how the WFI (and the FA interview if this was also observed) went. Also try to spend a few minutes talking to the PA to gain their perspective of the WFI.

There are two elements to recording your observations:

1. Record the content of the WFI conversation in full, as it happened. The aim is to provide a ‘transcript’ of the conversation, with lots of direct quotes, plus commentary on any non-verbal actions the PA or customer made. It is recommended that you write your notes as you go along onto a notepad and then transfer these notes onto the observation schedule.

2. Complete the checklist covering the key aspects of delivery intended to take place during a WFI meeting. As well as indicating whether a question or area was raised, please detail the context in which it was raised and the emphasis given to each aspect by the PA or customer. Include as many quotes and phrases as possible.

Please tick box according to customer group.

Lone Parent ☐  Carer ☐  JSA ☐  Sick/Disabled ☐

1. ‘Transcript’ of the Work-focused interview

Please record the conversation word for work as it occurred, noting any non-verbal actions or expressions made by the PA or the customer. Use additional pages if required.

2. Checklist and contextual information for Work-focused interviews

Please complete the checklist below, outlining when each aspect was raised, how, and the customer’s reaction to this. Include quotes and phrases used by the Personal Adviser and the customer to support your findings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approximate length of WFI (in mins):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tick or cross as appropriate</th>
<th>Outline how this was done, when it occurred in the conversation, and the customer’s reaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The PA explains the purpose of the meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA explains the requirement to participate in the WFI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA considers whether a waiver/deferral is appropriate and takes the necessary action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA discusses the customer’s current job search activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA collects information from the customer on work-related subjects including employment history, education, qualifications, skills, barriers to work, and the implications of caring responsibilities or health problems on ability and availability for work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA creates or updates a record of information on the customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA discusses with the customer whether work is an option now or in the future, and when this might be an option</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Details</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA explores work options with customers:</td>
<td>what work that want to do, what work they can do, new careers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA conducts a job search for those ready for work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A job submission is made when suitable jobs are found</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAs focus on an IB customer’s residual capacity not their incapacity;</td>
<td>what they can do, not what they can not</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAs challenge customers assumptions about work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAs actively promote in-work benefits and Tax Credits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAs actively promote other advantages of being in work for the customer</td>
<td>and their family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAs carry out an in-work benefit calculation, either using known figures</td>
<td>or hypothetical examples</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA actively promotes and encourages customers to take-up New Deal</td>
<td>programme support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA actively promotes and encourages customers to take up other help or</td>
<td>support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendices – Observation guides
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PA refers customer to appropriate support/provision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA develops an action plan with the customer setting out what they will do to prepare themselves for work, and what Jobcentre Plus will do to help them</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA tells the customer about mandatory Trigger meetings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA records a reminder for Trigger meetings on LMS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA offers continuing contact with the customer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA agrees further meetings with the customer before the mandatory work-focused meeting to discuss their work option (pls indicate whether meeting is with the same or different adviser. If different, note whether specialist or generalist)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PA advises the FA whether the customer participated in a WFI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**IF POSSIBLE, AT THE END OF THE INTERVIEW ASK TO SPEAK TO THE CUSTOMER. THESE INFORMAL CHATS SHOULD BE HELD IN PRIVATE, AWAY FROM THE ADVISER, AND SHOULD ONLY LAST ABOUT 5 MINUTES.**

**ALSO, IF POSSIBLE, SPEND A FEW MINUTES WITH THE PA TO GET THEIR VIEWS OF HOW THEY THOUGHT THE INTERVIEW WENT.**

**[RECORD ANY NOTES UNDER ‘OTHER’].**
References


