

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 519

A 'User Voice' study: Jobcentre Plus customers' perspective on DWP/DIUS strategy for skills

Carol Goldstone

A report of research carried out by Carol Goldstone Associates on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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First Published 2008.

ISBN 978 1 84712 410 4

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for supporting this research. In particular, Gilly Burgess, who was our key DWP liaison over most of the project, providing support and guidance on the research design, and Rowan Foster who provided many helpful comments on the draft report.

Thanks also to my colleagues at Carol Goldstone Associates, Janine Hawkins and Meena Bhagat for their assistance with preparation of the topic guides and fieldwork.

Finally, many thanks to the DWP customers who gave of their time by participating in the focus groups.

The Author

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Summary

Background

The Leitch report, published in December 2006, examined the UK's long-term skills needs. Among the recommendations, those of particular relevance to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and this research were:

- launch a new programme to improve basic skills for those out of work;
- create a new universal adult careers service;
- increase adult skills across all levels, especially for individuals with skills below Level 3; and
- route funding for adult vocational skills through Train to Gain and Learner Accounts.

Within the research context, these were tested as basic skills testing, provision of a skills adviser, skills progression and provision of a skills account for customers.

Research approach

A qualitative research study was undertaken to explore the views of Jobcentre Plus customers about the recommendations of the Leitch Review and the strategies that are being planned in response. The study comprised sixteen group discussions with Jobcentre Plus customers whose educational attainment was below National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 2.

Experience with Jobcentre Plus

Reflecting the range of respondents and the varied programmes they had experienced, there was a variation in the level of contact with the Jobcentre. These experiences informed attitudes towards further training.

Those who had a personal adviser were generally positive about the help received, although a minority were less satisfied. Many other customers would appreciate having an adviser or other allocated Jobcentre contact.

Views of, and barriers to, training

Although many respondents had positive attitudes to training, some examples were provided of training that was perceived as poor quality or not useful. Such views were possibly influenced by the fact that most group participants were unemployed and had, by definition, failed to obtain work following the course.

Attitudes to courses were not universally negative. Work preparation courses, for example, were considered to be especially useful. Key features to encourage take up of training were that it should be high quality, suitable for purpose, convenient to the customer's home to minimise travel time and costs, and result in a qualification.

Customers wanted training to be available quickly after the need is recognised, rather than having to wait. A high level of flexibility was required to meet the variety of needs and preferences. The need to start earning meant that on the job training or day release were seen as ideal options, on the basis that they did not affect income.

The greatest barriers to training were perceived to be financial – many customers would be unable to contribute even modest amounts to course fees. Other anticipated costs, including travel and childcare, were also a significant disincentive.

Barriers to work

Those lacking basic literacy or numeracy skills identified this as a barrier to finding work. Lack of basic computing skills was similarly perceived as a barrier by those seeking office work.

Other issues mentioned by customers included a long period of unemployment (especially if accompanied by other factors, such as imprisonment or drug use), having the 'wrong' address and (despite recent legislation) being too old or too young for available job vacancies. Those with children or caring for family members identified domestic responsibilities as an additional barrier to finding suitable work.

Leitch recommendations

Reactions to the four main strategies proposed by Leitch were each explored in the research.

Although the concept of **basic skills testing** met with strong approval, opinions were divided as to whether all customers should be tested or only those identified as having potential needs in this area. Testing (including explaining test results) should be undertaken with sensitivity. Suitable training packages should be very quickly available for those identified as having a basic skill need. Customers felt that, in the modern age, training for computing and IT skills was a priority.

The concept of the **skills adviser** was very popular with all age groups. It was felt that skills advisers could identify not only the skills that people lack, but those that they have and may be unaware of. The skills adviser was felt to be in a good position to give careers advice and support this with suggestions about training courses and other possible support.

Jobcentre Plus customers found the idea of **skills progression** to be the least relevant of the Leitch initiatives discussed, at least in the short-term. Their pressing concern was just to get a job, and training not specifically directed to that goal was seen as something that would be undertaken after they were in employment, rather than something to worry about now. Moreover, because they were most interested in filling the gap before retirement, interest in skills progression declined with customer age.

Many customers under 25 felt they already had good access to free training, so there was less interest from them in the idea of a **skills account**. There was more interest from the 25 plus age group who perceived themselves to have fewer opportunities to access free training. However, interest tailed off again as people got older and saw themselves as 'running down' toward retirement. Interest was most pronounced among those who had identified training that they would like to do and those who were confident that they could easily find relevant courses.

Consideration of Skills Accounts always involved discussion of costs. Customers were concerned that vouchers for training should not only cover course fees, but also incidental costs like travel, books and equipment or even childcare.

Differences between customer groups

Of the differences that were noted among particular groups of customers, **age** was the factor that most clearly differentiated the views of Jobcentre Plus customers towards the Leitch recommendations. This is partly due to the variations in the type of programmes and the access to training that are currently available to younger customers, but attitudes to training also vary with age. As people move towards retirement, they see less value in investing in training than younger people.

Conclusion and recommendations

While Jobcentre Plus customers involved in this research expressed some very positive attitudes toward the ideas for improved skills training put forward in the Leitch report, there are some caveats.

Some customers described negative impressions and experiences such as finding Jobcentre Plus staff unsympathetic and unhelpful or being sent on courses that were considered to be of poor quality. In such cases, customers were less confident that there would be appropriate recognition of their training needs and/or that courses would meet the stated objectives.

Customers in the research were happy with the idea that there should be some testing to establish if people need or would benefit from basic skills training, but there were objections to such testing being universal or compulsory.

Customers felt that course start times need to be flexible so that, if training is required, it is available immediately rather than having to wait for a course in the distant future. There were also some objections to a specific period of unemployment being needed before some courses are available.

The courses themselves should be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of those with domestic responsibility for children or other relatives. People with long-standing health issues or disabilities may also need flexibility, especially if they are unable to attend full-day sessions.

It was seen as crucial that attendance on courses should be voluntary. Customers themselves believe that compulsory courses will breed resentment and that the efforts of those who want to learn may be disrupted by those who are attending under duress.

Financial concerns were also a major issue for Jobcentre Plus customers taking up courses. The cost of the course was not the only issue as learners must also cover the cost of incidentals, such as travel, books or childcare. Customers would also be likely to reject courses if attendance would jeopardise their entitlement to benefit.

Customer reactions to the specific Leitch recommendations varied most significantly by age. In general, basic skills testing and training was most favourably perceived by young customers whereas the provision of skills accounts was of interest to older customers. Skills advisers were of greatest interest to customers overall whereas the concept of progression and continuous learning was found to be less interesting, largely because it did not address customers' immediate concerns about finding work.

The desire to start earning as soon as possible also lay behind the widespread feeling that the ideal option was a job with day release training. On the job training was also highly preferred for the same reason.

1 Background and objectives

1.1 Introduction

The Leitch Review into the UK's long-term skills needs published its report and recommendations in December 2006.¹ The review sets out ambitious goals which, it believes, if achieved would make the UK a world leader in skills. Among other things, the recommendations include a significant increase in the availability of workplace training and improved publicly funded programmes for acquiring vocational skills.

The DWP is working with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to respond to the recommendations made in the Leitch Review. As part of this policy development, DWP decided to explore the views of Jobcentre Plus customers about both the Leitch recommendations and the strategies that it is proposing in response. Carol Goldstone Associates was commissioned to undertake a qualitative research project amongst Jobcentre Plus customers and this document details the findings of that research.

1.2 Research objectives

The overarching objective of the research was to examine the views of those Jobcentre Plus customers likely to be most affected by the Leitch recommendations and the proposed policy which is being developed in response.

A number of secondary objectives were identified:

- to examine whether the proposed policies address the issues that are of most importance and relevance to customers, and particularly low-skilled customers;

¹ Leitch Review of skills, (2006) *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*.

- to explore the problems facing Jobcentre Plus customers in seeking work (and the extent to which these are driven by their lack of appropriate skills);
- to identify the type of help that Jobcentre Plus customers believe would best help them to get into employment; and
- to investigate the key issues and barriers for Jobcentre Plus customers in finding and retaining work.

2 Experience of Jobcentre Plus

2.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the background of group participants and explores their experiences of Jobcentre Plus. Although this section was initially included to provide some contextual background, it became apparent from Phase 1 that these experiences were critical in shaping not only attitudes to Jobcentre Plus (and therefore likely interest in what they were offering) but also the way that training would be perceived if originating in any way through the Jobcentre network.

2.2 Respondent background

At the start of each group, all respondents were asked to introduce themselves and briefly describe their family circumstances and work history (i.e. the type of work they had done in the past and the type of job they wanted or had recently started).

Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 64 and, reflecting this, the sample included a very wide range of family circumstances and responsibilities. As will be seen, attitudes, preferences and experiences were all shaped by these circumstances with age proving to be the most significant variable across the sample.

The length of time that respondents had been out of work ranged from a few weeks to many years and benefits received by participants included Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Income Support (IS) and Incapacity Benefit (IB). A range of benefits were represented within each group.

In line with the eligibility criteria, all participants were of low educational achievement. However, it should be noted that some of the older respondents had previously worked in jobs that would nowadays require qualifications above the minimum criteria. Examples of such experience included journalism, painting and decorating, and carpentry.

2.3 Experience with Jobcentre Plus

Customers' experience of Jobcentre Plus varied widely, in part because the nature of the relationship will depend on their benefit. For example, the frequency of visits to the Jobcentre Plus office, voluntary or mandatory participation in New Deals and access to a Personal Adviser will all depend on which benefit a customer receives.

In contrast to recent findings on satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services among customers², the experiences of customers participating in this research were largely, although not exclusively, negative. The difference may be due to the fact that, for most group participants, the endeavours of the Jobcentre Plus staff had failed to result in them finding work.

A number of causes for dissatisfaction were put forward. These included a perception that the Jobcentre atmosphere was cold or hostile, lack of privacy during interviews, a lack of continuity in the adviser seen at each visit and staff recommending that customers applied for jobs for which they lacked qualifications.

Views of Jobcentre staff varied. Some customers found them to be uncaring or unhelpful whereas others praised staff for going the extra mile to help. There were some complaints of inflexibility; for example, in the lone parents group, several mothers described how appointments were invariably made for around 3.30 pm, coinciding with the time that they had to collect children from school.

Opinions were sought about Personal Advisers. Some customers were evidently confused about whether or not the individual they saw was a Personal Adviser. Overall, however, those who were allocated such an adviser tended to have more positive views overall about the Jobcentre and the service it provided. With a small number of exceptions, Personal Advisers were highly thought of and considered a valuable help to the customer. A number of customers who saw new staff on each visit felt that they would benefit by being allocated such an individual.

2.4 Experience of Jobcentre programmes and training provision

A number of group participants had been on various courses or Jobcentre Plus programmes and their experiences affected attitudes to further training. In addition to New Deal, the training courses that customers had attended included basic skills assessments and work preparation courses which included valued features such as CV preparation.

² See 2007 Jobcentre Plus Customer Satisfaction Survey
http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_480.asp

New Deal courses were not commonly found to be useful. The main complaints related to the poor quality of the courses. Others complained that they had learned little or that the work placements had not led to permanent work. There was some scepticism that private companies were profiting from government funds by providing poor quality training for New Deal.

However, a small number of customers who were not eligible for New Deal were angry or disappointed because they were unable to take advantage of the training provision that is available under this scheme.

'It's like that New Deal, I wanted to go on that and they told me I had to wait. I had to be unemployed for 18 months. Where's the sanity in that?'

(Sheffield, 40+, Male)

Some training programmes were particularly favourably considered by those who had been on them. In particular, work preparation courses were generally considered worthwhile, especially where participants had been helped to prepare a CV, something that many of them were ill prepared to do on their own.

'The two week course, that was a good course, that. I thought, yeah, I'm going to get somewhere, handing CVs out. Actually, you know what, after I'd done that course, I got a response, I got a response back off my CV.'

(Manchester, under 25, Male)

Not all customers had been offered placements on such courses. Attitudes to this varied. For example, one participant identified interview skills as something that he felt Jobcentre Plus should train him on. Conversely, another customer had turned down the offer of such training because she felt that she already had these skills and that her time would be better spent looking for work.

A number of group participants had been given basic skills assessments and some were subsequently sent on courses.

Customers' approaches to participating in the available programmes varied from very enthusiastic to highly sceptical or unwilling. A minority unrealistically expected to undertake training only if it would lead to permanent work. As noted above, this was one of the criticisms of the New Deal programme.

Overall, customers' views of Jobcentre programmes were seldom very positive. However, it should be noted that the majority of group participants were not in work. For many, the programmes they experienced could not be deemed as highly successful as they had, to date, failed to achieve their main objective – to help them obtain a job.

2.5 Barriers to work

In order to explore what group participants perceived as their main barriers to getting work, discussions included consideration of what skills employers were looking for and the extent to which these were available within the group participants. Along

with other qualities (e.g. punctuality, reliability, team working etc) qualifications were perceived to be of high importance on any employers' wish list. The lack of appropriate qualifications or skills was perceived by respondents to be a barrier to them finding and retaining work.³

Several of the group participants had realised the importance of qualifications too late and would now like to go back to complete the missing elements of their education. They realised that this would be more difficult than completing these at school.

'I probably need to study at least three times a week. Now if I want to do that I can't go to the Jobcentre and be on Jobseeker's Allowance. I can't win. If I work I've got to earn, I've got to do more than 16 hours to be able to support myself in living, and then if I'm studying how am I going to live? Why not give us the support while we're younger? OK, they say they give it us when we're 16, but I messed up, you think you know it all when you're young, which I now know I was wrong, but, hey, you grow up and you realise that you do want to make a go of things.'

(Manchester, under 25, Female)

Those who identified themselves as lacking basic skills in literacy, numeracy or English were aware of the limitations this placed on them in the job market. Some in this situation could not think of a time when their circumstances would be improved, but others hoped to complete appropriate courses to improve those skills the lack of which was holding them back. The former group would need a high level of support and encouragement to give them the self-belief that they can improve themselves.

Apart from basic skills, the area that was most frequently identified as needing development was IT and computing. The ability to use a computer was seldom a problem for the younger customers, but older people – increasingly in the 40+ age group – had sometimes had no opportunity to learn even the simplest uses of a computer. This was a key requirement for many jobs, especially those which were office based.

It is important to note that other barriers to work were identified in addition to lack of skills which could restrict opportunities even after training.

A common problem was the length of time an individual had been unemployed as this was unattractive to employers.

³ It is interesting to note here that other recent DWP evidence suggests that employers themselves do not always place a high value on qualifications. http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_419.asp

'I think [my main barrier to work is] the length of time that I haven't worked. Because they look at you, and like I say, I was caring for father for ten years and I've had a year off since then. And they think because you haven't worked for 11 years they don't want you.'

(Cardiff, 40+, Male)

Finding work was especially difficult for individuals with particular problems such as drug addiction or a prison record. For them, training would not necessarily lead to employment.

'I've got qualifications, that's what I'm saying to you. I've got them. When I was in prison I did my qualifications in prison. There's nothing else to do but do that. And I've got good ones. So then I come out and nothing helps. They just don't want people with criminal records.'

(Lambeth, under 25, Male)

Another perceived prejudice was where a job applicant lived. The prospect of being rejected by employers because of your postcode was raised by respondents in two of the deprived areas covered by the research.

Age discrimination was frequently mentioned as a problem, despite recent legislation making this unlawful. Older people expected that employers would state other reasons for denying them a job, but they expected posts to go to younger people despite their greater experience.

For younger people, age was also a barrier. However, in this case the problem was lack of experience and being unable to get a job without it. People complained about the Catch 22 situation where you can't get a job without experience but you can't get experience without a job.

Lone parents, together with other mothers and people with caring responsibilities (e.g. caring for a partner or parent) had additional barriers because of the need to find affordable care and/or work to fit around children's school hours. Since their skills were low, such customers did not expect highly paid work and the reduced hours that they were available often made work an uneconomic prospect.

A final factor perceived as a barrier to finding work was the inability to get work in the type of job that an applicant had done before. This might be because similar work was not available in that locality or because the individual was no longer able to do that work following illness or disqualification (e.g. loss of a driving licence). For example, one respondent had been forced to give up work as a carpenter following an industrial accident. Although only in his thirties, he could not conceive that he would work again as carpentry was his only skill. He had just never thought about retraining to do anything else and this had not been suggested to him.

2.6 Initial attitudes to training

A number of participants were very eager indeed to undertake training. Not all, however, were able to undertake training and two problems were raised. The first general issue was the need to be out of work for a lengthy period before a customer was eligible for training⁴. This was roundly condemned as wrong.

'One of the things they do, once you've been out of work for about six months, you can get advice on retraining, but the trouble with that is by the time you've been out of work for six months, you get the advice and you wait for a course to start, then you do the course, you've been out of work for a year, and once you've been out of work for a year it's very difficult to get back in. It'd be a lot better I think if the retraining was available straightaway if you needed it.'

(Bournemouth, 40+, Male)

'There you go, a prime example, a person that wants to work and do some training, but he hasn't been on the dole long enough. How stupid is that?'

(Cardiff, 40+, Female)

Scepticism towards training was more pronounced among customers who had been sent on training courses, but had not found that these had resulted in finding work. One respondent was about to be sent on his sixth training course, but had yet to find a job.

Several examples were cited of customers who were instructed to go on training courses despite the fact that they had a job lined up and were to start work shortly. This was felt to be a total waste of time for both trainer and trainee.

The courses themselves were sometimes the subject of criticism if the quality of training or trainer failed to reach the expected standard.

'I did a computer maintenance course but it was a complete waste. You go in there, they're pumping music, they're smoking, drinking. Inside there the lecturer just wants some joke business. I don't even know what they thought they were playing at. Nobody learnt anything. Complete waste.'

(Lambeth, 25-40, Female)

This was not always the case. Courses were particularly warmly welcomed when they had evidently been put together with the needs of the target group clearly considered.

⁴ JSA customers need to be out of work for a period of time before becoming eligible for New Deal which includes training options. This may be the eligibility criteria to which customers in this research are referring.

'Somebody came into the school where my children are. It's a 12 week course for the things about teaching assistant, what a teaching assistant would do, which I actually applied for. ...They would run a maths and English course, as well, to give people qualifications that they need to get them started on for this training course. ...It's on a Thursday between 9.30 and 11.30 while your children are in school, so it's good.'

(Cardiff, lone parents, Female)

A number of concerns about training centred around financial and practical issues. These are considered in more detail in Chapter 5.

3 Leitch recommendations

3.1 Introduction

Following on from the Leitch Report, the policy team at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is developing and delivering a strategy to take forward the Leitch recommendations. A significant element of the User Voice research constituted discussion of the main concepts and exploration of how these could most usefully be interpreted for the target group.

This chapter looks at each of the four main strategies that have been proposed and then draws together some of the common threads evident from the reactions of respondents.

3.2 Basic skills

The Leitch report recommended that individuals who are out of work should be screened for basic skills needs at the start of their claim, rather than after six months, as at present. Where such needs are identified as the key barrier to work, customers will be referred to flexible training, alongside job search activity.

With only a small number of exceptions, group participants were in favour of the idea that basic skills testing should be widely available. There were, however, a number of caveats that would shape the way that they would prefer such testing and any subsequent training to be presented.

The issue of who should undertake basic skills training was vigorously debated. Views were split as to whether everyone should automatically be tested as part of the Jobcentre Plus registration process or whether it should be restricted only to those identified as having a possible need. Overall, group participants tended to prefer selective testing or testing available on request. One suggestion was that advisers were able to tell who might need skills training from one to one contact with the customer. The way in which customers complete their forms and deal with the adviser should, for example, make it obvious whether or not they have basic communication skills.

The stigma perceived as being attached to such testing underpinned many of the discussions. Several respondents identified their own basic skills needs – poor numeracy or spelling skills were most frequently cited. Some customers also mentioned dyslexia.

However, two respondents in one group, who had personally been tested for basic skill needs discussed their experiences. The first described her shock at being tested unexpectedly and both talked about the need for privacy and support in both testing and provision of results.

F1: *'Well, there was no warning [that I was to be tested], so it was horrible, and obviously when you're dyslexic, you've so many bad experiences at school because you're so used to not performing, and then suddenly it was like being at school again, and I was being timed and assessed. It's not good. I think if I knew about it then I would have been fine, but I was just thrown in. ...I'd rather be given out the results a little bit more discreetly.'*

F2: *'Whatever happens it has to be done sensitively, because a lot of people might not realise that they have language issues or dyslexia. I didn't discover until I was 21, ...and it can be so shocking news, so perhaps separately might be good with a bit of support and training afterwards, because I think it's no good letting someone know, and then going off you go. I didn't get any support, and it's horrible when you find out.'*

(Bournemouth, 25-40)

The preference for not undertaking basic skills tests in the presence of others was also discussed in other groups. Some respondents suggested that testing should be independently undertaken, not least because of the lack of appropriate spaces in some of the Jobcentres. Others preferred that tests should be run by Jobcentre Plus staff – personal advisers were suggested as an appropriate source since customers already had a relationship with the adviser which would make the actual test less disagreeable.

It was agreed that testing alone was insufficient but that suitable training should be offered. One respondent had, on testing, been found to have poor English skills. However, rather than be offered the remedial training he hoped for, he was recommended to apply for jobs where literacy was not deemed essential.

'I've been to the Jobcentre already and I told them, look, I'm not good at that, I can't do that. I'm not good at reading. I said, I want to go to a college...to do computer, reading, Maths or whatever. ...And they're telling me about gardening and all...Gardening? At the time I was so pissed off because I wanted to get that help. They want me to do gardening.'

(Lambeth, 25-40, Male)

Availability of good quality, targeted training was essential to make the tests meaningful. Some examples of existing good practice were given.

'There's this course with dyslexics where they teach you really good skills on how to read. Some guy did it. He said it was wicked and it's helped him with his confidence and everything. Really good.'

(Lambeth, 25-40, Female)

Although participants understood the concept of basic skills encompassing literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), there was also a suggestion that, in the modern age, computing and IT skills were equally fundamental to much employment. Testing and basic training in this area should be included as basic skills also.

There was also a suggestion, by a small number of older customers, that basic skills assessments were more appropriate for young people at the start of their working lives. They reasoned that older people had experience to offer employers and that they had managed for so long that basic skills were evidently not essential for all older workers. However, it is possible that some of these older workers had, over time, become adept at disguising their lack of basic skills. There is evidence to suggest that people who have literacy problems may be 'ashamed' to admit to them.

3.3 Skills adviser

From 2010/11, a new adult careers service will work closely with Jobcentre Plus, and a range of statutory and voluntary advice services, to help individuals get on in learning and in work. It will ensure that everyone is able to access the help they need to take stock of where they are in achieving their goals and ambitions, and to get the support they need to advance and achieve their full potential. The adult careers service will offer individuals a skills adviser, who will assist them in identifying and developing the skills that would help them get into work and to remain and progress in work.

The concept of the skills adviser was very popular with all age groups. However, an important feature of such a service was that individuals would be interested to learn not only of the skill that they lacked, but also the skills that they already possessed. In addition, the service should be tied up with some form of careers counselling, so that customers could see where their skills could lead.

Customers were split in terms of their goals. Some individuals had no firm ideas as to what type of work would best suit them. Examples were found of individuals who had never settled in a job for more than a year or two as they found each one uncongenial, but did not know what would be more to their liking. This group of customers recognised that the skills adviser could help them with careers advice. They felt that, with the proper support, they might be able to identify the sort of courses that they would need to go on to get a job that they would find fulfilling.

Another group of customers who believed the skills adviser could be of great interest to them were those who had specific aspirations, but did not know how to move towards their goal.

Some group participants, especially those in the older age groups, were interested in identifying their existing skills and seeing how these might be applied in other contexts.

'Sometimes you don't know what you're good at.'

(Cannock, 25-40, Male)

Some of the groups considered the skills that they could see fellow group members had from earlier discussion. Examples included an ability to budget (true of many of the mothers running households and their expenses), caring skills (parents and those with caring responsibilities) and the ability to work with children. Other transferable skills discussed included office skills and working with other people. Respondents reasoned that if they were able to identify these skills, a professional adviser should have no trouble in providing appropriate guidance.

However, few group participants had ever undertaken such an exercise for themselves and many had never considered working in areas outside the jobs they had done in the past.

'I've been doing decorating since I was 16 and I don't really know anything else, so I can only rely on what I do know, so I think I'm too old in the tooth to learn anything new.'

(Cambridge, Under 40 Male)

One suggested explanation for this was fear of change. It was thought that the idea of moving to something else can be very threatening after you have been doing the same job for many years.

Where the skills adviser identified a skills need in relation to a particular goal or aspiration, it was felt to be important that suitable training was readily available. There was no point in being told of a skills need unless an activity was identified to help the individual address that need.

Respondents were not greatly concerned about what type of organisation might provide skills training, as long as the training was adequate to meet the identified need. This is discussed further in Chapter 5.

The skills adviser was also identified as a possible source of help for those with ambitions to run their own business. Self-employment was an attractive option for a number of respondents, generally because of the autonomy it would provide or, for older customers, because they could not envisage successfully obtaining paid employment. Most of those with such ambitions had in mind some type of shop or bar or a vocation such as plumber, electrician or beautician.

Very few of these customers had explored the help available to run their own business and this was why the skills adviser was thought to be a suitable source for such information. Just one respondent had already resolved to start a business and had used the Jobcentre to source grants and advice.

3.4 Skills progression

Individuals can find it as hard to move from a low paying job to sustainable and better paid jobs, as to move from welfare to work. And for many, stuck in a job with poor prospects, it can be very difficult to find ways to move on and move up. Ongoing skills and training support for those already in work will help to move them further away from the risk of returning to unemployment and lift their families out of the risk of poverty.

Almost without exception, group respondents found the idea of skills progression to be the least relevant of the Leitch recommendations. This was not because they disagreed with the idea of lifelong learning, but rather because it related to some future time when the job seeker had already obtained employment and was ready to progress. For many of the unemployed customers, especially those who had been out of work for some time, this was a leap of imagination too far. Their concern was to win the elusive job so that they were no longer reliant on benefits. Only once this ambition was achieved would they be able to consider the future and the possibility of further training with any confidence.

Discussion of skills progression, therefore, tended to be quite theoretical, with respondents considering what might interest them once they were in work. However, there was general agreement – sometimes an implicit assumption – that any future training would be undertaken while in work. On the job training was clearly the preferred route for most, although day release was an acceptable alternative, provided that no wage reductions were expected.

Because of the expectation that improving one's future skills would, by definition, not happen for some time, interest in this declined with customer age. Older customers were likely to feel that they were too close to retirement age for skills progression to be relevant to them.

'It's an age thing isn't it? We haven't got time to learn anything else, we just want a job to last a couple of years of our working life. We just want a job now, tomorrow, to last us two years.'

(Cannock, 40+, Male)

Not everyone thought that skills progression was necessary or desirable. There were two types of customer who had little or no interest. Firstly, some individuals were interested only in obtaining a job that would provide them with adequate income to support their lifestyle. They wanted a job with minimal responsibility that needed their attention only during working hours. Such individuals did not seek to 'progress' in their employment and were particularly uninterested in going

'back to the classroom'. On the job training was expected, but only insofar as it would allow them to do their work. This group of people were content to stay in the same job, often for many years.

Secondly, skills progression was also perceived by some customers as being inappropriate for certain trades. Once an individual was a qualified tradesman, they reasoned, what benefit would be obtained from further training?

'You're a carpenter or a welder or something...It just wouldn't relate to a lot of people, maybe for some it would, but I'm still not really 100% sure what the concept is supposed to achieve.'

(Bournemouth, 25-40, Male)

Similarly, other types of training were unlikely to be of great benefit to the recipient as they would not actually help them to do their job better. The following quotation came from a person who had worked as a painter and decorator.

'I can't go to the customer and say, right I'm better at English, I'm going to have to charge you more.'

(Cambridge, 40+, Male)

Such views were held by only a small number of the group participants. For most people, especially those who still had some years of employment remaining, the potential of improving ones prospects once in employment was seen as desirable and many welcomed the prospect of training as a means to higher wages, increased responsibility and the possibility of a career rather than just a job. However, this was for the future and finding work remained the main priority.

3.5 Skills Accounts

Skills Accounts are seen as a key element of implementing the proposed Leitch reforms. They will give individuals greater ownership and choice over their learning, motivating them to gain skills and achieve qualifications, enter work and progress in employment. Skills Accounts will put purchasing power into an individual's hands, offering a virtual voucher of state funding, according to entitlement, to purchase relevant learning at an accredited, quality assured provider of their choice.

In general, although there were some exceptions, the youngest Jobcentre Plus customers (i.e. those aged under 25) were able to access the training they wanted free of charge. This is likely to be through New Deal for Young People (NDYP). Only those with ambitions to aim for higher qualifications, such as a degree, would be required to pay for their course. For this reason, the concept of skills accounts was of less interest to this age group than it was to the older customers.

For those aged 25 and over, training was seldom available at no cost (even though an entitlement to fee remission would be available)⁵ and a number of examples were given by group participants of training that they had wished to do but could not because they could not afford the fees and associated costs. There was, therefore, significant interest in skills accounts among these older customers.

It should be noted, however, that interest tailed off again among those who were at the top end of the age range and were very close to retirement. As discussed above in relation to skills progression, several of those close to retirement had only limited interest in undertaking any training and described themselves as particularly unlikely to take advantage of skills accounts if the relevant training was more than a very short course – anything more than one term would not be considered worthwhile by those expecting to work for no more than one or two years.

Interest in Skills Accounts was most pronounced among those who had identified training that they would like to do and those who were confident that they could easily find relevant courses.

'Because it gives you an offer of hope, to see how you feel you're getting on with it.'

(Cambridge, under 40, Female)

Those with little idea about the type of work they would like to do were less sure that they could find appropriate courses and the suggestion was of less interest to them. It, therefore, follows that this latter group would benefit from counselling by the skills adviser as a pre-cursor to identifying suitable training which could use the Skills Accounts.

Discussion of Skills Accounts always involved discussion of costs. Not only were group participants wanting to know whether all course fees would be covered by the vouchers, but they were also concerned about other costs. The usefulness of the Skill Accounts would be significantly reduced if other costs (e.g. travel, books and equipment and childcare) would still need to be met by the trainee. Financial issues (which were constantly raised during the groups) are examined in more detail in Chapter 5.

In addition, there was some scepticism from individuals who anticipated that training costs would vary by area so that the cost of their own training may not be adequately covered.

⁵ There is a universal entitlement to basic skills training through Skills for Life and an entitlement to fee remission for training to Level 2 for all those who do not already hold one. The Adult Learning Option, part of the New Deal for Skills, gives Jobcentre Plus customers the chance to take up their entitlement full-time whilst also remaining on benefits.

'It wouldn't work, because you find education and learning in Bournemouth will be really expensive, and you can go to somewhere where I come from like Sheffield, and it would be really cheap.'

(Bournemouth, 40+, Male)

3.6 Summary and general observations on recommendations

All the proposed programmes discussed in the groups were of interest to some of the participants. There was, however, an evident order of preference, i.e.:

- 1 skills adviser;
- 2 basic skills;
- 3 Skills Accounts;
- 4 skills progression.

Whereas the skills adviser was of interest to customers of all ages, other options tended to be favoured by specific age groups (see Chapter 6).

Customer reactions to each of the Leitch proposals has been described above, but there were some common features in relation to both the advisory elements and the training that would ensue.

Firstly, perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a strong feeling that participation in any of the programmes should be strictly voluntary. Mandation (e.g. non-participation at risk of benefit withdrawal) – which is already found in relation to participation of some existing programmes – was strongly rejected. It was reasoned that most people react better to being asked or advised rather than told to do something.

'If you're told to do something you're going to be dumb in saying I ain't doing it. But if you're asked if you want to do it then you'll do it. There is a difference in asking and being told.'

(Cannock, 40+, Male)

Furthermore, it was thought right that costs should be incurred only for willing participants who were more likely to interact fully with the programme. Those who had been conscripted were more likely to engage partially and get less out of the programme – and were more likely to be a disruptive influence, affecting those who wanted to learn. People remembered their experiences of disruptive pupils at school and said they had no wish to see training courses held back because of a lack of commitment from people who had been forced to attend them.

There were no strong feelings about the type of training that should be made available (see Chapter 5). There was no consistency as to the type of courses that people wanted, as Jobcentre Plus customers recognised themselves as having a variety of different needs and understood that a variety of different courses would

be needed to meet them. There was agreement that courses should be reasonably local and of high quality so that the training objectives were achieved, but no agreement as to whether they should be longer courses or shorter, full-time or part-time. There was interest in a wide range of subjects. It was of particular note that computer training (concentrating on things like Word and Excel, which would be useful in an office environment) seemed particularly popular with both men and women. Interest in computer training appeared to increase with age, probably because older respondents were more likely to be aware that they lacked relevant skills which younger people would have been taught at school.

The final general observation was that although the majority of participants were interested in the recommendations and willingly engaged in the discussion to consider how these could best be shaped to help themselves and others in similar situations, a small minority of customers, as represented within the groups, are unlikely to take up any of the suggestions willingly. This minority tended to be individuals with little idea of what they would do and those who would find many reasons why the time was not right for them. Potentially these individuals are precisely the kind of customers who could be helped by referral to the adult advancement and careers service for a discussion of job goals, aspirations, employment history and reasons for remaining unemployed.

4 Training and finance

4.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at two separate but related issues. The first section looks at the issues relating to the type of training most likely to be acceptable to Jobcentre Plus customers – for example, in terms of duration, location, style and provider. The second section discusses issues of finance and how this is likely to affect the uptake of any of the Leitch recommendations and associated training provision.

4.2 Training

4.2.1 Quality of training

Customers agreed that the most important features of any training recommended to Jobcentre Plus customers were that it should be of high quality and fit for purpose. This means that it must achieve its aims and deliver the intended instruction to customers. Many of those who were sceptical about Jobcentre Plus training had experienced poor quality training, which failed to provide the requisite education. Among the problems encountered by group participants, some of which were touched on in Chapter 3, were computer courses with fewer computers than participants; courses where the 'training' consisted of trainers instructing participants to check the internet for jobs; courses interrupted by disruptive participants; trainers spending all their time drinking coffee and not teaching; and teaching of outdated skills.

'I was involved with another skill centre that was supposed to be teaching young people how to repair cars, and they just taught them nothing at all. The guys were just having an easy day and leave the kids to play in the cars, and they were teaching them skills that were outdated, they're not used any more.'

(Sheffield, 40+, Male)

In some cases, suppliers had even failed to provide the full course (although, in others, some people had been sufficiently disillusioned to abandon the training course part way through).

Sceptics perceived such trainers as taking money from the government for little effort and were concerned why there had been no follow up to check on their satisfaction with the training they were supposed to have received.

Even allowing for significant exaggeration with these stories, it is evident that there is much current training which leaves Jobcentre Plus customers dissatisfied and poorly motivated to complete further courses.

It is important to remember, though, that the emphasis on poor quality training in these discussions does not necessarily reflect the general experience of Jobcentre Plus training. Discussions of this sort tend to emphasise bad experiences and, even with this bias there were reports of good quality training which had achieved its objectives.

Related to the quality of the training was the need for a qualification to be obtained at the end of this.

'A piece of paper so that at least then if you do leave a job you've always got that piece of paper to say well I can do this.'

(Cannock, 25-40, Female)

Very few customers were prepared to undertake training that did not lead to qualifications although, exceptionally, one older individual felt that she would be satisfied with her own self-knowledge that she had been through the training and could now do the work.

4.2.2 Flexible features of training

Group participants were asked about their preferences as regards the type and duration of training. In general, preferences reflected individual's personal circumstances, but one aspect on which there was general agreement was that the training should be within easy travelling distance of their home. Long distances meant both lengthy travel times and high costs. The distance that individuals would travel varied. However, broadly speaking, those living in urban areas expected to have to travel more (e.g. across their town or city) than those in rural areas since travel could be quite difficult in such circumstances – one participant discussed the poor transport links between her home and the nearest large town which would make training there impractical.

There were no strong feelings about who should be providing training – going to local colleges or use of private training companies were equally acceptable provided that, as noted above, the provision was of good quality.

Other issues varied significantly depending on the life style or preferences of the individual. For example, views were split as to whether full-time or part-time

courses were better and whether courses should be in daytime or the evening. There was also a great difference of opinion as to what would be the optimum length of course. Preferences varied from a few days to courses of a year or more – but it was essential that the course was long enough to achieve what it set out to do.

It is evident from this variation that there is a need for great flexibility in the types of training available, if a wide range of needs and preferences are to be met. For example, parents – especially, although not exclusively, mothers – were looking for training to fit in with their children's school hours, preferably so that they did not have to arrange after school care at all.

Most customers were keen that any recommended training should take place as quickly as possible after the need had been recognised. They did not want to have to wait for several months between becoming unemployed and going on courses. This would be demotivating and a waste of valuable time. The longest acceptable wait for most customers was three months, although a minority felt that they might have to accept a wait of up to six months because of the high costs involved in putting many unemployed people through training courses, especially if those courses were substantial.

Related to this was the small range of starting dates for many courses. If an individual was recommended to a course soon after it had started, there may be a lengthy wait before the next course started. In extreme cases, missing the start of the academic year might mean a delay of up to a year in starting a selected course. This was reluctantly accepted as a fact of life although it was far from ideal. Any ability to increase the range of starting dates would be seen as a significant improvement.

4.2.3 Training before or during employment?

Views were split as to whether training should be undertaken prior to starting work or if part-time work mixed with training was a preferable route. Some felt that they would want to complete any training they were doing before moving into employment – and indeed, the training might be key in helping them to obtain such employment – whereas others were eager to start earning at the earliest possible opportunity and preferred the part-time work route. An ideal option mentioned by some was to obtain a job which included the opportunity of day release. On the job training was also a highly preferred option, largely because this, too, ensured that the individual was earning as quickly as possible.

Group participants were asked whether, given the choice, they would prefer to retrain or to move to a different area in order to continue working in a field in which they had previous experience. Retraining was clearly preferred for the vast majority of Jobcentre Plus customers because family commitment and social ties were generally too strong for moving to be a realistic or acceptable option. This was true of all age groups.

4.3 Financial Issues

Financial issues were the most significant disincentive to undertaking training.

For many older people who had explored the possibility of training, course fees alone could be too high to make this a viable option. They believed that, unlike the under 25 age group, they would be liable for course fees – although they were aware that some courses (e.g. those put on by local authorities) were subsidised for unemployed people⁶ (see also Section 4.5). However, even low fees could preclude those who had been out of work for a long time or whose earlier employment had restricted them to low wages so that they had no savings. A small number of examples were mentioned where unwaged individuals had obtained training free of charge, but these were relatively exceptional.

In general, the cost of courses was not a concern of younger people who knew their entitlements to fee remission for some courses. However, the small number with ultimate aspirations to complete higher level qualifications – university degrees or equivalent – would be liable to the same student fees that affect those moving straight from school to university. Within this small group, few were able to obtain family help with finances and the prospect of future debt and student loans was a major disincentive to pursuing their studies.

However, course fees are not the only cost associated with training which were a concern for Jobcentre Plus customers. Any other possible call on their finances would also force potential trainees to reconsider the situation.

Among the financial issues raised by group participants were travel costs. A number who had attended previous courses reported that the standard approach was to claim travel costs back after they had been incurred. This was fine in principle but was of little help to the individual who had insufficient money to buy food at the end of the week – even a small expenditure of a few pounds was impossible when on such a tight budget. One option suggested was that course attendees could be provided with travel vouchers, possibly valid for only the appropriate dates and amounts. It was thought that this scheme would be easier to administer than claiming expenses and would enable those who did not have spare cash to pay for their travel.

Other costs were also a concern. Some courses required the purchase of books and/or equipment. One young woman was unable to take up a place on a beautician's course as she would have needed to spend a couple of hundred pounds on make up for her studies. Other courses required participants to purchase tools which was often not feasible for customers who had been on benefits for some time. While advisers have a discretionary fund that may help with these sorts of

⁶ In fact, all age groups are entitled to free training through Government Skills for Life and first level 2 schemes. Many older group participants were unaware of this and expected to have to pay for training.

costs, Jobcentre Plus customers are not always aware of the help that could be available.

Childcare was another financial disincentive. Not all parents had grandparents or willing friends who could cover their childcare while they were studying and they believed no money was available for this. There were some reports of previous schemes which had covered child care and they hoped that something similar would be of benefit to many of the parents who were Jobcentre Plus customers.⁷

The final area of finance was that of benefits. Many participants were very familiar with current rules covering the number of hours study which can be undertaken without affecting benefits. Since benefits were generally the only source of income, withdrawal of benefits – or reduction – would preclude customers from taking advantage of some courses. It was not only state benefits that could be affected (e.g. Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)) but also those administered by local authorities such as Housing Benefit (HB) or Council Tax Benefit (CTB). All were essential to maintain the fragile incomes of Jobcentre Plus customers.⁸

4.4 Barriers to training – summary

As can be seen from the discussion, there were a number of barriers to training identified by group participants. The first and most critical of these was undoubtedly financial. If the individual had to pay anything out of his or her limited budget, it was unlikely that they could afford to participate in the training, no matter how interested in it they were.

Once financial issues were resolved, other barriers would also need to be overcome. The first of these was the lack of flexibility. Courses must fit in with the individual's life style in terms of course hours, duration and start date. If any of these were wrong for the individual, they would be unable to participate in the training.

For parents, especially lone parents, child care was a real concern. Even if they had help with costs, the parent needed to be sure that the arrangements were suitable and free of problems. Training was a poor second to childcare.

⁷ All customers on full-time training are given help with travel and childcare costs. The Government also provides childcare support for lone parents participating in New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and those in work of over 16 hours through Working Tax Credits (WTC). In addition, all families with youngest child aged three and four are entitled the free part-time nursery education.

⁸ In practice, some individuals on low income will still be eligible for such benefits, while in work or studying, but not all participants were aware of this and believed that benefits would be lost. Similarly, courses of less than 16 hours per week – and some full-time training also, under specific conditions, will not affect a customer's entitlement to a benefit claim, but participants were not always familiar with these regulations.

The final barrier to training was the concern that it would not lead to employment. Several respondents had already been through a number of training courses and were still without work. This was a severe disincentive to undertaking yet more training as it was deemed to be a waste of time. Customers will need to be convinced that the training on which they are being sent will be a positive asset to their job search.

5 Differences across customer types

5.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together differences across different types of Jobcentre Plus customer. We first look at differences across the full age range of working age people and then turn our attention to special interest groups – people from black and ethnic minority groups, lone parents and those who are disabled or have health problems.

5.2 Age differences

Apart from differences between individuals resulting from different types of personality, the most significant feature distinguishing Jobcentre Plus customers was their age. Age was a much clearer discriminator than other variables such as gender or location in determining responses to the Leitch recommendations.

In general, the issues discussed here showed a gradation from youngest to oldest although a few issues (e.g. existing ability to get free training) related to the customer's specific age.

Age discrimination was an issue raised by both the youngest and oldest Jobcentre Plus customers. Among older customers age discrimination was often perceived to be the biggest barrier to employment. Despite recent legislation, employers were thought to favour younger applicants. Even if an older customer did manage to get a job, it was felt to be unlikely that employers would willingly train someone who had only a few years left before retirement. Experience was not as important as physical age.

'Your age makes a great deal of difference. All the experience you've got at the end of day don't count for nothing.'

(Harlow, 40+, Male)

Younger people felt that they too were discriminated against because of their age. However, in their case it was generally described as lack of experience.

Interest in training decreased with age. The younger customers tended to be very enthusiastic, anticipating that this would be of great value for their future. As the number of years left until retirement decreased, interest in training of any sort tended to decline also.

'Learning at this stage of your life is, you're past it, basically, it's really for the youngsters, the young.'

(Glasgow, 40+, Male)

Not all older people had this attitude. Many were willing to undertake training or retraining in order to have the chance of working again. However, there were some concerns about having to undertake training with a group who were all much younger.

'The only thing that'd put me off, if we were on a course with people in our age group then I'd do it. But I don't want to be stuck in a classroom with all the kids...it would drive me mad, that.'

(Cannock, 40+, Male)

Such a view was not confined to older people – a similar point was made by a young woman in the youngest age group:

'I feel because I'm a bit older than some of the others I'm just thinking I'm going to go back to college, I'm going to start off. There's going to be 16 year olds in the classroom and me. Even though I shouldn't care about that, I'm just going to learn. But I feel like I'm taking steps back, but even though it's for my own good, I'm going to benefit something out of it, I don't know, I just feel a bit, I don't know.'

(Lambeth, under 25, Female)

While there is no evidence that customers would decline training because they were likely to be in a class with people of vastly different ages, it should be noted that this could be demoralizing for some individuals.

Following on from the different life stages of Jobcentre Plus customers, there were definite patterns of acceptance for the different proposals coming from the Leitch recommendations, as summarised below:

- Basic skills Of particular interest to younger customers.
- Skills adviser Of particular interest to all.
- Skills progression Of particular interest to none (but more to younger).
- Skills Accounts Of particular interest to older customers.

Each of the proposals may be of interest to customers of any age but the tendency, as detailed in Chapter 4, was for interest in basic skills screening to be higher

among younger customers and the Skills Accounts to be of more interest to older customers (i.e. those unable to get free training already). It would therefore be of benefit for different proposals to be 'sold' to different age groups in different ways, highlighting the benefits to them at their particular life stage.

5.3 Ethnic minority groups

People from ethnic minority groups shared the full range of views and attitudes found among other Jobcentre Plus customers, but some also perceived that they had additional problems because of their ethnicity. Customers from ethnic minority backgrounds participating in the User Voice groups included individuals from a wide range of backgrounds including Black Caribbeans, people from the Indian sub-continent and recent migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe.

Although everyone in the groups spoke sufficient English to engage in the discussions, a number spoke halting English. They were especially interested in the basic skills programme which was felt to be a significant improvement on what was currently on offer. Timing of the basic skills programme was particularly critical for those hoping to improve their English language skills. Such training had to be offered quickly and before any other training was put in place.

For example, one young man had found where such logic had not been used under the current regime. He had recently started a course designed to improve his English, but was forced to drop out of this course in order to participate in a New Deal programme. He subsequently dropped out of the New Deal programme, partly because it was difficult for him to benefit as his English was too poor.

Within two of the groups, participants were largely from Black Caribbean communities. Some these individuals reported that they had found that low skill levels combined with their ethnicity had made finding work difficult. Examples were given of what was perceived to be racism amongst employers which these customers felt presented more of a barrier than training could overcome.

These groups considered young black men to be particularly disadvantaged because employers considered them a 'bad risk'. In addition, several of the young black men in one group had criminal records which exacerbated their problems. The combination of disadvantages – low skills, ethnicity and prison record – made it especially difficult for these individuals to turn their lives around and they were not optimistic about their futures.

It should be noted that not all individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds considered their ethnicity to be barrier to work. Others were confident that they would have no problems finding employment once they had received the training they wanted. Although it is difficult to find clear differences between those holding these diametrically opposite views, the more optimistic customers tended to be found outside of London and to have good family support networks.

5.4 Lone parents and carers

Lone parents encountered in the groups were largely, but not exclusively, mothers. The ages of their dependent children ranged from a few months to 16 years.

Inevitably, childcare was the critical consideration for lone parents, in relation to both employment and training. Parents differed in their willingness to arrange childcare. Attitudes to this were partially dependent on the number and ages of children – several children and/or those of primary age or below were more difficult to make adequate arrangements for. Not everyone had reliable family members or friends to leave children with on a regular or occasional basis and others were unwilling to ‘palm off’ their responsibilities in this way. Even where lone parents were able to find appropriate care for their children while they were training or working, the high cost of childcare could be a barrier too far.

The particular needs of lone parents were, therefore, that any training that they can take up must be built around school hours. Start and end times of courses were of particular concern, with due allowance for travel between the two locations. Any course which continued during school holidays would not be feasible for most lone parents. A course which could not meet these needs was likely to be rejected.

The problems discussed by lone parents were also shared by some two parent households and also, in many instances, by individuals who were acting as a carer for a partner or parent.

The groups also contained a number of individuals who were carers for a partner or family member. Their need to fit training and employment around their caring duties were, in many respects, similar to those of lone parents. In addition, those on Carers’ Allowance who wanted to get back to work faced difficulties with their benefit if they wanted to undertake training.

‘I went to Want To Work,...to the actual ACT course for the interview, and everything was going well, I was feeling on top of things, and then they turned round and said, well, because I’m a carer, it could affect the actual course, because you’ve got to do a full-time course, which is 13 weeks. ... So obviously it burst my bubble, so I left it at that.’

(Cardiff, lone parent, Female)

5.5 Customers with disabilities and health issues

A number of customers with disabilities and health issues were included in the groups. Some of these had been out of work for a very long time and the gap in employment was a particular problem for those who were now seeking work. In addition, customers with health issues were doubtful that employers would want to take them on, given their particular problems, despite any training they might receive.

None of the people with disabilities or health issues participating in the groups had received special help or advice from their local Jobcentre about how they could obtain training that met their specific health needs.

As with lone parents, some of the customers with disabilities or health issues had special needs in relation to training. A common complaint was that an individual would like to be trained but, because of their condition, was unable to spend a full day in a classroom. Similarly, travel was often more difficult for these customers. Training would not be acceptable unless it was flexible enough to meet their individual needs.

6 Conclusions

The User Voice study has indicated that there are many Jobcentre Plus customers who would welcome the training proposals which have followed on from the Leitch report.

It is evident that some low-skilled customers perceive their lack of appropriate skills as a key barrier for them in finding work and believe that there is a lack of good training opportunities. Inevitably, some customers will have no desire to undertake training, but others genuinely believe that one or other of the Leitch recommendations will provide them with a potential path to improved qualifications and hence better job prospects.

However, each of the proposals is hedged with caveats. Only if the proposals and the associated training meet customers' criteria will take-up be maximised.

Overall, therefore, our summary and conclusions for each element of our investigation are as follows.

6.1 Current experience

Customer experience with Jobcentre Plus varied amongst participants in this research. Some customers found that staff had not offered the advice they needed about benefits or programmes, others were not offered training to help them to improve their skills.

Where training has been available, and although there were some examples of excellent training programmes, many customers have been very disappointed with training that they have been offered through the Jobcentre network. Attitudes to training have often been shaped by experiences at school and, importantly, on Jobcentre Plus training programmes. Those whose experiences have been bad are more likely to reject the concept of further training since it is seen as a waste of time and has not achieved its stated aim of leading to work. Good experiences are likely to motivate trainees to attend further programmes, where appropriate.

Skills and lack of qualifications are seen as an important barrier in preventing customers from finding work. Other important barriers relate to personal

circumstances – for example, finding work or training that fits in with childcare responsibilities or the customer's personal circumstances, such as age or ethnicity. Each of these can be barriers to work – either from the perspective of the customer or the potential employer.

Computing and IT skills are also considered to be particularly important when seeking many types of work.

6.2 Leitch recommendations

People are happy with the idea that there should be some skills testing to establish if people need or would benefit from attending training provision but there are objections to such testing being universal or compulsory. People feel that tests should be offered only if Job Advisers have concerns about the skill levels of customers or if the customers ask for it. In any case, the tests need to be conducted with sensitivity – not always an easy thing to do in the Jobcentre environment.

All programmes should be offered on a voluntary basis. There is little appetite for compulsory attendance at any programme and customers would prefer resources to be spent on those who are willing and able to benefit.

When people do want training, they are anxious that they should be able to start courses as soon as they are ready to do so, rather than having to wait until they have been unemployed for some time.

Financial issues are the major concern of customers when considering whether or not training may suit them. This covers not only the cost of the course, but also all associated costs including travel, course requirements (books or equipment) and child care. Customers will often be unable to find the money for travel, even when they can subsequently claim it back. Furthermore, many customers will have to reject any offers of training if this affects the level of their benefits. Even the most desirable programme will not be taken up if customers perceive that they will lose financially, even in the short term.

In order to be acceptable and accessible to the maximum number of customers, it is essential that any offer and associated training should be as flexible as possible, especially if parents and carers (who are often restricted in the hours they can spend away from home) are to be able to participate fully. Customers differed significantly in the type of training that would suit them – course duration, course hours, and type of training all varied a great deal. A range of options should therefore be available to ensure that as many needs as possible are catered for. Particular care must be taken to ensure that skills provision is made to seem relevant to older workers who often feel that there is little point in increasing their skills as they approach retirement.

Training must be of high quality to be acceptable. It must meet its stated objectives. Ideally, it should result in some kind of paper qualification.

Reactions to the specific recommendations vary with customer age. In general, basic skills training was most favourably perceived by young customers whereas the provision of skills accounts was of interest to older customers. Skills advisers were of great interest (and to all age groups) and the concept of the skills progression and continuous learning was of least relevance, mostly because it did not resolve customers' immediate concerns of finding work.

The desire to start earning as soon as possible also lay behind the widespread feeling that the ideal option was a job with day release training. On the job training was also highly preferred for the same reason.

In summary, therefore, there is a perceived need for a greater range of good quality training. The proposed responses to the Leitch report will provide many low skilled Jobcentre Plus customers with the help they need to identify and access the training which will best suit them. This, in turn, will equip them with the higher level skills which Leitch identified as essential.

Appendix A

Topic guide



Carol Goldstone Associates

User Voice

Phase Three Focus Groups

Topic Guide

Introduction

Moderator to introduce herself and CGA. Stress independence and confidentiality.

- *Background to study*

Paraphrase:

Over the last few years, the government has been thinking about making some changes to the way the Jobcentre works and the sort of training it offers to people like yourselves.

The Government is looking for ways to help people like you to train so that you can find work and stay in work. Any changes they make must be realistic and really have the potential to work, and so they have asked us to do some research amongst Jobcentre Plus customers, to see what you think about some of these changes and what action should be taken. We will be looking at some of these today and thinking about what would or would not suit you and your circumstances. Remember that there aren't any right or wrong answers – we just want to find out what you think about some of the changes that are being put forward and which might really be of help to people in your situation.

- ***Reassure Respondent***

Explain this is *independent* research. No one outside of the immediate project team know who our respondents are and individual responses will not be fed back to anyone within DWP/Jobcentre Plus, that the process is in no way linked to their job search or any benefits they receive. All comments will be taken together to help us design the next phase of the research. No individual or anything that they say can be identified as originating with them so all respondents can feel free to speak very openly. The group will run for around 1½ hours.

- ***Tape Recorder***

Explain that the group will be taped to assist ensure that we catch everything that is said, and to ensure that moderator can concentrate on what is being said rather than on taking notes.

Warm up and Classification

- Round table introduction
 - o Name
 - o Status/job history

Experiences

- Before we look at the changes that are being considered, let's briefly think about the experiences that you have had with Jobcentre Plus. Think about both the process of getting benefits and looking for work. *Probe on* experience of:
 - o Processes/programmes involved in (e.g. Work Focused Interviews; basic skills assessment, New Deal, 18 – 24 – Gateway, Options)
 - o Reviews with Personal Advisers. *Probe on* need for private room, help required with forms (if any)/practical issues about interviews with advisors.
 - o Training opportunities offered/experienced
 - o General satisfaction with/attitudes to experience
 (Differentiate between experiences based on relevant benefits – JSA, IS, IB).
- What are the main things stopping you finding work? *Probe on*:
 - o Personal and external factors (e.g. age, care of children vs lack of suitable jobs)
 - o Most important factor to help get a job
 - o Source of help (Jobcentre Plus or other?)

FLIP CHART:

- What skills are employers are looking for
- And what skills do you all have

- So what skills are we lacking and what is the best way to improve these?

Probe for:

- o Do you think that improving skills would be good for you? (if no, why not)
- o What methods are likely to be most useful
 - College/formal training
 - Intervention/programmes by Jobcentre Plus
 - Role of employers (formal and on the job training)
- o When is the best time for training (when first become unemployed, after short period, later) and why
 - *Probe on* advantages/disadvantages of waiting (say) three months. Does this change perceptions of usefulness of training and/or attitudes to Jobcentre Plus?

Leitch Recommendations

Paraphrase:

Moving on to some of the changes that are currently being considered, let's think first about how you might want to improve/build on the skills that you already have.

Basic skills

First of all, there are a lot of people who have difficulties with basic skills such as reading and writing, dealing with numbers and speaking and writing in English.

- Should Jobcentre Plus test how well people can read, write or speak English? Why/why not?
 - o What, if anything, should be done if needs are identified?
 - o What is the kind of process that could be used that you think would be good? Why
 - o Who should do it and why?
 - Independent person or somebody at Jobcentre Plus?
 - Where should it be done and how should it be done?
 - How will this benefit you?
 - What would motivate/demotivate to attend this assessment?
 - What would you like to see happen with the results?
 - Would you attend training to improve areas that the assessment showed needed improvement?
 - Do you have suggestions about the training methods? Where? Length? Number of people?

Skills health check

- Would it be helpful for everyone to have a session with a careers service for adults to assess their experience and to look at the skills that they have and the ones that they need?
 - o How useful would this be for you? What would you get out of it?
 - o If you were to have such an assessment, when should it be done? At first Jobcentre Plus appointment/later?
 - o If you could design how such an assessment was done with you, where/when/how would you want it done?
 - o How would you feel if this were made compulsory. *If necessary explain:* you could be sanctioned if you refuse.
 - o If you had a session with the adult careers service and it identified some training that you could do that would better equip you for jobs available locally, would you go on it? Why/not?
- What are your views on having support available through training?
 - o Do you think a support service will be helpful? Why?
 - o What would you expect from this service?
 - o What would you like from this service and what would you like to gain/benefit you from using this service?
 - o Do you think this should be done by an independent organisation or by Jobcentre Plus? What are your reasons?
 - o Do you think it should continue once you are working?
 - How long do you think support should be available for before and after you have work? why?
 - Lengths/periods/frequency?

Skills ladder

- Do you think that better qualifications lead to better work? Why/why not
 - o Is this relevant/important to you? Why/why not?
- How do you feel about constantly improving your skills throughout your working life? Do you want to do this or not? Why/why not?
- Do you want to try for a better job or would you be happier with one similar to the most recent one you had?
 - o What are the advantages of a better job? *Probe for* money and other advantages such as more interesting work.
- If you are out of work, would you prefer to focus on getting a job or getting a job AND improving your skills/qualifications? Why?

Training

SAY: Let's talk specifically about training.

- How would you feel if you were advised or told to undergo training in order to try to get a job? *Probe on:* attitudes to training, 'advised' vs 'told'.
- How would you feel about receiving training that was to give you skills to match the specific jobs that are available locally? This might not be a subject that you are naturally interested in but might increase your chances of employment
 - o *Probe for* advantages/disadvantages of retraining
- *If not interested in retraining:* If jobs that use your skills are not available around here, would you be willing to relocate rather than have to get new skills?
- What type of training would be useful to you?

Probe on

- o Location (e.g. Jobcentre Plus/college/workplace/self-directed/community learning/private company)
- o Timing (day/evening/variable)
- o Type (vocational vs academic or combination of these)
- o Duration (day/week/months?)
- o Full time vs part time
- What type of training would you like and need? Reasons
- Do you have any ideas of what you would like to do? Why?
- What sort of training would you most like to do? *PROBE ON* examples of actual training (with level, if possible)
- When should this be done (early in period of unemployment/later/in job)?
 - o What are the advantages of getting a job that has a training package built into it (Train to Gain)? And the disadvantages?

FLIP CHART

- What are the reasons why you want to do some training? And what are the problems or things that put you off? *Probe for* key reasons vs others.

Learner Accounts

- One possibility is that Jobcentre Plus customers could be given vouchers to spend on training of their choice. You would have a fixed amount to spend and you would need to agree with your careers adviser or personal adviser how you 'spend' your vouchers. The vouchers can only be spent on training. What do you think of this idea?

- o How useful would it be to you?
- o Would it make any difference to the way that you feel about training? Why?
Probe for extent to which Learner Accounts might remove financial barriers
- Are there any other money issues that we haven't discussed that affect the likelihood of you training?

Summary, wind up and close

- Let's review some of the things we've been discussing. In terms of work, where would you like to be in, say, ten years time?
- Would any of the things we've discussed help you to get there?

Probe for each of the key Leitch recommendations:

Basic skills interventions

Upskilling (to level 2 or higher)

Skills health check

Different types of training (variety of provision)

Finance

Careers/skills advice

- Which of these things that we've talked about, if any, are most likely to have made a difference to you if they were available now?

FLIPCHART

- Recap range of answers to opening question 'what one thing would help you get a job' - now having been through these recommendations, has your answer changed at all? To what? Why?
- Summarise issues raised.
- Is there anything we've not spoken about that would help you as Jobcentre Plus customers, find work or improve your skills?
 - o Probe for anything additional to include in next phase of groups
- Any other comments....

THANK AND CLOSE

Appendix B

Research methodology

Overview

A key feature of this research was that it was devised to maximise the involvement of Jobcentre Plus customers at each stage of the project, encouraging them to engage in the process and treating them as the experts who are best placed to shape these changes, working to limitations as to what is practical.

In order to explore the attitudes and preferences of Jobcentre Plus customers in the required depth, a qualitative methodology was adopted. A total of 16 focus groups were undertaken in three phases. Eligible respondents for the groups were individuals identified as having a low level of basic skills. For the purposes of the research, this was defined as having qualifications at or below NVQ level 2 (or equivalent).

The number of groups in each phase was:

Phase 1	2
Phase 2	6
Phase 3	8
TOTAL	16

After each phase, the topic guide was amended for the following stage such that findings from earlier phases were fed back to participants to confirm their agreement and understanding of the way that their views were being used.

Following the first two groups, the changes to the topic guide were quite significant so that the topic guide for Phase 2 incorporated the views of Phase 1 respondents. Further changes were implemented following the second stage although, in line with expectations, there were fewer amendments between Phases 2 and 3.

Eligibility and sample structure

Because of the particular interest in Jobcentre Plus customers with poor qualifications or none, eligibility was restricted to those whose educational attainment was below Level 2. A lower age limit of 19 was imposed because skills advice for younger people is generally dealt with by Connexions. The sample also included a disproportionate number of lone parents and ethnic minority and disabled people as their response to the Leitch recommendations was seen as likely to be particularly significant.

It is important, in interpreting the results of this research, to bear in mind that the findings relate particularly to this sub-group of Jobcentre Plus customers and not all the findings will be true of the generality of those using Jobcentre Plus.

Eligibility was limited to those who had been customers of Jobcentre Plus within the last six months since they would have experience of Jobcentre Plus and job hunting. Thus, a small number of group participants were no longer unemployed although they had been in the recent past.

Because it was anticipated that needs and attitudes were likely to change with age, recruitment to each group was by age. The three main age groups for Phases 2 and 3 were under 25 years, 25-40 years and over 40 years. In addition, three of the groups were limited to individuals from special interest groups (i.e. lone parents, people who are sick and disabled and those from ethnic minority groups) since we wished to know whether people within these groups had different requirements from the majority of customers.⁹

Contacts were drawn from customer lists provided by Jobcentre Plus. Each contact received a letter prior to recruitment, advising them of the forthcoming research and providing an opportunity to opt out. Group participants were recruited by telephone following appropriate screening that included questions on their educational qualifications. The recruitment was carried out by FieldVision, using their specialist telephone recruiting unit. Copies of both the opt-out letter and screening questionnaire are appended to this report.

Respondents were given an incentive of £25 to attend the discussions. (This was raised to £30 in the case of a group held with lone parents, as they might reasonably have to pay for childcare.)

The use of a financial incentive and professional recruitment encouraged people to agree to attend the groups. The greatest difficulty in recruitment was amongst the youngest respondents but, even here, there was no evidence of systematic bias in the type of people who agreed to attend.

Groups were held at a total of nine locations across Great Britain, including a mix of deprived and wealthier areas and a mix of rural and urban locations. Table B.1 shows the location and make up of each group.

⁹ Individuals from special interest groups were also included in other groups.

Table B.1 Group structure

Group number	Location	Location type	Age range (+ special interest)	Deprivation type
PHASE 1				
1	Cambridge	Urban (inner city)	Up to 40	Low
2	Harlow	Rural/small town	Over 40	High
PHASE 2				
3	Lambeth	Urban (inner city)	Under 25	High
4	Lambeth	Urban (inner city)	25-40 (BMEs)	High
5	Sheffield	Suburban	Over 40	Low
6	Sheffield	Suburban	Under 25	Low
7	Cannock	Rural/small town	25-40	High
8	Cannock	Rural/small town	Over 40	High
PHASE 3				
9	Cardiff	Urban (inner city)	25-40	High
10	Cardiff	Urban (inner city)	20-45 (Lone parents)	High
11	Manchester	Suburban	Under 25	Low
12	Manchester	Suburban	20-45 (Disabled)	Low
13	Glasgow	Suburban	Over 40	High
14	Glasgow	Suburban	25-45	High
15	Bournemouth	Rural/small town	25-40	Low
16	Bournemouth	Rural/small town	Over 40	Low

Group size varied between four and ten with ten individuals recruited for each group.

Table B.2 shows the respondent breakdown for all group participants.

Table B.2 Breakdown of group participants

Title	Type	Number
Total		102
Age	Under 25	27
	25 – 40	34
	Over 40	46
Gender	Male	54
	Female	48
Special interest	Lone parents	22
	Sick and disabled people	18
	Black and ethnic minority people	22

Fieldwork was completed between 26 June – 21 August 2007. Copies of the topic guides used for each phase are appended to the report.