

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 575

A qualitative study of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with Jobcentre Plus; an exploration of issues identified in the 2007 Customer Satisfaction Survey with a particular focus on those most likely to be dissatisfied

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A report of research carried out by the Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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The project team

The full project team included:

- Penny Wymer – project managed the research process and played a leading role in designing the research methodology, undertaking fieldwork and analysis. She was the Project Manager for the Customer Satisfaction Survey qualitative research.
- James Clark – assisted in the organising of fieldwork with both staff and customers.
- The Survey Research Centre – incorporating Sue Green, John Jinks, Judith Harvey, and Naoimh Bohan assisted with organising and undertaking the qualitative fieldwork with customers and staff.
- Tim Bickerstaffe, James Clark, Sally-Anne Halliday, Ben Mitchell, Yvette Fidler, Sukky Jassi and Mark Rudd all contributed to undertaking the qualitative fieldwork and Sukky Jassi, Sally-Ann Halliday, Kate Botterill and Yvette Fidler undertook interview coding.

Abbreviations

AACT	Average Actual Clearance Time
AJCS	Accessing Jobcentre Plus Customer Services
ASM	Advisory Services Manager
BDC	Benefit Delivery Centre
BOC	Better Off Calculation
BSL	British Sign Language
CSA	Customer Service Agent
CSM	Customer Service Manager
DEA	Disability Employment Adviser
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
FA	Financial Assessor
FJR	Fortnightly Job Review
HB	Housing Benefit
IS	Income Support
JOT	Job Outcome Target
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
JSAg	Jobseeker's Agreement
LEP	Local Employment Partnership

LMS	Labour Market System
NI	National Insurance
SOM	Standard Operating Model
WFI	Work Focused Interview

Summary

Introduction

Jobcentre Plus has continually undertaken research to assess and understand customer satisfaction with the services that it provides, including repeated Customer Satisfaction Surveys, most recently in 2007. This report presents results from qualitative fieldwork which aimed to further understand some of the key headline results reported in the most recent survey findings (Johnson and Fidler, 2008). The research pursues prominent themes raised in the survey findings regarding differential levels of satisfaction between different benefit groups, Jobcentre Plus regions and specific customer groups. It also addresses some specific issues that arose from the survey results.

The research was initially planned to immediately follow the quantitative survey. However, concerns regarding the transfer of personal data from Government to external contractors led to a delay in the qualitative research for a period of ten months and as a consequence a revised methodology was employed.

Methodology

The research comprised qualitative fieldwork with a range of different staff and customer respondents. Fieldwork with staff included 44 interviews across 11 districts with a wide range of Jobcentre Plus staff, nine Customer Service Director interviews, three Senior Management interviews and 22 interviews with a mixture of staff from Benefit Delivery Centres (BDCs). Fieldwork with customers consisted of telephone follow-up with 110 customers who took part in the survey and a total of 33 customer focus groups (three per region) covering Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Income Support (IS) and Incapacity Benefit (IB) customers. All interviews and focus groups were undertaken using a semi-structured topic guide and interview transcripts were analysed using NVivo.

The initial research design for this project had intended to follow up issues arising from the survey and to do so by using dedicated focus group discussions with specific customer groups. However, it was not possible to sample customers

according to these groups because of difficulties with drawing and transferring a new customer sample. The fieldwork was therefore restructured within the constraints of using existing customer samples drawn for earlier projects and as a consequence of sampling and selecting in this way, several potential biases were introduced into the research (see Section 2.4) which tend to weight experiences in favour of dissatisfaction over satisfaction when considering some specific questions. Therefore, the overall findings from the qualitative research should not be understood as typical of the whole Jobcentre Plus customer group in relation to overall levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Rather, the advantages of this qualitative research are that the data offers a deeper insight into some of the issues arising from the survey, and offers a better understanding of why a small proportion of Jobcentre Plus customers are dissatisfied. This is crucial to assessing the extent to which satisfaction might be improved further and how this might be achieved. In relation to the majority of the research objectives, these potential biases in the customer element of the methodology did not affect the analysis and wherever this may be the case it is fully discussed in the findings below.

General satisfaction

Most staff indicated that they perceive customers to be, in the main, satisfied with the services provided. Customers involved in the qualitative research were much more negative about the standard of customer service than staff and customers involved in the quantitative Customer Satisfaction Survey. This was expected given the methodology employed and should not be interpreted as a real difference between staff and customers on this issue or a difference between survey and qualitative findings. Rather, as an indicator of general satisfaction among all customers, the survey results should be used. However, the qualitative results provide a much richer picture of the dynamics associated in particular with dissatisfaction, thereby offering insight into the extent to which and how Jobcentre Plus can further improve satisfaction with its services.

Customers and staff largely concurred on the core drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The most important factors underpinning satisfaction included the speed and accuracy of new claims processing, accessibility of services, advice and support, staff attitudes and the quality and consistency of information provided to customers. In addition, both customers and staff identified broader eligibility rules and payment levels as having an important impact on satisfaction; factors which are predominantly outside the control of Jobcentre Plus.

Explaining the survey findings

A range of differences in the drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction were identified between different benefit groups. Some headline themes include the importance of activation¹-related dynamics and a perceived lack of training opportunities as a cause of dissatisfaction among JSA customers. Some Jobcentre Plus customers, by their very nature, are experiencing challenging financial, personal, social or health-related contexts. This has an important bearing on their satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus. The higher levels of satisfaction found in the Customer Satisfaction Survey for lone parents may result from the voluntary nature of provision, the increasing availability of childcare and the ability to build stable and positive relationships between lone parents and their specialist Advisers.

The research did not identify any credible reasons to explain higher levels of dissatisfaction among some ethnic minority groups. Some plausible but largely speculative explanations for lower levels of male satisfaction were offered. An example includes customer expectations about the types of job that are suitable for men, which may sometimes be outdated given prevailing labour market conditions. Nevertheless, this disjuncture may have an important bearing on the satisfaction of male job seekers. The research suggests few credible explanations for regional differences in customer satisfaction, except in the case of London, where more challenging labour market conditions may lead to problems associated with the volume of work and staffing.

Explanations for the small minority of customers who reported in the Customer Satisfaction Survey that they were provided with incorrect or contradictory information, included explanations related to different remits of various members of Jobcentre Plus staff. Any one individual member of Jobcentre Plus staff only has a limited remit and therefore will only have up-to-date knowledge related to their own area. At the same time, however, they may occasionally face understandable pressures to provide information on the whole benefits and unemployment system, leading to the occasional provision of incorrect information. Equally, however, an additional explanation may include the difficulty of communicating complex messages about the benefit system to customers who often may not appreciate subtle differences in information provided, especially where they face difficulties with basic skills and/or are in stressful personal circumstances. Similarly, problems relating to changes of circumstances arise from a complex interplay of organisational and process dynamics such as communication between different parts of the organisation and the competing priorities posed by different performance targets. Coupled with the difficulties in communicating complex messages to customers

¹ Activation refers to the process of encouraging jobseekers to undertake active and effective job search activity. Activation measures include the promotion and checking of work-related and job search activity at Fortnightly Job Reviews (FJR) and encouragement to broaden the range of employment sought in new claims and Work Focused Interviews (WFIs).

this can mean that changes in circumstances are sometimes delayed and become more complex.

The research findings suggest several explanations for the survey results which found that 14 per cent of customers wanted to complain at some point but only around three per cent reported that they actually did so. These include the role of staff in handling queries and resolving concerns before customers make a formal complaint. Some respondents also highlighted the potential discord between the relatively formal complaints process and the preference of many customers for more informal communication, though it should be noted that Jobcentre Plus does publish a leaflet giving information about both formal and informal methods of complaining. The qualitative research also confirms the survey findings that at least part of the explanation for the difference between those who want to complain and those who do so results from customers' mistrust in the 'system' and a feeling that complaints either won't be taken seriously or will result in individual customers facing additional penalties or disadvantage.

Customer satisfaction with services

Both staff and customers concurred that the central features of the new claims process in relation to customer satisfaction were the speed, accuracy and efficiency of the data gathering and processing procedure. Several staff and customer respondents suggested that the current system is fragmented and that there are multiple points at which delays can occur. Customers are concerned about call charges and the ease of getting through to a Customer Services Agent. Staff and customers also agreed that it is important that staff treat customers with respect and politeness throughout the new claims process.

The effectiveness of FJRs was questioned by customers and staff because of the very limited amount of time available. While there have been some attempts to develop a differentiated and more flexible approach to give some customers more time at FJR, customers would welcome further flexibility and the availability of genuine support rather than what they sometimes perceive as a superficial 'checking-up' exercise. Both staff and customers noted that the conditionality side of this interaction predominates and because both perceive that it is not matched with support, this introduces a tension in customer relationships with Jobcentre Plus. Both staff and customers suggest that timeliness and professionalism are important, especially given the potential for customers to be sanctioned where they fail to keep to appointments.

Staff suggested that new claims WFIs can be difficult because customers are at that stage predominantly concerned with ensuring that their new claim is processed quickly. It was also suggested that WFIs are a balance between nurturing and respecting customer aspirations at the same time as ensuring that these are realistic in the context of available labour market opportunities and that customers may see this latter element as dissatisfying. Customers suggested that they see WFIs as

a means of applying pressure on them to take up available job opportunities but that these are frequently perceived as unsuitable in some way. Customers are often frustrated at the lack of training and other support available and matching of this support to longer-term career aspirations as opposed to quick job outcomes.

Some staff and many customers were heavily critical of the quality of mandatory external provision and customers suggested that some basic functions undertaken through contracts (such as CV support, help with job search and access to the internet for job search) could be provided in-house.

Customer satisfaction with channels

The office environment was described as clean, functional and comfortable. The open plan layout provided a more inclusive atmosphere and a less segregated office; however, many customers suggested the number of security guards was excessive and overbearing. Overall, respondents (staff and customers) had a good awareness of the channels available at Jobcentre Plus; however there was less awareness of the website in comparison to other channels. However, while respondents were aware of the channels available, they did not necessarily have a clear understanding of how to fully utilise them to their maximum capability.

The majority of customer respondents had a preferred channel to access Jobcentre Plus services, depending on their individual circumstances. Factors which influenced their decision included office location, costs incurred for use of channel, comfort, assistance and support provided, ease of use and reliability of information. Customers placed great importance on the level of knowledge and attitudes of staff for face-to-face and telephone contact. Throughout all the research with customers a general lack of face-to-face support when combined with conditionality and activation pressure was identified as a key driver of dissatisfaction.

In relation to benefit type; JSA customers were most likely to use Jobpoints and the website to access employment opportunities. In comparison to other channels, the website was least used by customers, principally because they lack internet access or computer literacy. The dissatisfaction experienced with this channel may be contributed to by the lack of online experience and computer skills or age-related familiarity with these types of media.

Providing services to customers with additional needs

The Customer Satisfaction Survey (Johnson and Fidler, 2008), First Contact Customer Survey and First Contact qualitative research (Nunn *et al.*, 2008a; Nunn *et al.*, 2009), revealed some issues around differential customer satisfaction in relation to disability and some specific ethnic minority groups. However, these differences were not clear cut and proved an insufficient basis on which to make

any interpretative judgement. This qualitative research suggests that staff feel that they are broadly able to identify customers' additional needs, relying on a number of forms of information including computer records relating to individual customers and softer conversation and communication with customers on an individual basis.

While staff are reasonably confident in identifying additional needs, this is less so in relation to 'hidden' disabilities and needs related to mental health and behavioural issues. Staff commitment to the equalities agenda and knowledge, awareness and willingness to utilise the wide range of adjustments to services and communication that are available to them was widespread and apparently deeply held. However, there was little evidence of any local level monitoring of the impact of service delivery such as different levels of referrals to provision, job outcomes or access to services.

Customer service and Jobcentre Plus

Both customers and staff identified treating customers with respect, politeness and listening to their needs as paramount in good quality customer service. Both groups also identified professionalism and individualisation of the services provided to customers as central as well as detailed and up-to-date knowledge on the part of staff. The need for a dedicated CV help service and the provision of internet access at the offices was also supported by both respondent groups.

From the staff perspective, suggested improvements in the Jobcentre Plus services centred around increases in resources (staff numbers and office space), improvements to training and awareness raising and a stronger management emphasis on quality and flexibility rather than standardisation and workflow.

Evidence from customers suggested that an increase in clarity about the correct use of channels and the provision of information to customers about channel functionality is necessary to help customers benefit from available services. More dedicated and relevant advice was sought in relation to training and employment opportunities by customer respondents. In addition, customers with specific health issues (mainly, although not exclusively, IB customers) which affect their ability to secure suitable employment emphasised the need for a more sympathetic service where staff had a better understanding of health matters.

Discussion and Interpretation

The Customer Satisfaction Survey suggested that the vast majority of Jobcentre Plus customers are satisfied with the service that they have received from the organisation. Among those who are less satisfied, this research suggests that a range of factors account for this, some of which are within the control of Jobcentre Plus (e.g. staff knowledge and treatment of customers) and others which are not (e.g. benefit eligibility rules and levels of benefit payments). Therefore, Jobcentre

Plus might be able to make changes which will impact positively on those customers that report dissatisfaction; however, it will not be able to eliminate dissatisfaction entirely, since many of the most important causes of disgruntlement among customers lie outside its control.

The research suggests the following areas are considered for improvement in the development of future services and as part of the process of continual improvement:

- improvements to staff training focusing on generic issues around the importance of 'customer service' and specific areas such as identifying customers with additional needs;
- staff respondents suggested additional resources may be necessary as a result of the current economic climate and increasing workloads;
- customers would welcome a greater focus on assistance and support to run alongside conditionality;
- many staff and customer responses centred around rigidity in service provision and the need for flexibility in some cases to meet customers' individual needs as well as ensuring professional and timely delivery of services; and
- there may be scope to introduce additional and less formal mechanisms of communication in the complaints system so that customer difficulties can both be resolved and learnt from to improve service provision.

The research suggests that a combination of the current economic downturn and planned reforms to the benefit system might introduce pressures toward greater dissatisfaction that may be picked up by future surveys. These may particularly affect some of the customer groups that are currently most satisfied, such as lone parents.

1 Introduction

Since the establishment of Jobcentre Plus, the organisation has continually undertaken research to assess and understand customer satisfaction with the services that it provides. This has led to the conduct of repeated Customer Satisfaction Surveys, most recently in 2007. This report presents results from qualitative fieldwork which aimed to further understand some of the key headline results reported in the survey findings (Johnson and Fidler, 2008).

In particular, the research pursues prominent themes raised in the survey findings regarding differential levels of satisfaction between different benefit groups, Jobcentre Plus regions and other specific customer groups such as men and some ethnic minorities. The research also attempts to address some specific issues that arose from the survey results, such as the small but significant proportion of customers who reported in the quantitative survey that they had considered complaining at some point, and why the majority of these customers do not appear to continue to actually make a complaint. Finally, issues related to access to Jobcentre Plus services and to the quality of information provision were also specifically explored. The research allowed some of these issues to be comprehensively addressed while some others (specifically differential levels of satisfaction among some ethnic minority groups and Jobcentre Plus regions) were not fully or persuasively explained.

In addition, a wide variety of additional findings arose from the research which provides an insight into the functioning of the relationship between a key government department and important social groups from a public policy perspective during a period of considerable change in both the policy programme affecting them and the social and labour market context in which both Jobcentre Plus and its customers operate. While this was not specifically the focus of the research, it nevertheless provides useful evidence that might be utilised in the design and implementation of the wide ranging programme of welfare and labour market policy reform which is currently underway.

The research was initially planned to immediately follow the quantitative survey. However, due to difficulties with drawing and transferring a new customer sample, the research was delayed and a revised methodology was needed. The limitations

of the revised methodology are outlined in Section 2.6. One of the implications of the research methodology which was used is that the research findings are intentionally not typical of all Jobcentre Plus customers in relation to one specific aspect of the research; the overall level of satisfaction of Jobcentre Plus customers. This does not undermine the usefulness of the research for policy and programme development. This is because the findings provide a deep and rich insight into the factors which underpin experiences of dissatisfaction with Jobcentre Plus. The survey findings show that this is the experience of only a small proportion of customers, but understanding what causes dissatisfaction for this group is crucial to identifying what scope there is for improving customer satisfaction in the future and how this might be done. In relation to the wide range of other issues explored in the research there is no reason to think that the changes imposed on the methodology had any substantive impact on the findings.

2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction and objectives

The objectives of the research were to:

- investigate in greater depth the findings and issues arising from the Customer Satisfaction Survey 2007 quantitative survey including, in particular what explains why some groups are more satisfied than others;
- obtain a better understanding of customers' experiences of the service provided by Jobcentre Plus and their expectations and priorities;
- develop a better understanding of the factors that influence satisfaction and dissatisfaction;
- inform action required by Jobcentre Plus to increase customer satisfaction.

2.2 Key research questions

These objectives were operationalised through the following key research questions:

- 1 How can the findings from the quantitative survey be explained? For instance, what explains the apparently lower levels of satisfaction among male respondents, JSA claimants, customers in London, the South East and Wales? What explains the apparently higher levels of satisfaction among lone parents?
- 2 What other aspects of Jobcentre Plus services affect customers' satisfaction with them?
- 3 What factors explain customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and do these differ between different customer groups?
- 4 How might customers' satisfaction with current service delivery inform the development of services which are better focused on the needs of clients and the strategic objectives of the organisation, as expressed through Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets?

- 5 How might customers' satisfaction with current service delivery inform the current programme of welfare reform? This question was retained from the initial methodology (see Section 2.5) but it was noted at the outset that only limited conclusions would be drawn against it because of the changes imposed by the inability to set up a new and segmented sample in the way initially envisaged.

2.3 Fieldwork summary

The research comprised qualitative fieldwork with a range of different staff and customer respondents. This included a range of fieldwork with both staff and customers:

- staff fieldwork:
 - 44 interviews with jobcentre staff, across 11 Districts. These interviews included Financial Assessors (FAs), FJR staff, Advisers (including Advisory Service Managers (ASMs), New Deal Advisers, Lone Parent Advisers, Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs), and Incapacity Benefit (IB) Advisers) and Jobcentre Operations Managers;
 - nine Regional Manager interviews;
 - three Senior Management Interviews;
 - 22 Benefit Delivery Centre (BDC) Interviews with Benefit Processors (of all benefits), Telephony staff and team leaders and managers.
- customer fieldwork (see Table 1 for dates and locations):
 - 11 customer focus groups with Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers;
 - 11 customer focus groups with Income Support (IS) customers;
 - 11 customer focus groups with Incapacity Benefit (IB) customers;
 - telephone follow-up with 110 customers who took part in the survey to ask them for additional explanations of their survey responses.

Customers involved in face-to-face research were offered a £20 cash incentive in addition to expenses for travel and childcare where relevant. All interviews and focus groups were undertaken using a semi-structured topic guide and were recorded digitally before being transcribed verbatim, other than the telephone follow-up customer interviews which were recorded digitally but written up using detailed and structured interviewer notes rather than transcription.

Table 2.1 Locations and dates of customer fieldwork

Region	Postcode	Location	Number of attendees	Date
East of England	NR	Norwich	25	Wednesday 8 October 2008
East Midlands	NG	Nottingham	20	Thursday 30 October 2008
London	SE	Peckham	21	Wednesday 15 October 2008
North East	NE	Newcastle	25	Wednesday 29 October 2008
North West	M	Manchester	13	Tuesday 30 September 2008
Scotland	G	Glasgow	23	Tuesday 28 October 2008
South East	BN	Brighton	26	Tuesday 14 October 2008
South West	BS	Bristol	26	Wednesday 22 October 2008
Wales	CF	Cardiff	23	Tuesday 21 October 2008
West Midlands	B	Birmingham	23	Wednesday 29 October 2008
Yorkshire and Humber	S	Sheffield	24	Tuesday 7 October 2008

2.4 Sampling and selection

Customer respondents were sampled from the existing sample drawn from the Work and Pensions Longitudinal Study for two previous projects: the 2007 Customer Satisfaction Survey and a related survey of customers in relation to customers' experiences of 'first contact' with Jobcentre Plus (Nunn *et al.*, 2008a). Contacts used to sample for the Focus Groups were those either not previously used for these studies or where when contacted customers had indicated that they were willing to take part in future research projects. No individuals were sampled where they had previously opted out of the research. Customers sampled for the telephone follow-up were contacted on the basis of having answered relevant questions in the Customer Satisfaction Survey and indicated that they were willing to take part in subsequent follow-up research. Staff contacts were sampled and selected on the basis of negotiations with district level liaisons.

2.5 Analysis

All focus group and interview transcripts were analysed using specialist qualitative analysis computer software (NVivo). For the telephone follow-up research, detailed structured research notes were used as the basis for analysis rather than verbatim transcripts. The analytical framework was both deductive and inductive. Deductive research methods take particular expectations or hypotheses derived from previous work and use observed findings to test the validity of these. As such, the qualitative fieldwork used the findings from the Customer Satisfaction Survey (Johnson and Fidler, 2008) and other relevant research projects to establish discussion guides and coding frameworks to structure the analysis. Inductive research methods start from an alternative premise and allow meanings and findings to emerge from the observed data. The fieldwork and analysis was sufficiently open to allow respondents to discuss experiences which were not part of the pre-established discussion guide. To accommodate these in the analysis it was possible to introduce new codes as the transcripts were analysed.

2.6 Limitations and imposed changes in the methodology

The initial research design for this project had intended to follow-up issues arising from the survey and to do so by using the dedicated focus group discussions with the following customer groups:

- long-term JSA customers.
- shorter-term JSA customers;
- IB customers and those on IS for reasons of ill-health;
- customers with Basic Skills needs;
- lone parents and carers;
- some specific ethnic minorities;
- former Jobcentre Plus customers who have found and remained in employment;

However, it was not possible to sample customers according to these groups because of difficulties with drawing and transferring a new customer sample. As such the fieldwork was restructured within the constraints of using existing customer samples drawn for the earlier projects and taking into account pragmatic concerns such as customer proximity to central urban locations which could be reached via public transport.

The use of focus groups in relation to Jobcentre Plus customers was appropriate in that it offered the most effective means of accessing detailed qualitative explanations for the levels of satisfaction identified by the survey. However, sampling and selecting in this way may have imposed several potential biases into the element of the research that involved Jobcentre Plus customers:

- sampling bias – those sampled in the first place are likely to have been on benefits for some time, indicating that they have not been successful in finding employment;
- selection bias – customers are contacted but then effectively volunteer to take part in the research;
- participation bias – focus group methods tend to privilege the views of those who have most to say. Based on experiences in this and similar projects, dissatisfaction tends to lead to customers having more to say than satisfaction, meaning that dissatisfied customers tend to dominate the discussion, though the discussions were facilitated by experienced researchers who ensured that less vociferous respondents were able to have the opportunity to participate fully.

In each of these different ways a potential bias towards experiences of dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction is introduced. This means that overall the findings from the qualitative research with customers should not be understood as typical of the whole Jobcentre Plus customer group in relation to overall levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The Customer Satisfaction Survey should be used to understand the overall pattern of satisfaction and dissatisfaction as in that research substantial efforts were made to ensure the findings were statistically robust and representative. Rather, the advantages of this qualitative research are that the data offers a much deeper insight into some of the issues arising from the Survey, and in particular may offer a much better understanding of why a small proportion of Jobcentre Plus customers are dissatisfied, in line with the initial objectives of the project. Understanding detailed explanations for why a small number of customers are dissatisfied with the services they receive from Jobcentre Plus is crucial to identifying the extent to which there is scope for customer satisfaction to be further increased and what specific measures might be necessary to achieve this.

The main way that the limitations of the imposed methodology impinge on the analysis and objectives, is in relation to the qualitative findings about levels of satisfaction, which is at odds with the quantitative survey findings. However, in matters of understanding the causal dynamics underpinning satisfaction and dissatisfaction there is no reason to think that the findings are at all unreliable. Wherever necessary, any undue bias resulting from the constraints in the methodology were managed in the analysis process and, where relevant, this is included in the discussion of findings below. It is also important to note that the customer element of the research is just one component and was balanced out by the substantial amount of fieldwork undertaken with Jobcentre Plus staff.

Although the tradition of quantitative surveys and qualitative follow-up research with customers is still very much part of the business of Jobcentre Plus, this particular report departs in an important way from previous work. Jobcentre Plus has always followed up a range of customer groups from the quantitative satisfaction surveys, including the dissatisfied, but on this occasion has probed further into the dissatisfied group of customers to get information which will help improve services further.

3 General satisfaction

3.1 Summary

Box 1: Summary of general satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus

- Most staff indicate that they perceive customers to be, in the main, satisfied with the services that they provide.
- Customers involved in the qualitative research painted a much more negative picture about the standard of customer service than staff and customers involved in the quantitative Customer Satisfaction Survey. This was expected given the methodology employed and should not be interpreted as a real difference between staff and customers on this issue. Rather, as an indicator of general satisfaction among all customers, the survey results should be used. However, the qualitative results provide a much richer picture of the dynamics associated in particular with dissatisfaction, thereby offering insight into the extent to which and how Jobcentre Plus can further improve satisfaction with its services.
- Customers and staff largely concurred on the core drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The most important factors underpinning satisfaction included the speed and accuracy of the new claims service, accessibility of services, advice and support, staff attitudes and the quality and consistency of information provided to customers. In addition, both customers and staff identified broader eligibility rules and payment levels as having an important impact on satisfaction which was outside the control of Jobcentre Plus.

3.2 Evidence from staff

A range of issues relating to customer satisfaction was discussed with staff including: their perceptions of customer satisfaction overall; the factors that underpin levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction; and perceived changes in satisfaction over the previous year.

3.2.1 General satisfaction

The majority of staff respondents perceive that customers are largely satisfied with Jobcentre Plus and that any problems tend to be focused with a minority of individuals. Some teams such as telephony response in Benefit Delivery Centres (BDCs), have, however, been created to specifically engage with customers making repeat contact to chase new claims and lodge queries; and respondents from these teams tend to perceive higher levels of dissatisfaction overall, precisely because of the nature of their role. There was a suggestion that initial customer expectations of Jobcentre Plus can be low, but that once engaged, customers are, in the main, satisfied. Though it is not clear what drivers affect these initial expectations, there is evidence presented in Section 4.2.2 that media and customer-to-customer contact both impact on customer perceptions of the services offered by Jobcentre Plus.

A number of staff made observations regarding some of the potential underlying causes of dissatisfaction, suggesting that at times they may relate more to the legislation that governs eligibility for benefits rather than the service itself; that there is a lack of understanding amongst customers about the systems in place; and that satisfaction is most frequently determined by the outcome, rather than the process:

'...you could go out on a limb for a customer and...spend all day on a case and at the end of the day if the outcome is the fact that they're not going to get any money because of any reason, they're still not happy with you.'

(Benefit Processor)

Linked to this, a number of Advisers and Advisory Service Managers (ASMs) identified the increased potential for dissatisfaction in relation to benefit processing issues, which are often regarded as a higher priority by customers than job search support:

'...in my role then the benefit would [already] be set up...and if it's not...it's very hard to get them to focus on work as an option because they're still struggling with their bills.'

(Disability Employment Adviser (DEA))

Other key areas felt to influence satisfaction/dissatisfaction are the prevalence of telephone rather than face-to-face contact; and the move towards a system that demands greater self-service rather than being 'spoon fed'. Some of the key factors underpinning customer satisfaction are examined in more detail in the next section.

3.2.2 Factors underpinning satisfaction

Whilst there was an overall view that customers are generally satisfied with the service that they receive, many staff respondents acknowledged that in the minority of cases where there is dissatisfaction, this can be both genuine and

justified, and that the operation of services is not always as effective as it should be. This can be in terms of, for example: processing of claims; seeing individuals at an appointed time; availability of staff, either in person or on the telephone; ability of staff to respond to queries; lack of a single point of contact for queries; and the inflexibility of the system (and the role of staff within it). To a large degree, resource constraints were identified as a key factor in each of these areas, either in terms of limited availability of staff or training; and/or the rapid implementation of new processes. The impact of the current economic climate was also viewed as significant in this respect, with the increasing number of job seekers placing greater pressure on the system, and leading to a change in the characteristics of some of their customer groups, with many new claimants lacking any recent experience with the benefits system and potentially bringing new challenges.

Overall, staff suggested a variety of specific factors that contribute to the satisfaction/dissatisfaction of customers, more details of which are presented below. These tend to relate to one specific element of the service, but it should be noted that there is potential for problems to arise at any one point as a customer travels through the system; and that dissatisfaction with one area can be exacerbated by problems encountered at a subsequent point. For example, if a customer encounters difficulties with the processing of a claim, their dissatisfaction is likely to increase if they then struggle to contact the appropriate individual to resolve their problem.

Timeliness of benefit processing

The main factor governing customer satisfaction, as perceived by jobcentre staff, is the time taken to process benefit claims. In particular, levels of satisfaction are based on:

'...whether they've got what they want [and] how long it's taken to get there.'

(Customer Service Manager (CSM))

Views as to whether this process is improving were mixed. A number of staff suggested that processing of claims is more rapid since the introduction of the current model of BDCs. Others were more sceptical, suggesting that staffing is now inappropriately balanced toward telephony response rather than processing and that the target-driven culture has led to a focus on new claims, whilst outstanding claims sometimes remain unresolved. This tallies to some extent with findings from the parallel research undertaken with staff in relation to First Contact with Jobcentre Plus (Nunn *et al.*, 2009) which suggested that this same dynamic may function in relation to the prioritisation of simple claims over more complex ones at times when this will assist in keeping the average claim processing time within target limits. Customer expectations were also identified as pertinent in this regard, with some being highly unrealistic; while in other cases staff acknowledged that complaints have been justified. Importantly, several respondents suggested that efficient processing of claims can be vital to ensuring customer commitment to

efforts to help them find employment, which often only becomes a priority once financial issues have been resolved:

'...my personal view is that until you've actually got the customer in a position whereby they feel comfortable with their financial situation...that is the thing that occupies their brain, therefore you can't focus them on other things, and unfortunately there are delays in that.'

(Jobcentre Plus Operations Manager)

Access to services

The ease with which services are accessed was also identified as an important driver of customer satisfaction. Some staff suggested that access issues were prominent in rural areas, where physical attendance at jobcentres can be problematic because of the distances and associated travelling times involved. With this in mind, a number of staff suggested that the availability of a diverse and flexible range of methods of access has been a positive development for customers, increasing their choice in terms of physically attending offices, using Jobpoints and free Warm Phones, and/or accessing services on the internet. However, there was some concern amongst staff that continued efforts to restrict customer access to face-to-face provision without an appointment still causes frustration for customers. This was allied with ongoing concern among some jobcentre-based staff about the quality of telephone service channels, for instance, in relation to handling of the volume of calls, the capacity of Contact Centre staff to answer benefit and job search-related queries and the multiple stages in the process of making a new claim. There was some suggestion, overall, that the service has become fragmented and that this can be a key source of dissatisfaction for customers. The lack of personal interaction was regarded as a particular issue in relation to vulnerable customers:

'...I think it does depend on the customers and I think especially because I deal with sick customers and some of them, especially with mental health [problems], find it really stressful to deal with on the phone...They find it much easier to talk to somebody in person. As well, people that if first language isn't English, obviously that is really difficult on the phone.'

(Incapacity Benefit (IB) Adviser)

A small number of staff referred to the implementation of the Accessing Jobcentre Plus Customer Services (AJCS) initiative as a potential driver of dissatisfaction, with its aim of further reducing footfall in Jobcentre Plus offices. Here concerns were also voiced by staff in BDCs, who suggested that some customers were being made to feel unwelcome in jobcentres unless they have an appointment. For example:

'I know that some jobcentres have tried to encourage people not to go in and look at Jobpoints, but surely that's...the raison d'être of them being there'.

(BDC Telephony Team Leader)

While some staff continue to stress concerns about the suitability of new forms of customer contact as alternatives (rather than additions) to face-to-face service delivery, others also suggested that as customer familiarity with these channels increases, dissatisfaction with the restriction of face-to-face contact decreases.

Quality of information

The provision of accurate information to customers is critical in influencing their satisfaction with the service received. This was acknowledged by a large proportion of staff respondents, many of whom suggested that overall performance within the organisation in relation to this area is relatively good.

The provision of misinformation was felt to occur most frequently when jobcentre staff and BDC staff were responding to queries on services or processes outside of their own direct remit. For example, a number of BDC staff indicated that customers were sometimes given inaccurate information about new claims by Advisers, Financial Assessors (FAs) or Customer Service Managers (CSMs) in the jobcentre. One member of staff in particular highlighted the potential for problems because of the volume of information transfer that takes place. Again, this triangulates with findings from other research focused on the new claim process (Nunn *et al.*, 2009).

Within the BDCs, there was some indication that staff shortages and limited training of staff may have resulted, in the past, in the provision of inaccurate information or where staff have outdated knowledge of a particular issue. However, the provision of the Customer Service A-Z² was identified as a positive development in enhancing information quality and accessibility. Where queries cannot be resolved, the importance of accurate referrals and a full explanation of why the required assistance cannot be provided at that time, by that individual, were identified as key aspects in contributing to levels of satisfaction.

Staff also thought that customer perceptions of the usefulness of information can be influenced by their ability to access this information. One Adviser identified the potential barriers to accessing information for vulnerable customers with low skills, particularly when information is provided on the internet or via leaflets, which can be problematic for those with poor levels of literacy, language or communication skills.

Staff attitudes

Despite indications from staff that the Jobcentre Plus customer experience has become more impersonal as a result of a reduction in face-to-face meetings and the increased use of self-service channels, they also frequently expressed significant levels of personal and professional pride in providing the best service that they can for their customers. A number made references such as '*going the extra mile*' and '*providing a Rolls Royce service*', stressing the importance of minimising

² A guide to services and process rules available to help staff provide consistent and accurate information to customers.

inconvenience for customers. Staff in the jobcentres were also keen to try and smooth the claims process and handover to BDCs, ensuring as far as possible that customer data is complete in the first instance, even when this was beyond their remit. This type of approach was felt to be fundamental in promoting customer satisfaction. Overall, the general view is illustrated by the following quotations:

'I think for most customers they just want to feel that they are being listened to, that they're being treated with respect, that they're being given the right information, or where we can't help them, that we correctly signpost them.'

(ASM)

'I think if their call is answered promptly...if we're helpful on the phone and you know, in a polite and respectful manner on the phone as well. If we get the issue resolved there and then on the phone without...warranting a call back...try and be as helpful as you can on the phone and have respect as well I guess'.

(BDC telephony team member)

Treating customers with respect and doing so consistently, irrespective of their circumstances, was identified as a key element in providing a professional and dignified service. However, a small number of staff did suggest that other staff members sometimes make moral judgements about customers.

A further factor that staff in all areas felt was of relevance was continuity and experience of staff. In some areas, particularly in the BDCs, high levels of staff turnover and employment of inexperienced staff can have a negative impact on the way in which staff are able to respond to customers.

Office environment

Most of the staff respondents indicated that changes in the office environment have been a positive development, making jobcentres a more pleasant and welcoming place. Whilst the open plan approach was largely perceived as an improvement, it was also acknowledged that this has had some repercussions in terms of privacy for customers, particularly when there are limitations on the availability of private rooms, though evidence from office staff in response to other questions suggested that these were available when needed (see Section 5.3).

The atmosphere within the jobcentres was felt, by staff respondents, to be friendlier, partly because of the reception that customers now receive, and partly because access has been limited largely to those that have a pre-arranged appointment and, therefore, a purpose for being there. This demonstrates the 'double-edged sword' of some of the changes, given that the implementation of an appointment-based system has also been identified as a potential cause of dissatisfaction amongst some customers and some staff associate restrictions on footfall as negative.

External factors

Only a limited number of staff identified any external factors that contribute to the satisfaction/dissatisfaction of customers. Where this was raised, it was largely in relation to the portrayal of the service in the media, which was felt to influence customers' negative perceptions of the organisation:

'...they don't put the full truth out...or they word it in a way which causes a bit of panic with people so of course when they come in they're already on edge.'

(IB Adviser)

Most recently, the reporting in the media of changes to the system bound up with the introduction of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) to replace IB and Income Support (IS) paid on incapacity grounds for new customers, was identified as having contributed to increasing customer concerns. In particular media coverage of the focus on activation of groups that have in the past been inactive, is a driver of this.

3.2.3 Changes in customer satisfaction over the last year

Staff views on changes in customer satisfaction over the last year were mixed. Whilst most staff suggested that levels of satisfaction have increased over this period, a significant minority indicated that satisfaction levels had reduced and others felt that there had been no change. The extent to which customer expectations are perceived to have increased was also an influential factor in relation to this issue, with some staff indicating that increased expectations of customers can then result in overall dissatisfaction. Staff identified a wide variety of reasons for the changes in levels of satisfaction. These included the impact of AJCS on enabling face-to-face resources to be focused on those most in need of them. Against this some staff continued to raise concerns about the quality of service offered through non-face-to-face contact and as a result of more recent labour market trends such as increasing unemployment and work volumes resulting from this.

3.3 Evidence from customers

There was considerable variation amongst customer respondents involved in the qualitative research in their views of Jobcentre Plus. A significant number expressed dissatisfaction, some more extreme than others, while a smaller number indicated that they were, in general, satisfied with the service that they received. While this difference of opinion is interesting and the discussion of the specifics of customer satisfaction below is certainly relevant and worthwhile, it should be noted that there are strong methodological reasons for the balance of satisfaction reported in the qualitative work with customers to differ with that reported by staff and by customers themselves in the Customer Satisfaction Survey (Johnson and Fidler 2008). These are discussed in Section 2.6. The implications are that the discussion

below is not representative of all customers' experience but the problems and difficulties reported do provide greater and richer depth in relation to the types of difficulty experienced by the relatively small proportions of customer groups who report dissatisfaction.

Levels of satisfaction amongst customers are largely determined by their specific experiences, which relate closely to their individual circumstances. Anecdotal evidence from the respondents highlighted a range of scenarios in which they perceived that they had received a poor level of service. The specifics of individual cases were often unique, but served to illustrate more general points about a range of pertinent issues. Dissatisfaction was most frequently expressed in relation to benefits, staffing and access issues, although a number of other areas were also identified as a source of concern. Further details of these are presented below.

3.3.1 Benefit-related issues

Customer respondents largely echoed the views expressed by staff members in that receipt of benefits is the initial priority for many of them; and experiences in relation to this area were frequently identified as being unsatisfactory. The intricacies and nuances of individual cases, depending upon personal circumstances, the different benefit types, and eligibility for a range of additional benefits such as free prescriptions and council tax, underpinned a considerable amount of the concern, and highlight the importance of responding to each case on an individual basis.

More generally, customer respondents identified issues relating to: poor levels of transparency and communication in terms of eligibility; the rapid cessation of payments if appointments are missed, even when they feel there is good reason for this; inconsistency of provision of information about benefits; the timeliness of benefit payments; and problems associated with the role of benefit eligibility rules in generating dependency, for example by making it difficult to take short-term employment.

A number of respondents had experienced what they perceived to be a sudden and unexpected halt in payments, which had much wider repercussions in terms of paying bills and rent, and being fined by banks or building societies. It was not always clear, however, based on customer responses, whether this was related to sanctions, changes of circumstances or other reasons.³ In addition, there was some confusion about eligibility criteria in relation to a range of benefits, as well as the availability of financial in-work support (e.g. Working Tax Credits) once employment had been secured.

3.3.2 Staff attitudes and support

Jobcentre staff are the point of personal contact that customers have with the benefit and job broking system, and, therefore, frustrations with the system can often be articulated as frustration with staff. Overall, customer respondents

³ There is a discussion of sanctions and conditionality-related issues in Section 4.2.3.

tended to express mixed views in terms of the way they had been treated by staff. A large proportion were positive about the interaction that they have had with staff members (particularly those who were able to see the same member of staff at each interview) and were able to distinguish between the attitude of the individual, and the constraints of the service within which they operate. For example:

'Some of the staff have been really lovely, I think that's my view of the staff themselves rather than anything the service provides.'

(IB customer)

There was, however, widespread perceptions of inconsistencies in the delivery of customer service especially variations in the nature and quality of interaction with different individual staff members. Whilst it was acknowledged that some members of staff make a real effort to provide support and assistance, a number of customer respondents were less positive about the interaction that they had experienced:

'...they just make you feel absolutely worthless. And when you're out of work anyway and you've been out of work for a long time you do feel quite worthless, so for them to...make you feel more in that way is just absolutely disgraceful.'

(Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customer)

Respondents frequently referred to *'being treated like a number'* and made reference to the impersonal nature of the service. This has been exacerbated by a customer perception that time limits are imposed on the length of appointments and that, as such, staff have a 'tick box' attitude and focus on completing forms, rather than providing constructive advice and support in terms of job search. In one focus group there was a strong feeling that staff only provide this additional support to vulnerable customers, or those who are behaving in a particularly obstructive manner, and that if you express a willingness to look for work, then you are expected to manage that process yourself, to some extent echoing staff concerns about customer satisfaction with self-service expectations:

'If they perceive that you are actually looking for work then they think they don't need to try.'

(JSA customer)

Whilst some respondents were comfortable with the move towards a system dependent on the more proactive behaviour of customers, others were concerned that they had not been given sufficient information about the facilities that are available to them in order to take the appropriate action.

3.3.3 Access

Problems with access to services were raised by a number of customer respondents. These tended to relate to two main issues, namely, the constraints of the appointment system and difficulties getting through on the telephone. In relation to the first, there was some frustration about the rigidity of the system

of appointments, and the perception that it is acceptable for the customer to be kept waiting after the appointed time, but that any late or non-attendance by the customer themselves will be penalised. The appointment-only system was also felt to have contributed to the development of a more impersonal service. Possibly of more concern to respondents, however, were the difficulties of access to services via the telephone. A number of respondents had waited in queues on the telephone for a considerable period of time, some of them using pay-as-you-go mobile phones which impose considerable costs. Problems with telephone access were encountered by those seeking to contact services in relation to both job search and benefits.

A number of additional access problems were identified by a smaller number of respondents including difficulties following the closure of the local jobcentre, confusion over the location for initial signing-on, lack of facilities for disabled customers, and having to queue outside jobcentres, in all weathers, before being able to use Jobpoints or Warm Phones.

Other areas in relation to which a smaller number of customers expressed dissatisfaction include:

- the provision of conflicting advice and inaccurate information in relation to both benefits and job search;
- lack of variety and limited availability of appropriate jobs;
- prevalence of temporary jobs and/or out of date information on the Jobpoints;
- inaccurate information such as out-of-date address information or inaccurate benefit history records held on Jobcentre Plus computer systems;
- discomfort and frustration with the role and prominence of security guards in jobcentres; and
- lack of support with wider issues, e.g. childcare.

Overall, levels of dissatisfaction amongst customer respondents were quite high, with some individuals vitriolic about the service they have received. Others were, however, more measured, and a number acknowledged the wider policy environment within which the organisation operates as a key factor governing their experiences:

'I have no problems with the employees at the jobcentre at all. Quite the contrary, they are courteous, professional and polite...but I think the employees within any organisation are only as good as those that issue the directives, and...I find some of those directives questionable.'

(IB customer)

In a similar vein, some customers suggested that the wider constraints on Jobcentre Plus staff severely limited their ability to be able to provide tailored services to meet individual needs:

'All they're doing is following a set routine. They have to follow that set routine otherwise they themselves get problems. But unfortunately because they've got to follow it and some of them follow it extremely rigidly it causes problems'.

(JSA customer)

In addition to their general levels of satisfaction, customer respondents were also asked to identify the best and worst aspects of the services provided by Jobcentre Plus, and to describe their experiences in a single word, phrase or sentence. The best and worst aspects largely reflected earlier, more general comments. A number of customer respondents identified the Personal Advisers as being the best aspect, particularly those who were able to continuously see the same member of staff. Others, however, identified Advisers as the worst aspect of the service, indicating that they can be 'belittling' and 'arrogant', again suggesting variation in the quality of interaction. Waiting times on telephones was another issue frequently identified as the worst aspect of the service, as was the lack of communication between the different parts of the service, and the rules and regulations governing eligibility for benefits and payment levels, especially in relation to IB and qualification for the full benefit entitlement (which is based on having made sufficient National Insurance contributions). Other areas identified as being the worst aspect included the poor quality of available jobs, misinformation, time taken for processing of claims and the lack of provision for those with higher level skills. One customer indicated that the service is fine, unless your requirements are, in any way, out of the ordinary. His experience had been frustrating:

'...to my horror, I sat down and worked it out, it actually took four years before I...was able to access the right person to tell me exactly where I stood with my benefits as regards to returning to work...the next problem on from that is although I notified the jobcentre and housing benefit and everybody else that I was starting work, told them how much I was expected to earn under the permitted works scheme, etc, etc,...Seven months later I'm still waiting for them to make the alterations in my benefit.'

(IS recipient)

3.4 Conclusions and interpretation

- Some of the findings from staff appear to reflect a degree of mistrust between staff in the different parts of the organisation. For instance, staff in jobcentres appeared to suggest that a cause of dissatisfaction for customers relates to processing times and the capacity of BDC telephony teams to answer customer calls and arrange call backs from processing staff. By contrast, staff in BDCs reported that initiatives in jobcentres to reduce unappointed footfall, such as AJCS, may drive satisfaction/dissatisfaction. It may be that staff are correct in both regards, but in interpreting this data it is notable that a degree of lack of trust between these two parts of Jobcentre Plus has been noted by other research (Nunn *et al.*, 2009).

- Findings from customers appear to contradict those from staff, with the former indicating a much more significant degree of dissatisfaction than the latter appear to expect. However, there are strong methodological reasons to indicate that this is what should be expected. This means that while customer findings reported above are not representative they provide rich data on the types of experience that lead to dissatisfaction overall.
- Customers raised concerns about the costs of contacting Jobcentre Plus over the telephone, especially using mobile phones. This has been a subject of national debate (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2006; National Audit Office, 2006; Social Security Advisory Committee, 2007) and has been explored in other research. Changes have also been made which were not necessarily in place when the sample groups involved in this research made their new claim, such as the introduction of a freephone number for the new claims interview. However, other research (Nunn *et al.*, 2008a; Nunn *et al.*, 2009) suggests that these may not have been sufficient to fully off-set customer concerns and pilot schemes are being tested with further revisions to the freephone access to address this issue.
- Customer responses in relation to waiting times for Contact Centre and BDC telephony services could not be verified and it was not always clear when the calls they referred to took place. As such it is not possible to discern whether this was during a period where there were acknowledged problems with the operation of telephone services or whether customers were referring to the period since then when acknowledged improvements to the service generally have been introduced. Focus group discussions and the nature of the sample (see Section 2.6) meant that the specificity with which these issues could be addressed was limited.
- The findings from some customers that indicate they are dissatisfied and experience difficulties, even where they might be regarded as able to use self-help channels, suggest that careful attention needs to be paid to the decision making processes that restrict access to face-to-face contact and these should not just follow pre-defined indicators such as qualifying for particular benefits. Some customers who do not qualify on the usual measures as vulnerable or a particular priority nevertheless, may sometimes benefit from additional or face-to-face support.

- A very strong theme in the customer focus groups related to the extent to which they felt they were treated with respect by staff. Customers complained that they felt they were treated in an impersonal way and that this reflected negative assumptions held about benefit claimants by staff members, as well as the general culture of the organisation. Whether this is true in individual instances is hard to judge. This does not, though, mirror the findings from discussions with staff. However, these customer findings may reflect the cultural and behavioural changes that Jobcentre Plus, in implementing Government welfare policy, is trying to achieve among unemployed and inactive benefit claimants. It is notable that recent announcements suggest an enhancement of these activation efforts rather than a retrenchment of them in the face of the economic downturn. There are two implications to draw from this. The first is that Jobcentre Plus customers are not 'customers' in the normal sense of the word and the organisation is not about satisfying them in the normal sense associated with customer satisfaction. Rather, it aims to help them in a transition toward work, which may involve, at times, disagreeing with customer preferences and applying coercive measures to drive the desired behaviour change (such as sanctions). As such, customer satisfaction for Jobcentre Plus needs to be understood differently to that which it is normally thought about and some degree of dissatisfaction is both to be expected and potentially also desired, albeit driven by desirable and intended service impacts rather than unintended ones. The second important implication is that given the policy intention to expand the focus of activation measures and a contracting labour market, there may be a fall in satisfaction in future survey results as these two factors combine. While it is arguable that the extension of activation measures⁴ such as conditionality and sanctioning to new groups may ultimately drive up satisfaction because of the associated support that will run alongside them (Department for Work and Pensions, 2009) it may be that these more positive effects will only be noted over a longer-period of time and as economic recovery takes hold. Nevertheless, should declining satisfaction be measured in future survey research, this apparent deterioration may not be a matter for concern but an intended policy impact and attention will need to be given to disaggregate this carefully.

⁴ Activation refers to the process of encouraging jobseekers to undertake active and effective job search activity. Activation measures include the promotion and checking of work-related and job search activity at Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) and encouragement to broaden the range of employment sought in new claims and Work Focused Interviews (WFIs). They also include harder measures such as sanctioning (stopping benefit payments) for failing to satisfy the conditions of eligibility for JSA (which is that the recipient must be 'available for and actively seeking work').

- Findings from customers and staff raise issues related to the new claims process and benefit processing in particular. These issues need to be carefully understood. First, the methodological biases involved in this research suggest caution and reference to benefit processing time statistics suggest that the vast majority of new claims are processed rapidly and within agreed target times. This data shows that on average, over the first three-quarters of the 2008/09 performance year IS claims were processed in 8.4 days, JSA claims in ten days and IB claims in 12.2 days, well inside the target ranges of ten, 11.5 and 15 days respectively. Performance on these targets was also well within target ranges for 2007/08 when many of the respondents involved in the qualitative work will have been making their most recent claim for benefits (Jobcentre Plus, 2008a). What this research suggests, is that in the minority of cases where problems do emerge in the new claims process they may not always be dealt with effectively, that the process and performance management regimes themselves may mitigate against this and that such problems have a lasting and wider impact on customer satisfaction with the organisation and its services as a whole.
- Customer feedback about a perceived lack of flexibility for Jobcentre Plus staff, particularly Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) staff and Advisers, to be able to tailor services to meet individual needs is a primary concern for Jobcentre Plus in the future and may simply strengthen the case for already planned reforms in relation to individualised service delivery, for instance through the Flexible New Deal.

4 Explaining the survey findings

4.1 Summary

Box 2: Summary of explanations for key survey findings

- There are differences in the drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction between different benefit groups. These include the importance of activation-related issues and a perceived lack of training opportunities as a cause of dissatisfaction among Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers. The difficult context in which JSA and some Incapacity Benefit (IB)/Income Support (IS) customers find themselves has an important impact on their satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus. The higher levels of satisfaction found in the Customer Satisfaction Survey for lone parents may result from the voluntary nature of provision, the increasing availability of childcare and the ability to build stable and positive relationships between lone parents and their specialist Advisers.
- The research did not suggest any credible reasons why some ethnic minority groups may be less satisfied with Jobcentre Plus. Some plausible but largely speculative explanations for lower levels of male satisfaction were offered which related to masculine expectations about jobs which may be out of date but nevertheless have an important impact on satisfaction among male job seekers.
- The research suggests few credible explanations for regional differences in customer satisfaction, except in the case of London, where more challenging labour market conditions may lead to problems associated with the volume of work and staffing.
- Explanations for the small minority of customers who report, in the Customer Satisfaction Survey, that they are provided with incorrect or contradictory information may include the difficulty of communicating complex messages about the benefit system.

Continued

- Problems related to changes of circumstances arise from a complex interplay of organisational and process dynamics such as communication between different organisational units and competing target-driven priorities, coupled with communication difficulties with customers.
- The relatively small number of complaints made by customers in relation to those who have wanted to make a complaint at some point may result from a combination of staff who deal with potential complaints before they arise, customer apathy and mistrust of Jobcentre Plus and customer responses to the formality of the complaints process.

4.2 Satisfaction and drivers of satisfaction for different benefit groups

4.2.1 Summary of survey findings

The Customer Satisfaction Survey suggested that there are some important differences in the levels of satisfaction between different benefit groups and that different causal factors underpin this for different groups. For example, the survey suggested that JSA customers were considerably less likely to be satisfied and more likely to be dissatisfied than were other customer groups. In addition, it showed that JSA customers were more likely to be in regular contact (because of the requirement to 'sign on' every fortnight to demonstrate availability for work) and that they were more likely to have used office-based facilities such as Warm Phones or Jobpoints. Following on from this their satisfaction was, therefore, also more likely to be affected by office conditions. Conversely, IB and IS customers' satisfaction was more likely to be impacted on by the accurate and consistent provision of information. Perhaps reflecting health concerns, IB customers were more likely to report some form of barrier to accessing Jobcentre Plus services than other customer groups. Finally, several groups appeared to be disproportionately satisfied or to have noticed an improvement in services. Lone parents for instance, fit both of those categories while non-white survey respondents were most likely to report an improvement.

4.2.2 Explanations from Staff

Staff respondents were specifically asked to explain a number of findings from the Customer Satisfaction Survey, in relation to benefit groups. In relation to lower levels of satisfaction from JSA customers, staff tended to suggest that this resulted, in the main, from the stricter conditionality and mandatory activity that applies to this customer group. In order to claim JSA it is a requirement that customers are 'available and actively seeking work'. This is checked through Fortnightly Job Reviews (FJR) where staff ask job seekers to prove their job search activity over the previous weeks, including, where relevant, that they applied for specific vacancies. Where this is not proven, there is scope to refer customers to Decision Makers

who may sanction them by removing benefit payments for a defined period. Most staff suggested that it was this level of conditionality and the pressure placed on customers to prove their efforts to actively seek work that led to lower levels of satisfaction:

'...there is a stricter criteria for them receiving their benefits. They have to sign on every fortnight, they have to demonstrate that they are available and actively seeking employment in order to be eligible for that benefit. Whereas people on IS and IB, it's a lot more relaxed and might just need to attend an interview every six months or occasionally.'

(Advisory Services Manager (ASM))

Clearly, levels of satisfaction are likely to be lower for this group where there are also, by definition, likely to be higher levels of sanction. In addition, several respondents suggested that this explanation needed to be set alongside a lack of available support for this customer group. So the pressure to demonstrate job search activity was contrasted with the relative lack of support and advice that staff can provide at FJR interviews which are strictly time limited. In a continuation of this theme, some staff suggested that dissatisfaction among this group may be generated by their inability to get help with some common barriers to employment. Examples offered here included financial help with gaining certificates that are frequently required to be able to take up certain positions:

'...a lot of other things like funding, you know, Labourers, Construction Workers, need a CSCS [Construction Industry Occupational License] card. They can't get one without the money, without a card, they can't get a job. "Have we got the funding?" "No, I'm afraid not,"...so that, sort of, thing...'

(FJR Officer)

In relation to the longer-term unemployed who the Customer Satisfaction Survey also suggested were less satisfied than other customer groups, explanations from staff continued these themes. Staff suggested that much of the dissatisfaction related to three interlinked dynamics: First, longer-term unemployed customers are more likely to be more negative in any event as a result of disillusionment and disappointment at not being able to find work, and staff suggested that this is likely to negatively impact on customer perceptions and satisfaction. Second, this is combined with a continuation and an increase in the activation focus from Jobcentre Plus, whether it be in the form of weekly signing (rather than fortnightly) or mandatory activity (e.g. in the form of entry to New Deal programmes). In the context of despondency regarding previous efforts to find work and future prospects some staff speculated that this was likely to further erode satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus.

'It happens a lot that people get up to three months and they're fine then suddenly they realise they're heading for six months unemployed. Then you see it in them and they say, "God I've applied for 200 jobs, I've been for interviews, and nobody wants me...I've come second" and..."What am I doing wrong? What's wrong with me?"...[this affects satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus] because they [see] us as part of the system....And I think they do see us as part of the barriers and of course they have got to prove that they are actively seeking every fortnight...I'll say to them, you know "what have you done to find work? Where have you looked? Can you show us who you have been to see?" And there's this, "well I've applied with them before and I've sent applications off they've got my details and you are asking me again". And I think that that is, you know that can be a bit of a bind.'

(Customer Services Manager)

Finally, some staff respondents suggested that some long-term customers may be dissatisfied because the additional help they begin to receive after being unemployed for a long period of time (six months in the case of younger customers and 18 months in the case of others) may be perceived as too little too late. In this final respect some staff suggested that moves to increase Adviser flexibility to refer customers to provision to help them overcome their barriers to work before the more significant unemployment scarring takes hold may be beneficial. In addition to these explanations, some staff suggested that the very long-term unemployed may already have been through the different programme provision available and therefore, be left with a sense of despondency that none of this has been effective.

In addition, staff were asked to explain why lone parents might be particularly satisfied and to be reporting an increase in satisfaction. It was notable from staff responses on this issue that lone parents are seen as a priority group across the board with all staff being able to cite examples of awareness raising about the services offered to lone parents in a way that is not necessarily the case for other customers. In addition, on a similar theme, though not necessarily helping to explain higher levels of customer satisfaction, staff appeared to be more obviously aware of the direct link between what they were doing in providing services to lone parents and high level Government policy objectives than is the case in other respects. For example, several respondents made a direct link between achieving the Government's child poverty objectives, parental employment and their role in supporting lone parents.

More directly related to explaining higher levels of satisfaction among lone parents, staff respondents tended to stress three mutually reinforcing dynamics: First, respondents suggested that there is greater and more varied support available to lone parents in the sense of assistance in overcoming barriers to work and in the form of financial incentives. In terms of improvements, several staff respondents reported increasing availability of childcare as a result of extended schools legislation and increases in nursery care provision. Second, respondents noted the scope for building a supportive rapport between lone parents and

Lone Parent Advisers and this is often reflected, for instance, in a greater level of feedback from customers who are successful in finding work. Thirdly, respondents suggested that the voluntary nature of provision and requirements (for example Work Focused Interviews (WFIs)) meant that these were often seen as more beneficial by customers, helping to enhance the quality of relationship between customers and Advisers. The voluntary nature of assistance also has links with the variety of provision available to lone parents, which staff suggested was often tailored not to getting customers into work directly but on tackling barriers to work (for instance confidence) in an effort to move them closer to the labour market on a gradual basis.

The responses are interesting in and of themselves but they also highlight important dynamics to be borne in mind for future work on customer satisfaction and in relation to understanding the likely impacts of future policy changes. In this context, staff themselves raised the prospect of declining customer satisfaction in the future as harder-edged activation measures are extended to lone parents and Employment Support Allowance (ESA) customers in the future. Importantly, the driver here may not simply be policy and practice changes themselves but media and public perceptions of those changes:

'There's a lot of kind of media you know kind of input as well in terms of how benefit changes are reported in the media that people feel that the Government is just here to kind of get them off their money and back into work whereas reality for a lot of people with health conditions – that might not happen very quickly, it might be something that's more of a long-term approach.'

(Disability Employment Adviser)

4.2.3 Explanations from customers

The qualitative fieldwork provided a deep insight into the types of experience and factors which underpin reported dissatisfaction, especially where this discussion was relatively unprompted. These are explored in more detail below for each of the main benefit groups.

Jobseeker's Allowance customers

Much of the dissatisfaction expressed by JSA customers appeared to be rooted in various ways to the activation and work-first approach of Jobcentre Plus and in particular to the way in which conditionality shapes their interaction with services. For instance, in several focus groups, unprompted discussions centred on a perception that staff do not trust customers or suspect that they are not really actively seeking work. Some reported that this had a significant impact on their self-esteem and that this reinforced existing feelings of negative self-worth which resulted from their experience of unemployment in the first place.

'Well it makes you feel quite worthless actually, but that's how they treat you, that's how they want to treat you, you know. I just don't feel like they want you in there, I never felt like going in there, you know, because they just make you feel absolutely worthless. And when you're out of work anyway and you've been out of work for a long time you do feel quite worthless, so for them to, you know, make you feel more in that way is just absolutely disgraceful. I think they like the power.'

(Female JSA customer)

These feelings were widespread but there were differences between and within focus groups on the extent to which this was driven by staff behaviour and attitudes per se or whether it resulted from systems, processes and policy. For instance, some customers were adamant that their negative impression was driven primarily by an institutional culture which was reflected in staff behaviour and attitudes. Others suggested that staff were as sympathetic and helpful 'as they could be' within the systems and rules that apply.

Here, conditionality-based rules governing service provision or its local implementation appeared relevant. For instance, some customers reported dissatisfaction arising from being asked to wait long periods of time at FJRs, if they were only slightly late for their appointment even if it appeared to the customer that staff were not busy in the meantime. Others expressed dismay at an apparent tension between 'work-first' pressure to remain active in job search and a perceived lack of help. This was particularly raised in relation to FJRs, where some customers were particularly displeased at being constantly pressured to demonstrate their job search progress while having insufficient time to be able to be helped in any meaningful way. In several focus groups a continuation of this theme arose for customers who had been moved to weekly signing, where they felt that the help available did not justify the intervention. Rigidity in service provision was a wider issue raised in several focus group discussions, for instance relating to taking short-term employment and the availability of substantive training provision.

One respondent commented on the experience of sanctioning (temporary stoppage of benefit payments as a result of not satisfying conditionality requirements) as a negative driver of satisfaction. The tension between work-first/activation and the labour market opportunities open to customers was also raised in several groups. This was highlighted in several respects. For example, respondents in several groups raised concerns at the quality of vacancies held by Jobcentre Plus, with several respondents suggesting that these vacancies were either limited in nature or often out of date (e.g. already filled). In other cases, customers complained about the prominence of agencies advertising vacancies with Jobcentre Plus. Importantly, in the current climate, several respondents suggested that they were dissatisfied by what they felt to be a tension between the prevailing economic climate and the activation emphasis of service provision. In essence, their responses suggested that the result of facing pressure from Jobcentre Plus to engage in active job search on the one hand, and the lack of available jobs in a contracting labour market on the

other, had a detrimental effect on their satisfaction. In particular, there was some evidence already from customers that new types of customers were entering the unemployment benefits system whose satisfaction may be negatively impacted on by their perceptions of the implications of conditionality.

In a similar vein, some older, especially male, JSA customers reported that they felt that it was unlikely that they would be able to find work because of age-related employer preferences. There was also some confirmation of evidence sourced from staff that suggests that at least part of this dynamic is related to gendered labour market expectations and economic change, with some male (and especially older) JSA customers feeling that the type of jobs that suit their skills and experience are simply no longer available in the local labour market or are not available through Jobcentre Plus vacancies. Finally, several JSA focus groups included discussion of customer perceptions that the education and training opportunities open to them through Jobcentre Plus are relatively limited, and where they are available, access is governed by what appears to them to be relatively arbitrary and unnecessarily rigid rules such as qualifying time spent on benefits.

Another theme in JSA focus groups related to access to services and assistance. Again, this manifests itself in a variety of different ways. For example, some group discussions focused on the relative crowding of offices and a consequential difficulty in accessing services or channels such as Jobpoints or Warm Phones. Other common issues related to access to jobcentres and a feeling of dissatisfaction related to attempts to reduce footfall in offices. As such several groups included discussion of dissatisfaction with security guards who had prevented them accessing the jobcentre or at being asked to wait outside offices, including in unpleasant weather, while they queued to use these channels. Developing this theme several discussions focused on a relative lack of help available and a suspicion that other customer groups may be able to access greater help. Though it was acknowledged that this differential service provision was often on the basis of 'need' and individuals' capacity to help themselves, it nevertheless fed into a feeling of disgruntlement, and in some cases appeared related to the noted sociological trend of white working class alienation (e.g. Páll Sveinsson, 2009) and reflects wider public perceptions (often inaccurate) about differential access to welfare provision by different ethnic groups (Hall, 2009:22). The tenor of these responses was two-fold: First, the suggestion was that it is unfair to restrict access to services for people who may be able to help themselves but were, nonetheless, deserving of help and support. Second, this discussion appeared to question the extent to which subjective decisions could be made about customers' capacity to help themselves. Other service accessibility issues raised related to jobcentre closures, with several groups suggesting that this was a factor behind feelings of dissatisfaction.

A further cause of dissatisfaction related to data quality and handling. In some cases, JSA customers reported problems, inaccuracies or inconsistencies in data held about them by Jobcentre Plus. This was raised in relation to new claims where

some customers suggested that their National Insurance number was related to inaccurate benefits history data or where they were unable to have inaccuracies corrected later in their interactions with the organisation.

An additional set of issues causing dissatisfaction related to process and service delivery issues. Again, new claims came up repeatedly as an issue, with discussions suggesting that customers see the process as fragmented and involving too many stages and points of contact. It was suggested that at times this creates unnecessary or unhelpful confusion, including increasing the scope for incorrect or contradictory information provision. A practical example here involved a customer visiting a local office to undertake their initial meeting with a Financial Assessor (FA) to sign their new claim statement but not being informed of which side of a large jobcentre to enter from, and then having their interview rescheduled because the confusion led to them being late. It is notable that dissatisfaction with new claims impacted negatively on satisfaction with the organisation more generally, potentially undermining efforts at building future relationships between Advisers and customers in support of job broking and activation assistance. A final issue in relation to service delivery related to continuity of staff contact, for instance in Adviser meetings and also at FJR, where it was felt by some that a lack of continuity meant that they continually faced the challenge of persuading staff that they were 'genuinely' trying to find work, rather than gaining access to assistance. It was suggested that where continuity is available, customers are able to access more help because they don't have to continuously overcome that barrier.

Finally, several groups also included discussions about benefit payment levels, which were unsurprisingly seen as too low and therefore, a cause of disgruntlement with Jobcentre Plus.

IB customers

At the outset it is important to note that the discussions with IB customers revealed a much more mixed picture of satisfaction. This reflects the Customer Satisfaction Survey findings which suggested IB customers were more likely to be satisfied and less likely to be dissatisfied than JSA customers. While the balance of discussion in the IB focus groups was still toward negative experiences, the overall impression left by the discussions was more positive than that for JSA customers.

Five main themes emerged from the focus groups with IB customers in relation to the experiences and perceptions that shape their satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus: First, much of the discussion related to staff attitudes and customer perceptions of their treatment by staff. As might be expected, the findings here were mixed, with some repetition of the themes identified by JSA customers. However, the general tenor of these discussions was much more positive than for JSA customers with perhaps a majority of the discussions on this theme suggesting that customers felt that staff treat them well, albeit at times with this being hampered by rules or regulations governing service delivery and benefit eligibility. Indeed, in one focus group there was an extended discussion of customer perceptions of the pressure

that staff are under and how this might occasionally and understandably affect their demeanour towards customers.

A second and prominent theme in IB focus group discussions related in various ways to new claims experiences, benefit eligibility and the complexity of the benefits system. New claims experiences elicited similar responses to those from JSA customers with a greater emphasis on the impact of confusion. Indeed, many respondents appeared to have some degree of confusion about the status and nature of different benefits and organisational responsibility for them. Here concerns with eligibility also extended to confusion, anxiety and dissatisfaction with (in)eligibility for wider associated benefits such as Housing Benefit (HB), and help with prescription and dental costs. IB customers are not automatically eligible for help with prescription costs for example, whereas IS claimants are automatically eligible, though there are additional mechanisms for claiming help with prescription costs for IB customers (National Health Service, 2008). Clearly, many of these factors are outside of the remit of Jobcentre Plus, but the discussions suggested that they all had a bearing on IB customers' satisfaction with the organisation, at least partly as a result of confusion about organisational responsibility for these wider benefits and complexity overall. A further, and frequently mentioned, cause of dissatisfaction for IB customers related to medical examinations and the results of these to determine initial and continuing eligibility for IB. Several respondents suggested that at some point they had undergone a Jobcentre Plus medical assessment (Personal Capacity Assessment) which resulted in their IB payments being stopped and these respondents tended to take issue with the medical judgement underpinning this.

A third set of concerns raised related to Government policy in relation to inactive benefits. For some this was a continuation of resentment about their previous ineligibility for IB for medical reasons which they suggested was, in fact, related instead to cost saving motives. In other cases, several customers complained about being asked to attend WFIs and the emphasis that was put on moving towards work:

'I've got emphysema...all they wanted to do was to get me down to meetings to get me a job...[I was] pushed and pressurised. Oh, it made me a nervous wreck and I've been out of work two years in [the past] 45 years...I had depression and everything...I got alcohol dependent. It was a nightmare.'

(Male IB customer)

In other cases respondents suggested that they were interested in moving towards employment but that the rules around IB, access to training and permitted work and the quality and nature of vacancies held by Jobcentre Plus did not help them make this transition. One respondent suggested that the impact of wider publicity about welfare reform, including television advertisements about benefit fraud, had impacted negatively on their perception of the motives of Jobcentre Plus as an organisation, and its outlook on benefit claimants.

An additional and related theme centred on communications. Several respondents suggested that they felt that occasionally benefits-related communication was

poor and failed to take into account individual needs. For instance, some felt that the way in which eligibility decisions were taken was confusing and that the benefits system generally lacks clarity. In addition, some respondents suggested that the preference for postal communication was slow and outdated given the availability of electronic communication.

Access to services was the fifth and final theme in IB customers' discussions, with individualisation being a major issue. Several respondents suggested that they felt that individually tailored services designed to meet their own specific needs are not only desirable but necessary given the variety of problems and difficulties faced by this specific customer group. However, where this was raised, the clear implication was that service delivery is currently insufficiently tailored to these needs, in their view. In addition to health-related communication difficulties this extended to other examples of mainstream service provision. One customer reported that they had been unable, due to their specific health problems, to access an appointment on an upper floor of a jobcentre. While the appointment had been arranged downstairs on the ground floor to accommodate these mobility problems, the respondent was dissatisfied that this meant that the meeting had to be conducted openly in a busy office rather than in a more private area. Other respondents were concerned that they were no longer allowed to use jobcentre channels such as Warm Phones to contact other public services, such as to apply for help with prescription costs.

IS customers

Six main themes emerged from the qualitative focus group discussions with IS customers, many of which overlap, to an extent, with the findings from IB and JSA customers. For example, several focus groups included respondents who reported on how their satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus had been impacted on negatively by previous experiences of being sanctioned while on JSA. This had occurred for a variety of reasons with the most common appearing to be missed FJR signing. Though most respondents offered perfectly reasonable reasons for not attending and in some cases suggested that they had communicated this to staff, these obviously could not be verified. However, continuing the same theme, some respondents also complained about activation pressure while on IS and suggested that the sole purpose of Jobcentre Plus was to promote work as an alternative to benefits, with the suggestion being that this is unsympathetic to genuine problems faced by these customers. Others suggested that they had faced pressure from Advisers to look for or take jobs that they felt were unsuitable in some way or that encouragement to get a job was inappropriate because of their health condition. Where sanctions had been applied, several respondents identified the negative impacts of this and effects on associated secondary benefits, particularly HB.

On the other side of this equation, an equal amount of dissatisfaction was reported by customers who suggested that they would like to work but that there was insufficient help and assistance to allow them to do this. Several respondents cited recent Better off in Work Calculations (BOCs) undertaken at WFIs and reported disappointment at the relatively small amount that they would be better off if they took work and that this was particularly the case when changes in eligibility for HB and transport to work costs were taken into account. Other respondents spoke of other barriers to work and suggested that Jobcentre Plus was less helpful than they hoped in this regard. For instance, one respondent highlighted the inability of Advisers to help with arranging childcare while others spoke of a general lack of interest in their aspirations or in identifying and supporting appropriate training provision. On this latter point several respondents suggested that they had been able to broker this kind of support (e.g. course fees) but this had been heavily dependent on them finding the specific course and arguing strongly to be supported in accessing it.

The issue of problems with benefit payments and the linkage between these and other benefits, such as HB was raised by many respondents who reported frequent delays or problems in payments, though these clearly could not be verified. Like other customer groups, several IS focus groups dwelled on issues of perceived fragmentation and difficulties with the new claims process and that this had led to apparently lengthy delays in receiving their first payments. In this regard several groups included respondents who had tried to access Crisis Loans from the Social Fund and the general tenor of discussions on this subject was negative, suggesting these loans are difficult to access. In relation to Crisis Loans and to Disability Living Allowance (DLA), and to an extent IB, several customers suggested that they perceived these benefits to be accessible only if the 'correct' language was used in the application, with the suspicion being that opaque 'buzz words' need to be cited to be able to successfully claim them.

Some respondents identified staff attitudes as a key driver of satisfaction, but responses were mixed on whether this generally led to satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Some respondents were suspicious of staff motives and regarded them as relatively unsympathetic to their problems, while others reported that staff had gone out of their way to provide help, support and encouragement. Several focus groups included discussions which emphasised how much customers value individualised and tailored service delivery, overlapping with the IB findings.

A final theme related to accessing services with complaints and dissatisfaction being linked to mobile call charges, queues and restrictions on the use of Warm Phones. In addition, several respondents reported dissatisfaction at being turned away from face-to-face provision without an appointment. One group included discussion of accessibility problems related to mobility and upstairs meeting facilities.

4.3 Differences in satisfaction

4.3.1 Differences in satisfaction related to gender and ethnicity

Summary of survey findings

The survey findings suggested that male customers and customers from black, Chinese and mixed-race backgrounds were more likely to be dissatisfied than other groups. Staff involved in the qualitative research were asked to offer potential explanations for this. It was not possible to construct customer focus groups that would allow these issues to be pursued in the customer research.

Explanations offered by staff for the survey findings

Many staff respondents found it difficult to identify concrete reasons for the differences in satisfaction according to gender and ethnicity, although a significant number offered some sort of explanation for these findings.

A number of reasons given related to cultures of masculinity and expectations about the role of men, their role in the family and employment. It was suggested that this generated greater pressure on men to find employment and work of a particular nature, which may not accurately reflect those jobs available in the local labour market or the vacancy stock held by Jobcentre Plus. The predominance of female staff within jobcentres, and the difficulty that some males may have in interacting with them, was also offered as an explanation for their dissatisfaction. A number of responses relating to male stereotypes were also put forward, for example suggesting that males are, in general, less patient, more aggressive, more vocal and expect more support than women. However, while plausible to an extent, all these potential explanations are largely conjecture and were not supported by concrete evidence.

Explanations for higher levels of dissatisfaction amongst black, Chinese and mixed race customers were more limited. The majority of staff who were able to offer an explanation suggested that language barriers could be the key issue, with some potential for misunderstandings during the use of interpreters, but as one acknowledged:

'I thought language barriers was one of the reasons why somebody would be less satisfied...I know language is the biggest problem with some of the communities that we see; but [for] mixed race and black communities [it] is normally not an issue.'

Other explanations offered included: that there may be cultural issues relating to claiming benefits; that there could be a perception of prejudice amongst customers from these groups; that some customers in these groups may face complex claimant processes, for example, in relation to residency tests; and that there may be an issue because Jobcentre Plus staff tend not to reflect the communities within which they work. However, these responses, as with those relating to language, could equally be applied to other ethnic groups.

While the survey indicated that certain ethnic groups are less satisfied with services than others, it also found that non-white customers, other than black, Chinese or mixed race, were more likely to have noticed an improvement in services. A small number of staff indicated that this could be because services for these groups have actually improved, with the organisation's commitment to equality and diversity now emerging more strongly and the provision of increased training in this area. Whilst some suggested that these groups now receive more support and that work with disadvantaged groups and communities has increased, another commented that:

'...we don't pick on specific groups to actually improve on, but we're trying to improve ourselves right across the board and those groups who've been disadvantaged before would see a difference in service now.'

Overall, in relation to each of these issues, staff were clear that they treat all customers equally, regardless of ethnic background or gender and that, as such, it is difficult to identify service-related issues to explain these findings.

4.3.2 Differences in regional satisfaction

Summary of survey findings

The Customer Satisfaction Survey suggested that there was some statistically significant differences in overall satisfaction between different regions. In particular, the survey suggested that customers in a first set of regions (London, the South East, and Wales) were more likely than customers in other regions to express dissatisfaction. A second group of regions incorporating all but the West Midlands had very similar levels of overall customer satisfaction, ranging from 79 per cent to 83 per cent. Third, the West Midlands was a strong outlier to this with 87 per cent of respondents to the survey suggesting that they were either satisfied or very satisfied. These three groups are used as the basis to structure the discussion below in relation to explanations for different levels of satisfaction.

Staff explanations for differences between regions

Despite the methodological changes, the research with staff contained a small deliberative element which involved regional findings from the Customer Satisfaction Survey being presented to them and respondents being asked to comment or offer possible explanations for these.

Less satisfied regions

Respondents in each of the three regions that the survey responses marked out as less satisfied were first asked to explore any potential reasons for the differential level of overall customer satisfaction and were then asked about a range of other issues on which customer responses varied from the average; in some cases these might be regarded as positive and in others they may be regarded as negative:

- **London** – staff respondents in London were asked not just about why the region's customers appeared to be less satisfied than elsewhere but also about why the survey showed related findings such as relative dissatisfaction with service channels such as Warm Phones and Jobpoints and the relatively negative perspective that customers had about how staff in the region treat them. The explanations for these customer findings from staff suggested that there were potentially several related explanations for this: First, staff respondents noted the specificity of the London labour market being more flexible with more rapid turnover and often having a more transient population. Second, they argued that this meant that London offices were disproportionately busy in terms of caseloads and footfall and third, they suggested that these dynamics impacted upon staff turnover which meant that not only was there a larger proportion of new staff than elsewhere but that the region often had a lower levels of staff and potentially higher caseloads. These factors were thought to account for elements of customer dissatisfaction with staff and with service channels. For example, it was explicitly suggested that staff under workload pressure may be less sympathetic than elsewhere and more inclined to stick to or reduce interview times. In addition, it was suggested by several respondents that customer volumes led to busy public areas and frequent and long queues for Jobpoints and Warm Phones. A further area of difference from the rest of the country was a disproportionately high number of customers reporting that they had made changes of circumstances and that they had had recent contact with Jobcentre Plus. The explanation provided for this by staff related to a disproportionately transient population with high levels of homelessness and customers in temporary accommodation. This might in turn provide a further explanation for higher levels of dissatisfaction than elsewhere because both the Customer Satisfaction Survey (Johnson and Fidler, 2008) and the First Contact Survey (Nunn *et al.*, 2008a) both suggested that changes of circumstance were a vulnerable point in the quality of service delivery to customers, with just under a quarter of respondents suggesting that they experience a problem after reporting a change of circumstances. This may also partially explain why staff respondents were reporting high levels of workload. Staff respondents were also asked about why customers might have reported (in the quantitative survey) improving customer service over the last year, albeit from and to a comparatively low level. No plausible explanation was offered. One respondent suggested that the introduction of the Accessing Jobcentre Plus Customer Services (AJCS) initiative may have impacted here, but this is both a national project and therefore, would not be expected to impact on London disproportionately and was for the most part rolled out after the survey interviews were undertaken in 2007.

- **South East** – respondents in the South East were asked about the comparatively low level of overall customer satisfaction in addition to several other findings where the region appeared to be different to the rest. These included a higher proportion of customers reporting that they had been given incorrect or contradictory information; a higher proportion of customers reporting that they had considered making a complaint; and a larger proportion indicating that telephone calls had taken a long time to be answered. Staff respondents were not able to offer a credible explanation for these issues, other than identifying issues such as declining staff head count that have affected the whole country.
- **Wales** – respondents in Wales were asked about a range of issues including the lower levels of customers who reported that they were treated with privacy and respect, the ability of Jobcentre Plus to provide relevant information, satisfaction with Jobpoints, and satisfaction with access to services. Of those explanations that were offered, the most credible related to the relative rurality of Wales in comparison to other Jobcentre Plus regions in explaining dissatisfaction with the accessibility of offices.

Averagely satisfied regions

In averagely satisfied regions the amount of discussion generated by regional variation was understandably less substantial. This was focused around specific areas where there appeared to be variation in the quantitative Customer Satisfaction Survey findings. In the East of England, findings from the Customer Satisfaction Survey suggested that customers were slightly more satisfied than average with aspects of face-to-face provision, including face-to-face meetings and the way in which they are treated by staff (for example, in relation to respect, politeness and privacy). Part of the explanation offered for this by staff respondents in the qualitative fieldwork was the smaller office sizes than some other regions because of its rural nature and that this has beneficial effects in terms of customer satisfaction because staff have closer and more continuous relationships with customers and are therefore, more approachable. Though these issues were explored in the qualitative work with staff respondents in the region, no definitive potential causal explanation was identified. In the North West higher usage of Warm Phones was explained by some staff respondents as a result of not fully or rigidly applying AJCS and continuing to allow customers to use these phones to contact employers or other parts of the public sector, though this was clearly not widespread as other respondents expressed surprise at this and the reduction of Warm Phone use. No real explanation was offered for lower levels of satisfaction with being treated with respect as an individual. In the North East high levels of satisfaction with telephone response were explained by decisions to create telephone response teams in some jobcentres, though again, the extent to which this was region-wide or region-specific was not clear.

More satisfied regions

In the West Midlands, customers indicated in the survey that they were more satisfied than elsewhere with telephone provision, and some staff respondents suggested that this may be because of additional resource put into Benefit Delivery Centre (BDC) telephony response (though it was not clear that this was more the case in this region than elsewhere) and some offices had implemented dedicated telephone response teams, which could potentially explain the difference. No real explanation was offered for the higher level of satisfaction overall.

Evidence from customers

Evidence sourced from the qualitative research with customers on satisfaction was inconclusive in respect to explaining regional variation. Clearly, customers themselves are not able to identify or attribute causal factors for regional differences but it was possible to identify passages in focus group discussions and analyse these for differences on an individual regional basis and in aggregate by grouping the regions according to the categories suggested above. This analysis showed some marginal support for staff reflections on the busy nature of London offices and the potential explanation that this leads to queues for office-based services and channels (such as Warm Phones and Jobpoints). However, comparing other low satisfaction regions (South East and Wales) with average and high satisfaction (West Midlands) did not suggest any causal influences on satisfaction at regional level that would stand up to robust scrutiny.

4.4 Explanations for access problems raised by the survey

4.4.1 Summary of survey findings

The Survey indicated that around 19 per cent of customers think that their access to services is limited in some way, with this being slightly higher for IB customers than other customer groups. Access appeared to be a cross-cutting issue however, and was related, in the main, to services and channels. The findings from the staff and customer follow-up are therefore reported in the sections dealing with those aspects of customer satisfaction (see Chapters 5 and 6). The evidence reported in this section is largely derived from the telephone follow-up with customers who had suggested in the survey that they had experienced difficulties in accessing services or channels.

4.4.2 Evidence from customers

Customer respondents involved in the telephone follow-up research suggested that there were a number of reasons for this, all of which support evidence reported elsewhere in this report. For instance, some respondents suggested that they had experienced difficulties with organising an appointment, with one lone parent suggesting that it took two weeks to organise an appointment to resolve a

relatively straightforward query related to whether she should take up a job offer or not. Other reasons for reporting dissatisfaction with access to services related to office closures and distance to the nearest office, parking problems at the local office and the perception that the office environment is hostile and unwelcoming, all of which supports evidence reported in other parts of this report.

In addition, a range of barriers were identified by respondents in relation to the physical accessibility of the office, and the following issues were raised:

- a wheelchair user stated that there was no disabled access at the jobcentre when they last attended, therefore, they could not physically get into the office;
- a sufferer of arthritis said that there is no parking close to the jobcentre which makes it difficult to get to the office as he cannot walk very far with his medical condition;
- a few respondents discussed issues around accessibility for pushchairs – offices sometimes had stairs which made it difficult to get into the office;
- the route into the jobcentre via a subway was described as isolated and intimidating by a respondent;
- within Jobcentre Plus offices, three respondents with health problems (rheumatoid arthritis, back problems and a wheelchair user) reported that they had to walk up stairs to get to the relevant part of the jobcentre or a specific Adviser;
- the Jobcentre Plus office is not served by a bus route for one respondent; and
- living in a rural area makes it difficult to attend on a regular basis to use the job search facilities available in the office.

4.5 Explanations for problems with information and changes of circumstances

4.5.1 Summary of survey findings

The quantitative Customer Satisfaction Survey found that around seven per cent of customers reported that they had received information from Jobcentre Plus that subsequently turned out to be incorrect or contradictory (Johnson and Fidler 2008:47), a finding that was also supported by the subsequent quantitative First Contact Survey which suggested that nine per cent of new claimants experienced this (Nunn *et al.*, 2008a: 43). In addition, 24 per cent of respondents involved in the Customer Satisfaction Survey also reported that they had experienced problems after informing Jobcentre Plus of a change in their circumstances. These issues were explored in the qualitative research with both customers and staff to identify potential explanations for these findings which appeared to be significant areas of dissatisfaction for customers among the relatively small proportion of customers, overall, who are dissatisfied.

4.5.2 Evidence from staff

Evidence from staff respondents involved in the qualitative research suggested that they recognised that the quality and consistency of information provided to customers was an important issue in determining satisfaction and that there was scope for miscommunication. Several potential explanations emerged for why apparently incorrect or contradictory information might be given: First, several staff respondents suggested that customer-sourced findings from the quantitative survey on this issue need to be carefully contextualised. Staff suggested that there are occasions where customers may feel that they have been given incorrect or contradictory advice or information, even where this is not the case. This relates to the complexity of the information involved, the difficulty faced by some customers in communicating specific and complex information and the importance of nuance or detail in queries and answers. So for instance, one respondent highlighted an example where customers ask whether they can claim a Crisis Loan. Out of a concern not to give out inaccurate information she suggested that it is important that the answer to this is 'yes' but that this does not imply that the claim will be successful.

'...you have to be very careful not to misguide them as well. We can't tell someone that they can't put in an application for say a Crisis Loan although we know it's unlikely that they will get it unless they are seriously in crisis. And it's unlikely if they don't meet the eligibility rules but they still do have an entitlement to put that claim in. And we have to say to them, you know, it doesn't mean that you can't ask for it. But the chances that you'll get it are quite slim and they will then turn around and say, well you know you told me that I could put an application in and that it would go through. And we say, "well no we said you could put an application in and the probability was that it may not go through".'

(FA)

While staff respondents suggested that these nuances and caveats are explained to customers they do not always take this part of the message in, and other staff identified the work volumes and pressures faced by some staff in all parts of the organisation, which may mean that these are not always given or sufficiently stressed and explained. In other cases, staff suggested that customers understandably push for an answer to a query that may be outside the remit of a particular member of staff and again may not fully appreciate any caveat offered alongside information that they may be given:

'Very often because they will come in and ask us specific questions and we won't be able to answer their specific questions and they will push for an answer. And I think we will say to them, "we can't say this is specifically what will happen in your case but it may be that this will happen. And it maybe that you are eligible for this". So I think they would see that as contradictory.'

(Customer Services Manager (CSM))

However, staff respondents also acknowledged that there was scope for genuinely incorrect information to be offered by staff. Indeed, one Disability Employment Adviser (DEA) spoke with considerable frustration about a live issue with a customer that she was helping but where she had been unable, over a protracted period of time, to gain a clear answer to a specific question related to the customer's claim. Other staff raised a variety of explanations for these problems. These included suspicion of the skills and abilities of staff in different directorates, occasionally poor communications between jobcentres and BDCs, as well as a general comment that staff turnover may lead occasionally to staff being unable to answer customer queries accurately. In addition, staff respondents expressed concerns about the quality of induction training for all staff on the complexities, particularly of benefit rules for staff other than processors and complained in some cases that very frequent changes in rules and eligibility were often poorly communicated to staff, for instance by email rather than regular re-training. That said, staff respondents also acknowledged the intended separation in roles and responsibilities between the directorates but suggested that experienced staff who have had previous experience of working in a different role may be tempted to answer queries about issues which they are no longer responsible for, occasionally resulting in misinformation because their expertise is out of date. For instance, when asked to explain the proportion of customers who report incorrect or contradictory information provision, one Lone Parent Adviser replied:

'...because it's complicated...because experienced staff sometimes don't doubt themselves when perhaps they should, and don't check the current things, which they...we all should...'

(Lone Parent Adviser)

Staff in both jobcentres and BDCs were also asked to offer explanations for the relatively high proportions of customers who indicated that they encountered a further problem, such as having their benefit payments stopped, when they informed Jobcentre Plus of a change of circumstances. A wide variety of explanations were offered for this.

Both jobcentre and BDC staff argued that changes of circumstances that appear relatively superficial, nonetheless require significant evidence gathering and processing. So a change of address requires customers to fill in a separate form and sign it. The need for customers to provide evidence of this introduces a delay in the process. Customers may either do this in the jobcentre or post it to the BDC. In either case a delay in receiving that information is introduced and the change of circumstances cannot be actioned until that evidence is received. Further, many BDC staff suggested that they experience delays in receiving this sort of post because post-opening and sorting is centralised, meaning that there can be delays in evidence reaching the correct person in the BDC. Depending on the evidence provided there may need to be further checks because a change of circumstances related to address may actually generate further changes that the customer has not acknowledged, purposefully or otherwise, such as changes in the composition of the household or the income of a new partner.

Further, BDC and jobcentre staff suggested that customers often do not inform Jobcentre Plus of a change of circumstance in a timely manner. This means that the changes become much more complex and difficult to resolve, requiring a stronger evidence trail. This is coupled with evidence from staff respondents that a significant proportion of changes are from customers who may have 'chaotic lives' (for example, frequently moving address, changing relationship status or being homeless) making the changes more frequent and complex and the required evidence trail harder to accumulate. In this context BDC staff also again raised communication issues with customers as an important determinant of the success of the change of circumstances process. For example, conversations with customers about a change of circumstances may include customers being told that this may affect their benefit payments if they do not provide documentary information rapidly, but customers do not always acknowledge the importance of this until payment problems emerge.

In other cases both jobcentre and BDC staff suggested that changes of circumstances can be delayed due to volume of work pressures and backlogs in the BDC. Additionally, some BDC respondents suggested that changes of circumstances are of a secondary order of importance to achieving the Average Actual Clearance Time (AACT) target for new claims, meaning that new claims are prioritised over changes. That said, other BDC respondents suggested that there are times when changes of circumstances are prioritised according to different criteria such as customer need or the impact that the change may have on the customer (e.g. stopping payments as opposed to simply delaying a small increase).

These delays are important because in some cases registering but not processing a change of circumstances on the computer system may lead to benefit payments being stopped pending the full processing of the change, meaning that where customers are slow to provide supporting evidence or its receipt or processing is delayed, customers may experience problems with their benefit payments. This is even more significant because of the separate and contingent nature of the benefits system which may mean that other benefits are also stopped or overpaid.

4.5.3 Evidence from customers

Customer responses largely triangulated with those of staff, indicating that many had faced problems related to relatively simple changes of circumstances such as address. It was not always clear from customer discussions however, whether this was the result of delayed processing or failure to provide adequate and timely information. However, several customers did report having benefit payments stopped as a result of these problems and of this affecting other benefit entitlements.

Additionally, though, customers raised important concerns about changes of circumstances related to taking-up employment, especially short-term work or work that had a risk of being short-term. This was thought to be problematic because despite the 'rapid reclaim' process, some customers suggested that they had faced difficulties with rearranging benefit payments and that this had

difficult to resolve knock-on effects on associated benefits such as HB. It was clear from several focus group discussions that several customers had experienced these sorts of problems which is significant given their insistence that this would make them more risk averse in the future regarding taking up short-term or risky employment.

4.6 Explanations for complaints-related issues

4.6.1 Summary of survey findings

The survey suggested that 14 per cent of customers had at some point wanted to make a complaint about their interaction with Jobcentre Plus, with this being much more prominent among JSA customers than others. However, only three per cent of customers actually go on to make a complaint. The survey suggested that the reasons behind wanting to make a complaint were related to staff attitudes, a lack of knowledge among staff and problems with benefit payments. These issues were explored further in the qualitative fieldwork and followed up with both staff and customers.

4.6.2 Evidence from staff

Staff respondents in the qualitative fieldwork identified a range of issues that might motivate the reasonably significant proportion of customers (in the quantitative Customer Satisfaction Survey) to suggest that they have considered complaining at some point. These reasons largely mirrored staff conjecture about why customers might be dissatisfied and included acknowledgement of service-related shortcomings, an expectation that customers were dissatisfied about the extent to which they gain face-to-face contact with staff and a large number of staff who thought that delays or problems in the new claim process would drive this sort of customer response. BDC staff also acknowledged problems related to the loss of medical certificates and other documentation. However, staff were also keen to contextualise the survey findings, by noting the importance of customers' immediate social and economic context at times when they engage with Jobcentre Plus and a suspicion that the majority of complaints that customers might feel like making are actually related to legislation and Government policy rather than complaints about the nature of service delivery within those constraints. For instance, several respondents suggested that eligibility and payment levels were likely to be core drivers of complaints rather than customer service problems.

When asked to explain why so many customers who indicate that they have wanted to make a complaint at some point do not actually go on and do so, staff suggested that this was again the result of a mix of reasons. Included in these are customer apathy, as suggested by the survey findings and a lack of trust that no progress would be made as a result of the complaint or that this would result in problems for customers. It is worth noting that a number of staff respondents argued that these suspicions were untrue and suggested that they would welcome

more sensible complaints as a means of identifying problems and improving the quality of service delivery. Certainly, staff responses suggested that complaints are fully investigated and are taken seriously. They also offered some additional reasons why customers may not complain: First, they strongly suggested that at least part of the explanation is that many possible complaints are resolved by staff in jobcentres and BDCs as responses to aggravated queries before they get to the complaint stage. In this regard CSMs and BDC telephony response teams both deal with customer queries and repeat contact and are important resources to resolve potential complaints at an early stage, thereby negating the need to use the formal process. Second, some staff suggested that the formality and comprehensiveness of the complaints process may actually put some customers off, particularly that it is a written process. This formality was also felt to condition customer satisfaction with the outcome of the complaints process. Nevertheless, Jobcentre Plus does publish a leaflet explaining how to offer comments and complaints, covering informal as well as formal processes (Jobcentre Plus, 2008b).

Some staff suggested that the reason why complaints may not be resolved satisfactorily in the eyes of customers is because many complaints are related to benefit rules and regulations rather than how Jobcentre Plus has implemented them. Examples given were complaints about JSA sanctions or failed Personal Capacity Assessments which can lead to the discontinuation of IB:

'As I deal with a lot of the complaints, some of the complaints aren't... although they are unhappy with the system. The system is something that the jobcentre[s] aren't able to change. If they have a complaint it really needs to be to maybe somebody that can change the system rather than us. We have to see that they're following rules and the guidance. It is an allowance, Jobseeker's Allowance is an allowance so if you are job seeking we have to have proof that they are job seeking. And if we haven't, then we can't carry it forward. IB, they have to have a doctor's certificate and also their doctor may say they are unfit to do the job they're doing.'

(CSM)

Some staff also suggested that customers occasionally appear to hold Jobcentre Plus staff responsible for problems with benefits that they do not administer such as HB or tax credits.

4.6.3 Evidence from customers

When focus group discussions turned to the subject of why customers often report that they feel like complaining at some point but do not actually do so, a range of reasons were given, some of which triangulate with staff-sourced evidence. For instance, a large proportion of customers begin by suggesting some form of apathy, similar to the findings from the Customer Satisfaction Survey. However, the group discussions revealed deeper causal factors underpinning this. For example, discussion in several of the groups identified the relatively formal process as a barrier to customer complaints in several regards: First, some customers lack the

skills or confidence to make a written complaint, which is clearly important given that basic skills problems are a noted barrier to work and will, therefore, be an issue facing many of Jobcentre Plus' more vulnerable customers.

Some customers went further than this to suggest that the formality of the complaints system was not simply a barrier but was designed consciously to be so. On a slightly different note, some customer respondents talked of experiences which suggested that customers with mental health problems, at a vulnerable point in their lives, may not be able to negotiate a formal complaints system without help.

Other customer respondents in the qualitative research appeared to have a deep suspicion about 'the system' which meant that either they felt strongly that a complaint would simply result in no action, or that it might result in them being disadvantaged in some way. This was also the main reason cited by those customers who were involved in the survey and suggested that they had wanted to make a complaint but didn't.

'Because it's not going to change anything is it, they'll still, they'll still carry on the way they are no matter what you, no matter what we say and no matter how much we complain.'

(Male IS customer)

Indeed, some customers suggested that they felt that they had been singled-out by Jobcentre Plus and that they regularly had the phone put down on them because they had voiced dissatisfaction in the past. Clearly the research was not able to verify these experiences but it is possible that frustration at being unable to communicate effectively through the formal channels or to change the actual causes of frustration (such as benefit levels or eligibility rules) means that the discussion becomes heated and is terminated, generating additional frustration.

Among those customers from the survey who were followed up to provide more detail, several suggested that they had made official complaints. The nature of these complaints ranged from problems with sanctions, staff attitudes, negative experiences of external provision, a perceived lack of support and pressure to find or apply for jobs that customers thought were inappropriate. On further probing, however, few of these complaints appeared to have actually been formal written complaints and there was no clear pattern of why customers were satisfied or dissatisfied with the process of handling and responding to complaints.

4.7 Conclusions and interpretation

Several important themes arise from the qualitative research that require highlighting and further interpretation:

- Because of methodological limitations the research cannot hope to address all the issues underpinning customer satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus. However, perhaps because of the sampling, selection and methodological biases involved in the research, the findings help to understand in more detail the factors which underpin much of the dissatisfaction expressed by a small proportion of Jobcentre Plus customers in the quantitative survey.
- The research did not uncover sufficient evidence to fully explain regional differences in customer satisfaction, at least partly because of the imposed changes in methodological design. There was evidence, however, to suggest that London may suffer from particular problems related to the labour market which impacts both on work volumes and staffing issues, which might help to explain lower levels of customer satisfaction.
- There are important differences between the underpinning dynamics which explain satisfaction and dissatisfaction for the different customer groups. The Customer Satisfaction Survey suggested that JSA customers were less satisfied than some other groups. While a range of factors were suggested as explaining this lower level of satisfaction, one important set of explanations related, in some way or another, to measures and conditionality intended to ensure activation among customers. Some customers feel dissatisfied by this pressure, especially when it is combined with a lack of labour market opportunities or long-term unemployment. This is significant given the plans to further extend activation measures to other benefit groups as it may suggest that these groups will see falling satisfaction as measured by the Customer Satisfaction Survey into the future. This is especially the case since one of the groups that is currently ranked as most satisfied – lone parents – appear to be satisfied to some extent at least because of a lack of activation pressure and a softer, more progressive focus on gradually tackling barriers to employment. This does not necessarily question the policy approach but should lead to a more nuanced understanding of the role of customer satisfaction in relation to Jobcentre Plus services and suggests that care will need to be taken to accurately interpret future survey findings, especially in relation to disaggregating intended from unintended effects.
- The focus group findings suggest JSA customers are disappointed with the training and development opportunities available, though again, this appears to be the result of a policy preference for a 'work first' approach rather than an unintended consequence of poor implementation and delivery.

- Some of the discussion among JSA customers, in particular, underlined the role of Jobcentre Plus as a key interface between the State and disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups. In the current economic and social context this may mean that the organisation has a key role to play in relation to social cohesion. Care should therefore be taken to ensure that the impact of the organisation is to promote social cohesion and equality, in the way suggested by recent research (Nunn *et al.*, 2008b:84) and the social mobility White Paper (HM Government, 2009:10).
- The research suggests that there are two sets of issues around the expectation that some customers are able to help themselves that have not emerged in previous Customer Satisfaction Surveys: First, the suggestion was that it is unfair to restrict access to services for people who may be able to help themselves but were, nonetheless, deserving of help and support. Second, this discussion appeared to question the extent to which subjective decisions could be made about customers' capacity to help themselves. In either case, these issues may need to be considered in the development and implementation of policies designed to personalise and tailor support to individual needs, such as in the Flexible New Deal.
- The Customer Satisfaction Survey has continually raised the issue of customers who report that they have been provided with incorrect or contradictory information. While this research suggests that there are issues related to the staffing, training and organisation of Jobcentre Plus that may partly explain this, perhaps an equally important explanation centres around difficulties in communicating complex information to customers in difficult circumstances. As such, the planned simplification of the benefits system (Department for Work and Pensions, 2009) may help to improve this component indicator of satisfaction in the future.
- The discussion of changes of circumstances and the impact that these can have on continuing claims was notable in that unintended consequences of processes could create the conditions in which customers are at risk from slipping into severe poverty. Procedures around changes of circumstances may need to be reviewed to prevent these conditions from occurring, including improving information flow to and from customers and speeding up processing.
- Changes of circumstances, like problems arising in new claims and the administration of benefits more generally, have the capacity to damage customer trust in the organisation, undermining its credibility with customers. This is significant, and in this respect customer satisfaction is important in helping Jobcentre Plus to achieve its wider organisational and social objectives, which are ultimately expressed in the various Public Spending Agreement Targets to improve the overall rate of employment and to narrow the gap in the employment rate between vulnerable groups and the average.

- At least part of the explanation for the disparity between the number of customers who suggest that they have wanted to make a complaint against Jobcentre Plus and those who actually go on to do so is explained by the ability of staff, particularly CSMs and BDC telephony staff to deal with problems and resolve them before an official complaint arises. However, it also appears that one unintended consequence of the comprehensiveness and formality of the customer complaints system is that it dissuades some customers who lack confidence and basic skills from complaining. It may ultimately be in the interests of the organisation in improving its understanding of customers to provide an alternative, less formal mechanism for making complaints while still capturing any learning that arises from them.

5 Customer satisfaction with services

5.1 Summary

Box 4: Summary of issues related to service provision

- Both staff and customers concurred that the central features of the new claims process in relation to customer satisfaction were the speed, accuracy and efficiency of the data gathering and processing procedure. Several staff and customer respondents suggested that the current system is fragmented and that there are multiple points at which delays can be introduced. Customers are concerned about call charges and the ease of getting through to a Customer Services Agent. Staff and customers also agreed that it is important that staff treat customers with respect and politeness throughout the new claims process.
- Both staff and customers have concerns about the effectiveness of Fortnightly Job Reviews (FJR) as an intervention given the very limited amount of time available. While there have been some attempts to develop a differentiated and more flexible approach to give some customers more time, customers would welcome further flexibility and the availability of genuine support rather than just what they perceive as a superficial 'checking-up' exercise. Both staff and customers noted that the conditionality side of this interaction predominates and because it is not matched with support, this introduces a tension in customer relationships with Jobcentre Plus. Both staff and customers suggest that timeliness and professionalism are important, especially given the potential for customers to be sanctioned where they fail to keep to appointments.

Continued

- Staff suggested that new claims Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) can be difficult because customers are at that stage predominantly concerned with ensuring that their new claim is processed quickly. Staff respondents suggested that WFIs are a balance between nurturing and respecting customer aspirations at the same time as ensuring that these are realistic in the context of the available labour market opportunities and that customers may see this latter element as dissatisfying. Customers suggested that they see WFIs as a means of applying pressure on them to take up available job opportunities but that these are frequently perceived as unsuitable in some way. Customers are often frustrated at the lack of training and other support available and matching of this support to longer-term career aspirations as opposed to quick job outcomes. Customers also complained of a lack of privacy in WFIs. Both customers and staff noted that declining job opportunities made WFIs harder to deliver in a satisfying manner.
- Some staff and many customers were heavily critical of the quality of mandatory external provision and some customers suggested that some basic functions undertaken through contracts (such as CV support, help with job search and access to the internet for job search) could be provided in-house as and when required rather than coming after a qualifying period. Some other types of provision, often non-contract, was regarded as more positive, especially in relation to specific groups such as disabled people and lone parents.

5.2 New claims

The new claims process was explored in relation to customer satisfaction with both staff and customers during the research process. Issues explored with customers included the new claims interview, the speed in processing the claim and subsequent receipt of benefits and the decision making process.

5.2.1 Staff perspective

The core factor identified by staff respondents in the qualitative research as influencing customer satisfaction with the new claims process was the time taken to process a claim and for the customer to receive their first benefit payment. In addition, numerous other issues were also considered to contribute to the overall success and satisfaction of the new claims process for the customer. A realistic indication of the processing time and a comprehensive explanation of the new claims process were viewed as central to customer satisfaction, particularly by jobcentre staff. The provision of this information ensures that the customer understands the expectation of their contribution to the process (e.g. producing the correct identification and documents) and therefore is less likely to encounter delays in processing and unrealistic expectations are eradicated. Within the process of providing this information, it was considered that customers should also be given the opportunity to ask for clarification of process-related issues.

It appears that a small proportion of customers continue to be dissatisfied with the telephone new claims data gathering process. Jobcentre staff continue to have concerns regarding time taken for customers to get through to the Contact Centre and some staff respondents suggested that this was likely to be a driver of dissatisfaction among customers. However, it was not clear how accurate or up to date these concerns were in view of the large scale changes that have been implemented in Contact Centre call handling over recent years. Dealing with customers in a professional, polite and courteous manner with a degree of empathy and respect was recognised by all staff as imperative to customer satisfaction.

5.2.2 Customer perspective

Respondents' experiences with the new claims process varied widely. The length of the new claims interview was considered to be lengthy and somewhat laborious taking up to 45 minutes:

'You're on for 45 minutes and then they say go to the jobcentre and they say go through it all again in the jobcentre.'

(Female Incapacity Benefit (IB) customer)

The time taken to get through to the Contact Centre was also viewed as challenging by customers; while some respondents managed to speak to a Customer Service Agent (CSA) on their first attempt with only a short period of waiting, others reported multiple attempts to get through and long waiting times. The cost of the call caused concern for a small proportion of respondents, however, the majority of respondents did not raise this as an issue and a few were fully aware of the free 0800 number available for the new claims service. These customer-sourced findings need to be set in full context. Due to the age of the sample involved, many of the customer respondents in the qualitative research will have undertaken their new claim process prior to the changes in the Standard Operating Model (SOM) around the new claims process that have been introduced over the last two years; including the freephone number, the unification of the inbound and outbound new claim call and the implementation of a system of 'virtual' call handling which has substantially improved call handling and answering performance.

A small number of respondents expressed the view that they preferred the process which they had engaged in over previous years and would rather see an Adviser face-to-face for the initial new claims interview. Despite this, some respondents were grateful that the new claims process excluded them from what they perceived as complex and time consuming form filling, particularly if they have basic skills needs:

'...when you were, like, filling in the form with a lady or whatever, you were there for an hour, an hour and half. Whereas you've got the form there already, fair enough you've maybe spent half an hour on the phone but that doesn't matter. You've got your form ready and you're in the office half an hour and that's you signed, sealed and delivered and away you go.'

(Female Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customer)

However, several customer respondents suggested that subsequent to their telephone new claims interview, they had received their completed customer statement through the post with several and important errors in it. Some customers also suggested that they had also received duplicate copies of these statements. This appeared to be a common experience among all benefit groups, though again, it needs to be noted that changes to the new claims process have since been introduced and JSA customers no longer receive their printed statement in the post and instead are asked to visit a jobcentre to check through their statement with a Financial Assessor (FA). Having said that, there is still evidence to suggest that these changes may have not completely eradicated erroneous data gathering or entry during the telephone new claims process (Nunn *et al.*, 2009).

Evidence from customer respondents in the qualitative research triangulated with that from staff respondents (see Section 6.2.1). Customers also complained about the fragmentation in the new claims process, suggesting that where delays were experienced, this was the cause:

'At one time you used to have to come down and make an appointment and go and fill the forms in, now you have to do it all by the phone, they send you the forms, you sign them and send them back, that is where the cock up is. Because by the time they've sent them to you, you've signed them, sent them back and then they've gone to that department, whereas when you used to come in, you were directly in the department and your money was a lot quicker coming through for the first time, wasn't it?.'

(Female Income Support (IS) customer)

5.3 Fortnightly Job Review

Throughout the various stages of the research, both staff and customers were asked to provide their views about the FJR and which factors influence customer satisfaction with this service.

5.3.1 Staff perspective

Providing customers with a specific time to sign on as opposed to a broader time 'window' was regarded as positive by staff respondents to the qualitative research. This was largely because they saw it as eliminating or reducing queues and as a result having a beneficial impact on the atmosphere in jobcentres. However, this system does reduce flexibility for customers and staff acknowledged that this can have a negative impact on customer satisfaction, though clearly there are efficiency and outcome-oriented reasons for this system which might be seen to outweigh these problems. Staff also raised concerns about the scope to provide a meaningful intervention in the time available at an FJR. While this has been tackled in places by differential signing times, with some customers allowed a slightly longer appointment while others receive a slightly shorter one (for example, four

and seven minutes respectively instead of a blanket five minutes for all customers), staff still worried that they were not able to do much more than a perfunctory check on job search activity. In some cases staff suggested that this meant that they were not able to provide assistance and coaching on job search or to engage in any rapid job broking/matching activity. In addition, some staff suggested that time slots are so tight that they sometimes struggle to keep to appointment times and that where this results in customer appointments being delayed, the contrast with sanctions for customers missing appointments may be a driver of understandable customer dissatisfaction.

Staff were conscious about the mandatory nature of customers providing evidence of jobsearch and availability for work at FJR. However, they also noted that they needed to adopt softer communication styles to ensure that they implemented these obligations in such a way as it had as little negative impact on their rapport with customers as possible and acknowledged the fact that the majority of customers are genuinely trying to find work. The consistency of the relationship between FJR staff and customers was also recognised as contributing to building positive relationships, however many staff found it impossible to deliver such service due to staff shortages and other resource implications. FJR staff also noted the importance of maintaining good customer relations and their own role in providing a friendly and polite approach to customers.

5.3.2 Customer perspective

Customer respondents in the qualitative research offered views which suggested inconsistency in the delivery of the FJR service, for instance in relation to the timeliness of appointments, length of the review, continuity of staff, level of helpfulness and politeness received from staff. All these issues were reported by customers as influencing levels of satisfaction. Staff continuity at FJR over a period of time appeared generally to have a positive affect on respondents' perceptions of the service and in such cases led to an increase in satisfaction. However, the reported lack of flexibility, particularly in terms of the length of the review and timeliness was frustrating for many customers. For example, customer focus groups included discussions of customers waiting on occasions after the allotted time for their appointment. This was juxtaposed by customers with the implications of them arriving late for appointments which had often resulted in them being asked to return at an alternative time or even being sanctioned. Customers complained about a perceived unfairness of this but also of the additional expense incurred in making repeat journeys.

Customers interpreted the FJR process as essentially a 'checking up' exercise and an opportunity for staff to encourage them to apply for employment, with some customers using words such as 'pressurise' and arguing that the employment opportunities suggested at FJR were often unsuitable for one or more of several reasons including conflicts with childcare or other caring responsibilities, unacceptable salaries in comparison to previous employment, a lack of fit with career aspirations and concerns that the marginal gains (or even losses) of taking

these jobs would be insufficient to offset costs associated with employment or to incentivise the additional effort. Respondents who felt pressured by the process were largely dissatisfied; as a result this service was viewed merely as a box-ticking exercise. Two respondents described their experience as the following:

'It used to be a very busy and helpful place at one bit...but now you just go in and sign on and that's it...they just want to see the back of you.'

(JSA customer)

'As long as you made two enquiries a week for employment or whatever, that was it...they wasn't interested...there was no help coming forward suggesting things that I might be able to do...or courses or anything like that...nothing at all.'

(JSA customer)

An additional complaint voiced by customers was that the FJR service focuses too much on filling in forms and unnecessary paperwork in the short time available rather than offering genuine assistance with finding suitable employment.

5.4 Job search assistance and coaching

Customer satisfaction with the assistance provided for the job search service was explored with customers and staff. Whilst staff were asked about what influences customer satisfaction with this service, customers were asked to provide their views about staff knowledge and ability to advise about local labour markets.

5.4.1 Staff perspective

Customers are expected to keep a record of their job search activity to assist in the process of demonstrating that they are available and actively seeking employment and as a means of assisting in job search activity, for instance at both FJR (time permitting) and in WFIs. However, staff respondents to the qualitative research suggested that customers are not always wholly committed to this process, viewing it negatively as a means of 'checking up' on them rather than being supportive of their efforts. Staff viewed job search advice and support largely as a customer-led process, therefore creating awareness and signposting customers to relevant channels (e.g. website, Jobpoints) to search for jobs was typical. It was recognised that customer satisfaction with job search relied heavily on the channels accessible/available to the customer and any external provision which they may have received support from. For example, some customers are eligible for referral to external programme provision (e.g. New Deal or Pathways) that will support them in job search activities.

Staff suggested that while the scope for undertaking job search activities with customers had declined due to the restriction of time at FJR, they still see it as a core service. Staff reported that inexperienced staff are mentored by more senior

colleagues to support this activity and others reported engaging in extensive matching activities with caseloaded clients, contacting customers between interviews and appointments where relevant vacancies arise.

Staff also noted that the increasing volume of customer FJR appointments and plans to spread activation measures to other benefit groups, meant that they were no longer in a position to offer extensive face-to-face support for customers in job search activity. Instead, jobcentre staff suggested that they were aware of the need to support customers in developing their own job search capacity, using the Jobpoints as well as other non-Jobcentre Plus sources of vacancies, such as the local media.

By contrast to the experiences of 'front of house' staff such as FJR staff and CSMs, Advisers reported that customers are sometimes surprised by the extensiveness of job searches performed during WFIs. In addition, to support more in-depth job searches at WFIs, one jobcentre had put in place a 'jobs first' Adviser whose role was to support customers leaving a WFI to apply for any vacancies found during the interview, perhaps advising them on filling in an application form or making an approach to an employer, without actually doing this for them. In this way, it was reported that the jobcentre was mimicking some provider practices and helping to build on WFIs through the addition of a minimal additional resource.

The key driver of satisfaction for customers in relation to job search, according to staff, related to matching jobs to customer aspirations. However, Advisers noted the problems reported by customers (see below) about the availability of good quality jobs that meet customer needs and aspirations. This, they thought, was dissatisfying for both customer and Adviser:

'Well sometimes...an Adviser's hands are tied by what jobs are actually available. I mean, I know from my point of view it can actually be quite deflating when you're sitting down with somebody, especially somebody who's very, very keen...and then you sit and go through, like, vacancies and there's not very many there for a start, not very suitable for perhaps their needs, from my point of view lone parent customers want part-time work, family friendly work, there isn't very much of that certainly...'

(Lone Parent Adviser)

In this context, some specialist Advisers spoke about the importance of working with employers to design the types of employment patterns that their particular client group might be able to access. For instance, one Lone Parent Adviser spoke about the importance of increasing the amount of work that Jobcentre Plus does with employers to promote term-time and part-time employment. Moreover, several staff respondents noted that matching customers to suitable quality vacancies was rapidly becoming more challenging as a result of the current economic climate. This was the case in several respects: First, increasing work volumes was further restricting the time allocated for the FJR and scope to assist customers with job search. Second, the economic climate has also impacted on

the type of customer now engaging with Jobcentre Plus and using the job search service. For example it was noted that previously most customers had fewer skills, whereas the influx of customers more recently has been more skilled and trained in sector/industry specific employment. These customers may be highly skilled but lack any up to date knowledge of labour market and vacancy information and job search. They may also not easily match to the types of vacancy held by Jobcentre Plus, which in any case are declining.

5.4.2 Customer perspective

Customer respondents to the qualitative research suggested that they had a very different perspective on job search assistance from Jobcentre Plus. While some customers reported very good experiences with job search assistance, others were very negative, though this was often related to the quality of vacancies and employment available to them in the local labour market rather than service provision from Jobcentre Plus specifically, though this did also feature. In relation to the quality of vacancies many of the focus group discussions centred on the generally low quality of these for instance because of the wages offered and also the often temporary nature of these vacancies. In particular customers were negative about the role of agency vacancies. They suggested that taking work through agencies could pay-off by providing access to employment experience with employers that they would not normally be able to get, thereby improving their chances of longer-term employment with that or similar employers. However, they also suggested that there was a considerable risk that this would result in their benefits being stopped for a very short period in employment. Some respondents also complained that they felt that it was difficult to get even 'entry' level employment because of the regulation and certification of particular occupational-based skills, such as health and safety requirements, the Construction Industry Certificate scheme, Security Industry Accreditation and other licences. This was, they felt, an unnecessary and additional barrier to finding work. Customers also felt that it was often difficult to work out how attractive particular vacancies were because of the difficulty of calculating in-work benefit eligibility and levels. While many of these issues are outside the remit of Jobcentre Plus, they nevertheless had a bearing on customer satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus as an organisation, especially where they perceived the organisation to be complicit in perpetuating low quality employment either through registering vacancies, or through promoting registering with agencies as a conditional requirement of demonstrating active job search.

In relation to more directly relevant aspects of job search support offered by Jobcentre Plus, some customers were critical of vacancy information. This was regarded as often out of date (i.e. vacancies held by Jobcentre Plus were actually filled) and one customer complained that it would be easier to work out how attractive a particular vacancy was if salary information were presented in a consistent way. Some customers also suggested that Jobcentre Plus job search services, whether at FJR or in WFIs often resulted in pressure to take inappropriate vacancies that did not match either their needs or aspirations. Several respondents were critical

of the travel to work assumptions which underpin some job search support from staff, with customers suggesting this was often overly ambitious in relation to the wages for vacancies being considered. In other cases, customers complained that Advisers lacked specific occupational or labour market knowledge and therefore, unwittingly suggested jobs that they were unsuited for or were overly narrow in their attempt to find suitable vacancies.

'Well I'm a painter and decorator by trade and they want me to go and work for £5 an hour, I mean I was virtually getting that when I was an apprentice. I mean I've been in the trade 42 years.'

(JSA customer)

'I've only been a PA and an Office Manager, it's not you know, it's not rocket science but they didn't have a clue of what you would do in a day-to-day job or even how much you would get paid for it and you're correct, they want you to take a job for £12,000. I'm not being funny but how do I pay my childcare on that £12,000...'

(JSA customer)

Although issues relating to channels are covered in the following chapter, it is worth mentioning that a high proportion of respondents were disappointed with what they perceived to be inaccuracies or faults with the vacancy search process on Jobpoints and the Jobcentre Plus website. Both allow customers to search for vacancies of a particular occupational type and to limit the search on a geographical basis. However, when vacancies are displayed they are sorted into a priority list which more closely matches the search criteria and then a less closely matching set of vacancies. This second list is marked out by a change of colour and will typically include similar types of vacancies to those searched for but in different parts of the country. Customers widely complained therefore that the search function was not working properly but the likelihood is that they either did not notice the change in colour or there were no local vacancies matching the criteria used and so national ones were displayed instead. Nevertheless, whatever the explanation, the frequency with which this issue was mentioned suggests that some remedial action might be necessary.

5.5 Work Focused Interviews and labour market and training advice

Both staff and customers were asked to provide their views and opinions about any advice received about the labour market and/or training and WFIs.

5.5.1 Staff perspective

Staff respondents to the qualitative research suggested that a range of issues determine a good quality WFI and customer satisfaction with this. Advisers spoke about the difficulties of conducting an effective new claim WFI because customers

are frequently much more interested and concerned at that stage to ensure that their claim is processed and benefit paid. This means that occasionally the work-focused element of this initial interview is obscured with issues associated with benefits and sometimes Advisers suggested that they end up reviewing details of customer claims, and even noticing errors in the claim, whereby a customer may not be claiming additional benefits that they are entitled to for example. Some Advisers appeared to suggest that the commitment to undertake initial WFIs in the specified time (date of claim plus three days) means that the emphasis is on throughput rather than the quality and effectiveness of the intervention.

Advisers in particular provided rich data about the role and experience of WFIs. A common theme in these discussions related to the need to balance matching activity and a regard for customer aspirations with realism about the labour market opportunities available. Advisers acknowledged that a key determinant of customer satisfaction in this regard related to the scope to effectively match customers to job opportunities that fit with their aspirations. However, Advisers also noted that this needs to be realistic, in more ways than one. First, they suggested that the Jobseekers Agreements (JSAs) should not contain 'wish lists' of unattainable jobs. More soberly, though, they also suggested that realism extended to understanding and acknowledging contemporary labour market change and that customers may have to look outside their previous employment history to find work in the future. While Advisers suggested that this could lead to dissatisfaction, where customers feel that they are being pressured to take work that is not aligned with their aspirations, they also suggested that this could be positive where they managed to show customers how they may have more opportunities in the future if they were to commit to changing their aspirations. As such, Advisers suggested that WFIs were about providing a degree of 'pressure' for customers but that this may result in either dissatisfaction or satisfaction on the part of customers, depending on their reaction to it:

'I think they [customers] do [feel pressure]...the whole reason they're getting this benefit is that they've got to be looking for work and got to be getting a job so they probably do feel pressured but I don't think that's a bad thing because that's what they're here for, to get a job, you know. And then some people if they're not pressured they won't do anything. So I wouldn't think it was excessive pressure but there has to be a little pressure...what we're here for is to get them a job, nothing else. A sustainable job.'

(Customer Service Manager (CSM))

'They might not be satisfied, but I think that we have an obligation to tell them that "okay, it's nice to do what you've done before and what you feel secure and safe in, but those jobs are not around anymore and you need to move on and, and perhaps get some career advice and decide what you're going to do for your future". So I think we've got an obligation to do that. But yes, they wouldn't be satisfied would they? If you told them that they can't do that anymore, there's no jobs around.'

(Disability Employment Adviser (DEA))

Advisers also noted that this was occasionally about providing confidence building to customers where they have become discouraged by a failure to find a job or by a lack of self-esteem. As such, the job of an Adviser is often to help customers to see the opportunities that are open to them.

Overall, in undertaking this complex task of motivating customers and building their confidence Advisers suggested that accurate, detailed and up-to-date knowledge of the local labour market is crucial. They suggested, however, that in recent years they have experienced difficulties in maintaining this in the same ways as in the past. Previously they were able to undertake visits to employers and build relationships with them, identifying opportunities for caseloaded clients. However, this has become more difficult in recent years because of caseload volumes and the numbers of staff available. Nevertheless, they reported several different ways of addressing this: First, caseload conferences help to spread and share knowledge and opportunities for particular clients and in several interviews Local Employer Partnerships (LEPs) were suggested to be bringing benefits and opportunities for caseloaded clients that weren't available immediately prior to the LEP being established. In some other offices, specialist industry or sector knowledge was being developed by specific Advisers to try to match their capacity to local labour market needs.

However, a widespread theme in discussions with Advisers related to their concern with the types of work available locally, and in some cases this was clearly an area that Advisers thought would drive dissatisfaction.

5.5.2 Customer perspective

Customer perceptions on WFIs were difficult to disaggregate from wider dissatisfaction with the labour market opportunities open to them or to dissatisfaction with the role of Jobcentre Plus in trying to encourage all benefit groups to look for work that they can do. Some customers suggested that they perceived WFIs to be perfunctory and superficial exercises, either because they had barriers to work that could not be overcome (such as childcare responsibilities or drug problems) or because they perceived Advisers as not being sufficiently interested. Customers also complained that while Advisers were polite and friendly, they saw the role of the WFI as being to push them into work that may not be suitable. This was seen as negative or inappropriate by some customers, particularly those on IS or Incapacity Benefit (IB), but some JSA customers also raised these concerns. This appears to triangulate with Adviser-sourced evidence (above) that the process of matching customer aspirations to available opportunities can be emotionally challenging for both Adviser and customer:

'...and they want to give us menial jobs. We want something that we can aim for.'

(JSA customer)

'...when I said to him, "I want to do a job obviously that I want to do, because if I'm going get into [doing] a job that I don't want, then I'm not going stay there". And he just turned round to me and said, "well I don't like the job I'm doing but I come every, every day, so you just take what you're given".'

(JSA customer)

In some cases, customer discussions suggested that Advisers occasionally may advise customers that work is not in their best interests where they undertake a Better Off Calculation (BOC) which shows that the customer would be no better or only marginally better off in work.

Some customer discussions suggested that they felt WFIs were insufficiently long or too infrequent to provide the basis for a good working relationship between Adviser and customer. This meant that some customers suggested that even when they had continuity of staff in WFIs, Advisers did not remember them sufficiently to build constructively on previous meetings. Customers were concerned that this meant that Advisers were not able to adequately tailor the discussion to identifying and addressing customer needs and aspirations, meaning that WFIs were not effective.

A number of additional procedural issues were raised by customers which appeared to impact on their satisfaction with WFIs and indeed their effectiveness. These included customer complaints that appointments were not always kept or that appointments were made for awkward times, given their particular circumstances. For instance, some lone parents were frustrated that appointments were made at school dropping off or picking up times and several respondents suggested that they had been given appointment times before the jobcentre was actually open. Finally, privacy was raised as an issue in relation to WFIs. All of these factors were seen to undermine the customer – Adviser relationship and as such to negatively impact on the effectiveness of the WFI.

A proportion of customer respondents were disappointed with limited focus on training and development in WFIs. Customers complained about the qualifying periods for employment programmes and a lack of support for more in-depth training programmes. Many respondents reported that the training which they identified and subsequently approached the jobcentre for was not funded or supported; a number of respondents did not undertake the preferred training choice because they could not afford the fees or to lose their JSA benefit whilst undertaking the training.

'...I need a career. "Well, you need to train". "Well what courses are available?" "Well there isn't any for secretarial or office work. You have to pay." And I said, "Well I haven't got the money". So that's the help that I never got from them.'

(JSA customer)

Some customers also suggested that they would benefit from receiving advice or help with their CV at the WFI, rather than from an external provider.

5.6 Referral to external provision

Customer satisfaction with the referral to external providers was explored with customers and staff. Staff respondents were asked to provide an insight into what factors they considered to influence customer satisfaction with external provision and customers were asked to discuss their experiences of any training received and how that influenced satisfaction.

5.6.1 Staff perspective

Staff respondents in the qualitative research suggested that there are a wide range of issues which impact upon satisfaction with external provision and that this differs in relation to the different types of provision available.

In relation to mandatory provision (for instance New Deal Gateway provision), staff raised reasonably widespread concerns about the quality and effectiveness of this. Specific concerns related to the rather generic and often passive nature of this provision. Advisers recounted stories from customers that providers do not always adequately resource this type of provision or that customers are often left to their own devices. Even where this is not the case some staff suggested that generic provision is not always suitable. This is because those customers who would have found a job in any case will do so, while those who require more sustained and tailored interventions to resolve barriers to work are not helped. It was hoped by some that the introduction of the Flexible New Deal may help with this. Staff respondents also reported that customer dissatisfaction may result from being referred to mandatory provision but that this may need to be carefully understood and contextualised. Staff suggested that often, this dissatisfaction may result from the imposition of structure that these referrals imply, which customers may resent but at the same time benefit from over the longer-term.

Voluntary and more specialised provision was often held in higher regard by staff and specialist Advisers in particular. However, again, concerns were raised about the specific impact of this on customer satisfaction in several respects: First, some Advisers suggested that they lacked access to such provision or that customers have unrealistic expectations and frequently ask for referrals to, or support with, extensive training activity but do not fully understand the implications of jobs associated with this training. The example of HGV licences was given to substantiate this with many customers suggesting that they would like support with this without understanding fully the occupational requirements (such as periods away from home) of this sort of work. In other cases Advisers suggested that sometimes customers ask for very specific vocational training that they simply cannot access or support. Generally, there was felt to be a tension at times between the work-first approach of Jobcentre Plus and the demands of some customers for ongoing training, education and development. For instance, one staff respondent

identified JSA customers who engage in free provision from local colleges but are then mandated to go on provision or pressured to submit applications for jobs that would conflict with this. While the Adviser recognised the value of the education in question they also recognised the need to ensure that the customer is actively seeking and available for work. An additional concern related to waiting times for courses and programmes even where they are available. Some staff suggested that even relatively short waiting periods could see customer engagement and commitment dissolve.

In other circumstances, Advisers faced entirely opposite problems. For instance, in areas where the European Social Fund is available provision is often widespread but sometimes short-term, meaning that Advisers struggled to keep abreast of all the support that is available and how it is targeted at specific groups. Changes in the availability of contracted provision were also raised as a problematic issue for Advisers, with good programmes often disappearing and in some cases customers being reluctant to revisit a provider they have been to before, even if the nature of the programme has changed considerably.

5.6.2 Customer perspective

A range of issues was reported by customer respondents about external provision which affected customer satisfaction with the service. These triangulated substantially with the responses of staff. Customers offered mixed assessments of mandatory provision but certainly some confirmed the suspicions of staff that this was of a very general nature and often failed to help those that need specific intervention. Some customers reported little help from providers, inadequate or crowded facilities and even superficial adherence to the structure of the course with some participants allowed to leave shortly after arriving rather than staying for the whole day. In other cases, the nature of help provided was described as superficial:

'...and they'll say then "would you like to do some basic IT training?" They'll show you how to turn the computer on, press a mouse and then that's it.'

(JSA customer)

Indeed, several respondents suggested that this sort of basic mandatory provision would be better offered in-house rather than being contracted out. It was also noticeable that some local providers had very strong reputations among customers, either for being good or bad, with the determinants of this mostly being related to their effectiveness at helping people to find work or take useful steps toward finding work. Several providers received multiple mentions from customers as having a good reputation for helping people to overcome specific barriers or to make links with employers, through employer recruitment fairs.

Respondents that discussed experiences about job specific training (e.g. forklift truck licence) which they had undertaken with an external provider were generally very satisfied with the training received. Although in some cases completing the

training did not appear to make customers job ready or they needed to make an additional payment for a certificate or license which they reported that they could not afford.

Some respondents were clearly aware of payments and incentives in operation with private sector providers and in several instances expressed reservations about this. In some cases this was related to their resentment at providers having incentives to get them into work when they felt other outcomes (such as training) were more appropriate or that this led to a focus on jobs that the individual customer would not normally perceive to be appropriate:

'...if you find a job while you are on [name of provider] they get like a grand or something from the Government which is all well and good but they do try and stick you in jobs that you don't want to do so which is all well and good, it gets you into work but if you don't want to do it you are going to be there for about a month and then just go back on JSA so...'

(JSA customer)

5.7 Conclusions and interpretation

- Satisfaction with the new claims process was most heavily influenced by the time taken to process the claim and payment to be made to the customer. Additional factors which contributed to satisfaction include the manner in which customers are dealt with by staff throughout the process. Dealing with benefit issues promptly and effectively and delivering customer satisfaction in this side of Jobcentre Plus' remit appears to be essential in building trust with customers that can be used to support the organisation's wider objective of getting people back into work. With this in mind, there were some suggestions from Advisers that new claims WFIs may be better timed to occur after the FA interview. To some extent this coincides with customer evidence that resolving new claims problems is central to them shifting their focus to finding work.
- FJR was regarded as a difficult intervention by both staff and customers. Both sets of respondents suggested that constraints of time limit the effectiveness of any intervention and both also noted that efforts to prove that job seekers are available and actively seeking work involve challenging and sometimes emotionally significant interaction. Customer respondents tended to see this more negatively than staff who recognised the value of ensuring customers remained active in their job search. However, both sets of respondents effectively concurred that more flexibility or time to deliver a more substantial intervention may improve customer service and that continuity of staff may also help.
- Staff clearly see WFIs as an important intervention and recognise its role in motivating customers to adapt their behaviour and to help them find employment. Both customers and staff recognise the emotional nature of some of these discussions, though efforts to ensure that customer aspirations are realistic given local labour market conditions appear to lead to dissatisfaction among customers.

- For both FJR and WFIs procedural issues such as the timeliness and privacy of meetings were important in driving customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Where either were delayed because of Jobcentre Plus, customer trust and engagement with the purpose of these intervention appeared to be negatively affected.
- Both customers and staff suggested that mandatory provision is less effective than it might be, providing generic and, in some cases, low quality support for customers who would benefit from more tailored help. This appears to support the transition toward Flexible New Deal where the expectation is that services will be more tailored to individual needs.
- Customer reactions to FJR, WFIs and external provision appear to support the conclusion that these services are designed to move customers closer to the labour market and not necessarily designed to provide customer satisfaction. They appear to drive dissatisfaction among a proportion of customers, even where they are apparently delivered correctly and against their desired objectives.

6 Customer satisfaction with channels

6.1 Summary

Box 5: Summary of issues related to satisfaction with channels

- The office environment was described as clean, functional and comfortable. The open plan layout provided a more inclusive atmosphere and a less segregated office; however customers perceived the number of security guards as excessive and overbearing.
- The lack of privacy in Jobcentre Plus offices was reported by both staff and customer respondents to be a problem.
- Overall, respondents (staff and customers) had a good awareness of the channels available at Jobcentre Plus; however, there was less awareness of the website in comparison to other channels.
- Although respondents were aware of the channels available, they did not necessarily have a clear understanding of how to fully utilise the channels to their maximum capability.
- The majority of customer respondents had a preferred channel to access Jobcentre Plus services, depending on their individual circumstances. Factors which influenced their decision included office location, costs incurred for use of channel, comfort, assistance and support provided, ease of use and reliability of information.
- In relation to benefit type; Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers were most likely to use Jobpoints and the website to access employment opportunities.
- Throughout all the research with customers a general lack of face-to-face support was identified as a key driver of dissatisfaction, especially when combined with conditionality and activation pressure.

Continued

- Great importance was placed on the level of knowledge and attitudes of staff for face-to-face and telephone contact. Satisfaction with face-to-face contact also relied on the timeliness of appointments; similarly, satisfaction with telephone contact was dependent on how quickly calls were answered and call costs.
- In principle all channels were considered to have advantages by both customers and staff respondents, however a number of problems were reported relating to the reliability and access in relation to some of them.
- There was a distinct lack of clarity amongst respondents about what Warm Phones can be used for, with other problems related to availability, reliability and privacy also being raised.
- The website was not used by many respondents because they did not have internet access or computer literacy. The dissatisfaction experienced with this channel was contributed to by the lack of online experience and computer skills.

Throughout this chapter evidence from customers refers to evidence sourced both from the qualitative focus groups and from follow-up telephone research with customers initially involved in the survey.

6.2 Jobcentre environment and services

6.2.1 Jobcentre office environment

Awareness of their local Jobcentre Plus office and the factors which drive satisfaction when visiting the jobcentre premises were discussed at length with customers. More specifically, respondents were asked to provide their views about jobcentre décor, cleanliness, layout, atmosphere, security and aspects of the general environment.

The issue which caused the most concern to respondents was the lack of privacy in jobcentres. Whilst there was some awareness that a private room could be made available upon request, many respondents reported that this was not possible because rooms were unavailable or there simply were not enough in the jobcentre. A few respondents mentioned that the jobcentre which they attend was already addressing this issue and thus creating more private spaces for customer interviews. The collective concern was discussing and providing personal information in an environment susceptible to identity fraud. However, for other respondents more intense and personal issues regarding pride and dignity were raised as the quote below suggests:

'I think there's no privacy and if you don't want to be on the dole it's embarrassing enough [as] it is. It's stripping your dignity completely away to discuss everything in front of everyone.'

(Incapacity Benefit (IB) customer)

Despite the distress about privacy issues, some advantages of the layout were noted by customer respondents in contrast to jobcentre design and layout many years ago. These included a less segregated office and a more inclusive atmosphere with less hostility. On this latter point there is scope to suggest that more recent initiatives such as Accessing Jobcentre Plus Customer Services (AJCS) may be bringing further improvements.

Views about the local office décor and cleanliness varied and were very mixed. Levels of cleanliness and office décor were deemed as acceptable and functional. For some respondents the layout and décor of the office was a minor issue and the level of service offered was considered to be a much higher priority.

'Well I think a great deal would depend on the...on the people involved in the job centre itself. That's the grey area.'

(JSA customer)

The furniture was described as being 'comfortable' and 'improved', however a minority of respondents complained about the chairs being too low and unsuitable because of certain health needs or that they were unable to use the toilets or get a drink of water.

'The chairs really are so low, I mean I have to...like I thought I was going to have to ask someone to help me get up which is really embarrassing, I don't want to have to do that.'

(Income Support (IS) customer)

Respondents discussed the reasons why they thought access to toilets was denied, unless permission was sought for the key. Some thought this was to deliberately belittle customers by making them ask to use the facilities and a small minority believed access was denied because the space was being used inappropriately by drug users. Discussion about these issues inevitably led to respondents speculating about the type of customers which use their local office. Whilst they were not all necessarily described as disruptive, some customers were described as having a presence which made respondents feel intimidated and subsequently created a hostile atmosphere.

'...if you've got to walk past a bunch of...shall we say unsavoury characters and you've got security guards on the door, that makes it pretty offputting for everybody else.'

(JSA customer)

Following this, respondents understood that there was a need for some security guards at offices; however, the current level was frequently reported as being excessive, unnecessary and intimidating by the majority.

'...when I was signing on I have to show my book three times before I see my Adviser. I have to show it once at the door, once down at the bottom of the fire exit, once at the top of the fire exit. Do you know what I mean? And, you know, its gone security crazy down there.'

(JSA customer)

Location was another factor which influenced customer satisfaction with jobcentres. Many respondents have been allocated a different office because of recent office closures and as a consequence are travelling much further and incurring more costs in travelling.

The streamlining of Jobcentre Plus services and the increase in channels available has also led many respondents to believe that fewer staff are available at the jobcentres and the likelihood of having a query dealt with on a face-to-face basis is extremely unlikely unless an appointment has been pre-arranged. Jobcentres were also recognised as being less busy and congested with smaller queues for all services, again perhaps as a result of recent initiatives to control footfall.

6.2.2 Face-to-face contact with staff

Face-to-face contact was explored with both staff and customers; both groups were asked to provide their views about what factors drive customer satisfaction with this channel. Customers were asked about their awareness of face-to-face contact, the availability, views about pre-arranged Adviser meetings and experiences at the front of the office. The range of issues covered included the availability of Advisers and appointments, Advisers' knowledge, the general attitude and willingness to help and the type of help/support offered.

Staff perspective

The perspective offered by staff respondents at the Benefit Delivery Centre (BDC) focused on the perceived advantages of face-to-face contact over telephone contact; a few had the opinion that a better service could be delivered to customers if more face-to-face contact was resumed. Discouraging customers from wanting an appointment for face-to-face contact and instead encouraging them to provide all claim information, either by telephone or post, was considered to be a very challenging task and viewed as having a negative impact on customer satisfaction. A large proportion of the jobcentre staff agreed with the aforementioned points as illustrated below:

'...they're getting, getting the human element, they feel as if they're... somebody's listening to them sympathetically and can, can help.'

(Floorwalker)

However, a range of additional drivers of customer satisfaction were also discussed by jobcentre staff. It was recognised that the customer should always be treated with respect and any assistance provided needs to be based on their individual needs. They acknowledged that the level of help and assistance provided to customers should be consistent.

Customer perspective

All involved in the focus groups and the telephone follow-up interviews were aware of face-to-face contact with staff at Jobcentre Plus. However, a large proportion of respondents believed that this channel was no longer available to

them or was severely restricted. While this is an intended impact of initiatives such as AJCS, respondents with literacy problems and/or health issues that impacted on their ability to use other channels also thought that they were not entitled to face-to-face provision. For example, one respondent who was partially deaf reported finding it extremely difficult to access the new claims service over the telephone, but said he was told this was the only way in which he could pursue the claim. Others reported not being provided with an opportunity to state why they required face-to-face contact before being referred to other channels. Throughout all the research with customers a general lack of face-to-face support was identified as a key driver of dissatisfaction, especially when combined with conditionality and activation pressure. Outside these additional needs, there was a strong preference for face-to-face provision because of apparently unsuccessful attempts at using other channels and it was perceived as a better service.

In relation to benefit type, all respondents had experienced some face-to-face contact, although those in receipt of JSA had regular contact due to mandatory Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) obligations. Overall, the changes at Jobcentre Plus over recent years and the subsequent decline in face-to-face contact and increase of use of other channels has led to many respondents reporting that they feel 'cut off' from their local jobcentre.

Where customers did have experience of recent face-to-face contact the reported quality of, and satisfaction with, this varied widely. The availability of appointments in a timescale which the respondent deemed as reasonable impacted on satisfaction levels. Where respondents attempted to book an appointment to see an Adviser at their local office, many respondents reported that appointments were booked for days/weeks ahead and this was a cause of dissatisfaction for some. However, some were seen straight away if the office was not busy.

Respondents were also asked about pre-arranged appointments and their experiences with Advisers. An issue which many customers discussed at great length was the capacity of jobcentre staff to answer questions relating to benefits. A number of customer respondents alleged a loss of benefits because jobcentre or contact centre staff had not made them fully aware of their entitlement at the outset. In addition, respondents were frustrated about Advisers not making them aware of the supplementary financial assistance available, for example, assistance with dental/opticians costs and travel assistance for job interviews were mentioned. Some respondents said they had paid for these services in full for some time before being made aware that assistance was available to them.

An inconsistency in jobcentre staff's approach to respondents' circumstances was noted. Whilst a small proportion of respondents were pleased with the approach and manner of this contact, it was more common that customer respondents felt that face-to-face staff lacked sympathy or that they were being belittled and spoken down to. While it is not possible to verify customers' reported experiences and the discussion above suggests why customers may find face-to-face contact challenging, several customers suggested that they found the experience of visiting

the jobcentre so difficult that they merely 'went through the motions' in order to get out as quickly as possible or they avoided visiting it as much as possible.

6.2.3 Warm Phones and dedicated phones

Staff and customers were asked to provide their views about Warm Phones (also known as freephones) and dedicated phone services at Jobcentre Plus offices. Customers were also asked to discuss their experiences with using the channel; issues covered included the availability, awareness of what the channel can be used for, ease of use, comfort, privacy and what types of information were accessed.

Staff perspective

It was understood that customers could use the phones to contact employers for vacancy information, internal Jobcentre Plus directorates (e.g. Jobseekers Direct, BDCs, etc) and other Government departments or agencies for benefit-related inquiries. However, across districts and regions there appeared to be a variance in which services the phones could now access. For example, some offices had restricted calls to external organisations because of misuse by customers and the introduction of AJCS introduced in order to reduce unappointed footfall in jobcentres and help customers without pre-booked appointments use the contact channel that best meets their needs. It is worth noting here, however, that not all staff appeared to be knowledgeable about the implementation of AJCS.

Staff respondents expressed concern about the following issues relating to Warm Phones:

- a lack of privacy when providing sensitive and private information to employers or other Jobcentre Plus directorates, leading to concerns about identity fraud;
- there was a limited number available to serve customers, particularly in the larger offices which led to large queues and overcrowding in offices;
- channel reliability as many phones were reported to be 'out of order' on a frequent basis;
- the general lack of provision of chairs which was recognised as uncomfortable for customers making longer calls and/or having health problems; and
- misuse of the channel and personal calls being made by customers and attempting to monitor the use of the phones to prevent this from happening.

Despite these concerns, staff were supportive of Warm Phones and acknowledged that the service provides a valuable free service to customers.

Customer perspective

Customers involved in the focus groups and the telephone follow-up interviews were generally aware of Warm Phones. However, the awareness of which services they can access was patchy and inconsistent, and respondents were dissatisfied with the lack of clarity about 'correct' usage. The service which respondents most

commonly used this channel for was to contact other Jobcentre Plus directorates (BDCs and Contact Centres) or make benefit-related inquiries to other Government departments. Many respondents were completely unaware that the phones could be used to contact employers or for job enquiries. The introduction of AJCS appeared to lead to some respondents being unable to use Warm Phones to contact BDCs and Contact Centres and this was clearly generating some degree of dissatisfaction.

Those respondents who had used the channel thought that the service was good and helpful, particularly because the service is free of charge and saves many respondents money for phone calls which would have otherwise been significant due to the length of the calls and the use of pay-as-you-go mobile phones by some customers. Nevertheless, some customers were also critical of the lack of privacy or the limited number available:

'I shouldn't have to tell, like, personal details, especially with the way the world is today with all this fraud and identity theft and all that lot. What's wrong with giving you a little room to shut the door behind you?'

(JSA customer)

'Easy to use, yes, but there's not enough of them.'

(JSA customer)

6.2.4 Jobpoints

Customer satisfaction in relation to the availability of, ease of use and quality of information from Jobpoints was explored with customers and staff.

Staff perspective

Jobpoints were largely viewed as a very accessible, easy to use and a simple method of searching for job vacancies.

'I think they're quite easy to use. Occasionally they do break down but not as often as they used to and I think they're quite easy to use and they find the vacancy and print them off.'

(Advisory Service Manager (ASM))

It was recognised that there had been some issues concerning reliability with Jobpoints in formative years. However, the channel was considered to be increasingly reliable and the number of problems with their functionality was perceived to be decreasing. Nevertheless, a few respondents described Jobpoints as 'fiddly' and the 'sub-codes as a nightmare'. Jobpoints were also compared to the former system of advertising vacancies on a notice board; the advantages discussed included being able to filter and focus a job search to a range of individualised search criteria, the possibility of searching for jobs nationwide and accessing vacancy information which was constantly updated by employers.

The majority of staff respondents also discussed perceived problems with the function of search criteria in relation to geographic location (as illustrated in the following quote):

'...I'm not the best at geography but I know if I put five miles from my home, Glasgow is more than five miles away and so is Nottingham. There's a glitch in our system.'

(IB Personal Adviser)

As mentioned previously in Section 5.4.2, it was reported by the majority, that Jobpoints populate lists with job vacancies miles away from the specified location in the search; however, only a small minority of respondents were aware that this issue could be avoided by selecting the geographic location as the most important factor at the beginning of the search process or by paying attention to the colour coding of results.

The number of Jobpoints provided at a Jobcentre Plus office, the presence of a member of staff/floorwalker to assist customers in their use of Jobpoints, the reliability of the vacancy information and the number of vacancies advertised on the Jobpoint were also considered to be key factors that influence customer satisfaction.

Customer perspective

Awareness of Jobpoints was excellent, whether respondents had used the channel or not. JSA customers were more likely to have used this channel in their search for employment; it was common for respondents to use Jobpoints before their FJR appointment. Overall, Jobpoints were considered to be easy to use, particularly because they are touch screen and easy to navigate around.

The availability of Customer Service Managers (CSMs) to help with any questions or difficulties was regarded positively by customers, especially first-time users, though a small number of respondents said they had not used Jobpoints because they had not been shown how to use them.

Like staff, customer respondents frequently identified perceived problems with the geographical search function and some customers suggested that vacancy information is frequently out of date. Further problems related to the number of Jobpoints available to meet demand at busy times and the number that are frequently out of order or without paper for print-outs.

A few customers claiming IS noted that there were no seats available to sit on when using the Jobpoints which had deterred them from making use of the channel altogether because they could not stand for very long due to health problems (as illustrated in the following quote):

'..I don't use them but again I've noticed them. There's no chairs by them. Yeah, I couldn't stand up there and look for jobs. I wouldn't be able to stand that long so it's no use to me anyway.'

(IS customer)

6.3 Telephone contact

Staff and customers were asked to provide their views and opinions about telephone contact with Jobcentre Plus services and what they considered to drive customer satisfaction. Customers were also asked about their awareness of the various telephone services which exist and encouraged to discuss their experiences of any telephone contact with Jobcentre Plus.

6.3.1 Staff perspective

Respondents from the BDCs raised concerns about the number of customers who were unable to get through on the phone and as a consequence were seeking advice at jobcentres. This was an issue because BDC staff suggested that jobcentre staff did not always have the benefits knowledge to assist and thought that on occasions this resulted in incorrect information being given to customers. The recent improvements in the telephony equipment and the teams at BDCs were spoken about positively because of the impact this has had on the number of callers being able to get through more easily. The number of operators and staff training being undertaken was also considered to have made a contribution to improving the service. A small proportion of respondents at the BDC believed that the service offered over the phone by BDCs was much more accessible for customers:

'You know, people who've got, you know, single parents, they don't want to actually, you know, drop the kids off at school and run somewhere to an office, you know. A lot of people have got mobile phones which makes it much more accessible for them to ring when they want us.'

(BDC Telephony Team Leader)

Drivers of customer satisfaction in relation to telephone contact were explored with all staff respondents and these were identified as the following:

- the amount of time taken for a call to be answered (the number of staff available taking calls, especially as peak times);
 - getting through to the correct person/part of Jobcentre Plus;
 - the length and cost of the call, particularly from mobile phones;
 - knowledgeable staff that can deal with customer inquiries promptly and efficiently;
 - polite and helpful staff;
 - not keeping the customer on hold for excessive periods of time; and
 - offering customers call backs and doing so at the time arranged.
- some jobcentre respondents perceived staff in Contact Centres to be under-qualified for their roles due to the lack of training provided and were specifically anxious about the capacity of both BDCs and Contact Centres to answer phones particularly in light of the more recent growing number of customers, though the extent to which these concerns were rooted in evidence or misconception was not clear.

Telephone response within jobcentres was also reported by jobcentre staff to be problematic with calls frequently left unanswered because staff were dealing with face-to-face contact. A very busy office in the West Midlands was piloting a scheme at the time the research was undertaken where dedicated staff were made available to solely answer the telephone.

6.3.2 Customer perspective

The awareness of telephone services was excellent amongst customers involved in the qualitative research, though there was an element of confusion about which telephone numbers were assigned to specific services. It was reported as common to be transferred from one part of Jobcentre Plus to another before the correct person was obtained. Some respondents had been provided a leaflet from their local jobcentre listing the telephone services with the allocated telephone numbers; this was considered to be very useful and ensured that customers were calling the correct number at the outset.

The call charges for using the various telephone services varied for respondents depending on where they were calling from. '0845...' telephone numbers were perceived to be costly to use whether using a landline or mobile telephone. Not all customers were aware of that the new claim service is an 0800 number and free from BT landlines and several suggested that they would be calling from mobile phones in any event. This problem was further exacerbated by both the length of the calls and the inability to reach an operator after waiting in a call queue for a significant period of time (as illustrated below). It was not always clear when and to what service these calls were made, as significant improvements have been made recently to the process of new claim handling with the introduction of virtuality which routes calls to the first available operator nationally. Fuller and dedicated research has recently been undertaken and published on this subject (Nunn *et al.*, 2009). Customer respondents to this research suggested that once they get through to a Customer Service Agent they receive satisfactory treatment and those that were able to compare with previous experiences suggested that the quality of service is improving. A minority of respondents questioned whether Jobcentre Plus is profiteering from the telephone services and whether the government should enforce regulations on mobile telephone companies for Jobcentre Plus telephone services to be free of charge. The length of calls was also identified by customers as negative in terms of their overall satisfaction, particularly with the new claims interview which was reported to last up to 45 minutes. A small proportion of respondents discussed the need for staff to have appropriate knowledge and training to be able to deal with customer inquiries effectively via the various telephone services.

6.4 Website

The Jobcentre Plus website was discussed by customers and staff respondents; the questions asked during the research attempted to gauge the awareness and use of this channel as well as the drivers of satisfaction. Other issues covered included the design and ease of navigation, the speed of the website and the quality of the vacancy information provided.

6.4.1 Staff perspective

When staff respondents were asked what they considered to be the drivers of customer satisfaction with the website, many said they had never used the website. A variety of reasons were offered for this lack of awareness such as a lack of access to the internet, both at work and at home and a lack of time while at work. Some staff respondents even suggested that they did not see a knowledge of the Jobcentre Plus website as being central to their job. This extended, for instance, to an FJR staff member who suggested that she was informed by a customer about the scope to make a new claim or change of circumstances online:

'...you can do your claim on line and you can do a change of circumstances on line. I've never heard of that before a customer came in and taught us ... and I thought I better admit I've not looked at the job site. I don't get round to using the internet here, and I'm not going to be sitting at work or home, thinking oh I'll have a look at my website.'

(FJR Adviser)

However, an examination of the Jobcentre Plus website suggests that while it is possible to make a new claim online, changes of circumstance are only possible by sending a web-email to the BDC. Since it is likely that queries over changes of circumstances will arise at FJR it is important that these staff are aware of the various ways in which changes of circumstances can be made. If they are not, as in this case, it is easy to see why customers would report that they are given incorrect information.

A small minority of staff respondents noted perceived problems in relation to customer usage of the website. The geographical job search function was criticised for the website in the same way as for Jobpoints. In addition, some staff respondents suggested that while the website brings flexibility for customers with health and mobility problems that might make physical access to the jobcentre difficult, they were also concerned that some customers lack either the skills to use, or access to, the internet.

6.4.2 Customer perspective

JSA customers were much more likely than IS or IB customers to have used the Jobcentre Plus website, principally because of their enhanced tendency to be searching for work. Awareness of this channel was good among the majority. Some customers though were aware of the website but had chosen not to use it for a

variety of reasons, including a lack of access to the internet, a lack of confidence with computers, limited IT skills or simply a preference for other channels. Many of those JSA respondents who did not have internet access expressed an element of resentment towards the move to online services (not exclusively with Jobcentre Plus) and felt there was a perception that everyone has access to a computer. One respondent said:

'Do you know that's one of my pet hates about everything today, everybody just assumes everybody's got a computer...'

(IB customer)

Of those respondents who had experienced using the website, some reported dissatisfaction for the following reasons:

- difficulty in navigating around the website;
- the excessive number of categories and the volume of questions to answer when conducting a search;
- a lack of faith in the search criteria in relation to job type and geographic location;
- a lack of faith in the online new claims service and suspicion that claims made in this way might not be received; and
- customers feeling that they cannot access the information that they need through the website, resulting in them using another channel.

However, some of the respondents who had accessed the website clearly communicated that they had limited IT skills, little experience of using websites and/or had acquired assistance from younger family members, all of which may have attributed to levels of dissatisfaction with the channel. There was also a degree of dissatisfaction because access to this channel was not provided at Jobcentre Plus offices and it was not user friendly for customers with low levels of literacy or dyslexia.

Where respondents made a comparison with other channels; overall, there was a stronger preference for Jobpoints when searching for employment opportunities which were seen by some to be easier to use and many respondents expressed a preference to conduct their search for employment when visiting the office for mandatory visits, therefore only using the channels available in the office. Nevertheless, a small number of customers involved in the qualitative research preferred the website in comparison to all other channels and believed it offered more flexibility to their lifestyle. Where customers discussed their employment history it appeared that those with a skilled or professional employment history relied more heavily on industry and sector specific websites to conduct their employment search. Therefore, the Jobcentre Plus website was also viewed whilst accessing other employment websites.

6.5 Conclusions and interpretation

- The office environment was described as clean, functional and comfortable. The open plan layout provided a more inclusive atmosphere and a less segregated office. Nevertheless customers also report contradictory messages in relation to the office environment. Customers report on the one hand that they welcome the enhanced calm and order in the environment provided by security guards and by limiting footfall in the offices, ensuring that customers who use the office have a clear purpose for being there. However, at the same time they also report that they find security guards threatening and that limiting their access to the building is a driver of dissatisfaction. Similarly, while customers reported that they found the open plan design of offices to be welcoming, they also suggested that it limits privacy. Taken in the round this does suggest that there is no one way of fully satisfying customers in this regard. However, it also suggests that maintaining a multiplicity of channels is essential to enabling customers to access Jobcentre Plus services in a way that meets their needs. This evidence may also suggest that there is a need for more private spaces in jobcentres to meet customer needs while undertaking Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) and using Warm Phones. It also supports the change in policy to provide a dedicated telephone to make new claim calls in jobcentres rather than using Warm Phones for this purpose.
- Overall, respondents (staff and customers) had a good awareness of the channels available at Jobcentre Plus; however, there was less awareness of the website – including amongst staff – in comparison to other channels. The research also suggested that there is scope to improve awareness of the specifics of services available through different channels among both staff and customers.
- Issues in relation to the geographic search facility on Jobpoints continued to be raised. This suggests a need for greater clarity over this, with enhanced staff awareness and coaching and potentially clearer presentation of search results.
- Consistency and professionalism in procedural issues associated with contact between customers and staff, such as the timeliness of meetings, impact on customer engagement with services. There is, therefore, an outcome-oriented motivation for ensuring that high standards in this regard are maintained.
- The evidence on the introduction of AJCS was mixed, with some staff respondents suggesting that it had not been implemented everywhere.

7 Providing services to customers with additional needs

7.1 Summary

Box 3: Summary of issues related to service provision to customers with additional needs

- The Customer Satisfaction Survey and First Contact Customer Survey, both revealed some issues related to differential customer satisfaction in relation to disability and some specific ethnic minority groups. However, these differences were not clear cut and proved an insufficient basis on which to make any particular interpretative judgement.
- The qualitative research suggests that staff feel that they are broadly able to identify customers' additional needs, relying on a number of forms of information including computer records related to individual customers and softer conversation and communication with customers on an individual basis. The collection of data is highly dependent on the capacity of staff who undertake initial contact with customers such as Customer Service Managers (CSMs), Financial Assessors (FAs) and Customer Service Agents (CSAs) in Contact Centres.
- While staff are reasonably confident in identifying additional needs, this is less so in relation to 'hidden' disabilities and needs related to mental health and behavioural issues.
- Staff commitment to the equalities agenda and knowledge, awareness and willingness to utilise the wide range of adjustments to services and communication that are available to them was widespread and apparently deeply held.
- Evidence of monitoring of the equalities impact of service delivery at a local level was largely lacking.

7.2 Additional needs, customer satisfaction and organisational efficiency

Identifying any additional needs that customers may have is central to the organisation's ability to deliver its services effectively and equitably and to overcoming access needs which were identified by some customers in the Customer Satisfaction Survey. Indeed, both the Customer Satisfaction (Johnson and Fidler, 2008) and First Contact (Nunn *et al.*, 2008a) Customer Surveys suggested that some disabled customer groups (including those who self-report limiting illness) are less satisfied than other groups.⁵ Identifying and dealing with additional needs may, therefore, be closely linked to satisfaction for some customer groups.

Identifying and meeting additional needs is also central to ensuring that the organisation is able to pursue its efficiency and service redesign agendas while also focusing support, where needed, on those who are not able to help themselves to find work or identify support that may be able to help them overcome barriers to work. For instance, identifying additional needs is central to the Accessing Jobcentre Plus Customer Services (AJCS) project that was recently implemented to build on previous initiatives which seek to redirect those customers who are able to use them to self-service channels, while identifying those that require more intensive face-to-face support.

7.3 Identifying additional needs

Staff involved in the fieldwork were asked about the ways in which they identify any additional needs that customers might have and the extent to which staff are confident in doing so. Overall, jobcentre staff responses to these questions suggested a variety of approaches are used, with some local variation and innovation. The range of approaches used included structured data collection from customers themselves, personal communication and conversation, recorded computer-based information and referrals from external sources.

The most structured approaches included use of local questionnaires given to customers when they first make 'face-to-face' contact, with some questions being structured to identify additional needs. It was felt that this helps to collect robust information on customer needs from the perspective of the customer, rather than rely on other sources of information which may not accurately reflect customer needs.

For a larger number of respondents though, there was a strong emphasis on the role of personal communication and conversation in identifying needs 'softly'. One staff member highlighted the importance of:

⁵ Though it should be noted that in the Customer Satisfaction Survey findings suggested disability was not a significant component in explaining satisfaction.

'...talking to them. Trying to listen to them...and what they are saying and what they are not saying.'

(Jobcentre Plus Operations Manager)

This was thought to be especially important in the work of CSMs, and Advisers and other staff clearly relied on CSMs to be able to identify customer needs in this way. However, while there was evidence of some jobcentres and staff having undertaken more sophisticated thinking to support the identification of additional needs in this way, generally this sort of informal identification of needs appeared to be only partly successful. Several respondents identified a lack of confidence in their ability to identify 'hidden' disabilities, particularly in relation to mental health and behavioural issues.

Generally, staff respondents also highlighted a strong reliance on colleagues who handle initial contact to collect accurate information about customer needs, whether this be in the form of CSMs or CSAs in Contact Centres. In particular, these staff were seen as important to the extent that they collect information from customers about potential needs and then record it on appropriate computer systems. Many other staff, such as Advisers (including specialist and Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs)) use these computer records as a main source of information on customer needs. Generally, this was thought to work well.

'[W]e're informed previously...there are generally a lot of notes on a customer's records so we can tell [for example] whether or not they've got maybe difficulties reading paperwork...or writing and things like that which is...because obviously my job where we have to check through their paperwork and we need to read it and sign it...so obviously notes on the system are helpful so we know obviously if a customer can't read or write then we have to go through it, obviously read it out to the customer.'

(FA)

DEAs were included in the research but suggested that their role is not usually to identify customer needs. Rather, they are usually involved with customers as a result of additional needs being identified. However, they did suggest that occasionally their engagement with a customer begins with the process of identifying the specifics of customer needs and how these may impact on customer service issues as well as their capacity to find employment.

On the basis of evidence collected there did appear to be examples of confident practice in relation to identifying the full range of customer needs. The majority of respondents suggested that whatever approach they mostly relied on, they were confident in their ability to identify additional needs where they were present. Additionally, several respondents suggested that a flexible approach was taken to matching needs to adjustments and additional help, with efforts being made to ensure these were right for the individual rather than a standard response. However, respondents appeared to indicate that there are wide variations in the nature and confidence of staff in undertaking this activity, with one suggesting that they did not feel adequately trained to identify additional needs, while a

small number also noted a lack of confidence in this area generally and specifically noted difficulties in identifying hidden needs or mental health issues. Some suggested that, other than in the most vulnerable of cases, it was the responsibility of customers to divulge information of this nature which might impact on their ability to use standard services or to find work. These same staff tended to suggest that customers could not be forced to divulge this information if they did not want to and there were clearly cases where staff felt awkward or uncomfortable talking to customers about additional needs that they may have or pointedly asking this information.

7.4 Making adjustments to services and provision

Staff were also asked about the range of adjustments that they were able to make to accommodate additional needs. Most staff were able to immediately suggest a wide range of alternative means of accessing Jobcentre Plus services, the types of flexibility they were able to offer in delivering core services and a range of types of provision available to customers to overcome specific barriers to work which resulted from additional needs.

The types of alternative means of accessing services primarily related to overcoming barriers to communication. As such, a very wide range of staff identified alternative means of communicating to whatever form is standard in that particular context (i.e. verbal/written). These included awareness and use of interpretation services (including British Sign Language), hearing loops, the availability of British Sign Language interpretation, alternative print and Braille formats for leaflets, forms and other written material. A number of offices also appeared to have staff available who were able to communicate in common languages in the local area other than English and some offices had staff who were competent with Sign Language. Staff were also able to cite adjustments to service delivery that were routinely available to improve physical accessibility, such as arranging interviews on the ground floor of buildings where they would usually be organised on a higher floor. Staff also mentioned adjustments possible for people with particular mental health, behavioural or communication difficulties such as the availability of private interview rooms. Finally, several respondents identified the roll-out of the AJCS project as enabling those customers who require it to access face-to-face provision. However, the extent to which this has improved access to services for such customers was not clear.

In addition, a number of respondents also identified the different types of provision available to them to help people with additional needs to overcome their barriers to work, suggesting widespread awareness of appropriate support among Advisers. Such examples included contracted programme provision, such as through the variety of New Deals, Pathways to Work and non-contracted provision available locally through the voluntary and community sector and other public agencies (such as local authorities). Basic skills provision was also raised in this regard.

7.5 Managing the equalities impact of service provision

The qualitative fieldwork with jobcentre staff, including Operations Managers and Advisory Services Managers (ASMs), included a number of questions related to the management of the equalities impact of service provision locally. For instance, respondents were asked about their awareness and response locally to Diversity Challenge. Launched in 2007, Diversity Challenge is intended to embed and implement Jobcentre Plus' Equality Schemes (Jobcentre Plus, 2008c) and is, therefore, based on a monitoring and planning approach. It also reflects the Jobcentre Plus Board decision that the equalities management should be spread to a broad spectrum of equalities strands, including age, religion or belief and sexual orientation.

Respondents' answers to questions about Diversity Challenge suggested that staff are not widely aware of the initiative. Indeed, very few, if any, could recount any awareness, with the quotation below from a Jobcentre Operations Manager being typical and illustrative:

'I'm not too sure what that [Diversity Challenge] means.'

(Jobcentre Plus Operations Manager)

Staff did though show an awareness of other equalities initiatives. Fieldwork took place shortly after the organisation ran a national Diversity Week campaign. Many respondents reported that their district or local office had organised celebratory events or information sessions associated with this, though the level of engagement with these appeared to be highly variable and in some cases this appeared to be superficial.

In addition, questions about equalities monitoring revealed a similar, if not quite so pronounced, pattern of responses. There was little awareness or evidence of the use of equalities monitoring or data resulting from this to assess local patterns of service delivery and impact and to amend local approaches to address any issues arising from this. Where there was awareness of equalities monitoring, this tended to relate to the setting of markers on the Labour Market System (LMS – computer system), and interpretation of the responses suggests that this may be largely done for performance purposes,⁶ though LMS does allow markers to be set for other equality strands such as age, gender and disability. In some jobcentres there was evidence of a more systematic or broader approach to collecting data on equalities issues through the use of data collection forms or caseload surveys to collect this from customers. It appeared that these were district-wide initiatives and

⁶ The main headline outcome performance measure for Jobcentre Plus includes an explicit weighting which is intended to prioritise service delivery to specific 'Priority' customer groups. These include people with health problems and disabilities, younger people, older people and various other groups who are generally thought to be disadvantaged or at risk of disadvantage in the labour market.

were aimed at collecting information on the service delivery needs of customers and to some extent, planning service delivery to meet these.

Despite this, however, staff responses demonstrated a widespread and often apparently deeply held commitment to equalities and to promoting equality through service delivery. This tended to be reflected in a commitment to treating all groups equally, regardless of their particularities of identity, and to addressing individual needs on a case by case basis.

7.6 Conclusions and interpretation

- The variation in practice, and the difficulties and discomfort of staff in identifying customers with the full range of additional needs suggests that more may need to be done to increase and standardise capacity and spread good practice in this regard, potentially through induction, training and other development activity within Jobcentre Plus. This may require more targeted research to identify the full range of practices and to isolate current best practice.
- The apparent level of staff commitment to the equalities agenda was impressive and suggests a widespread organisational commitment.
- Though the evidence suggested that engagement was mixed and in some places superficial, the recent Diversity Week appeared to have gained widespread awareness and recognition.
- Awareness of Diversity Challenge and the use that might be made of equalities monitoring data was extremely low and suggests that such approaches have not extended to the local level. This may suggest a weakness in approach and a further need for training and development.

8 Customer service and Jobcentre Plus

8.1 Summary

Box 6: Summary of issues related to customer service and Jobcentre Plus

- Both customers and staff identified treating customers with respect, politeness and listening to their needs as paramount in good quality customer service. Both groups also identified professionalism and individualisation of the services provided to customers as central, as well as detailed and up-to-date knowledge on the part of staff.
- From the staff perspective, suggested improvements in the Jobcentre Plus services centred around increases in resources (staff numbers and office space), improvements to training and awareness raising and a stronger management emphasis on quality and flexibility rather than standardisation and workflow.
- Both staff and customer respondents supported the need for a dedicated CV help service and internet access being made available at the offices.
- More dedicated and relevant advice was sought in relation to training and employment opportunities by customer respondents.
- An increase in clarity about the correct use of channels and the provision of information to customers about channel functionality is necessary to help customers benefit from available services.
- Respondents with specific health issues (mainly, although not exclusively, Incapacity Benefit (IB) customers) which are affecting their ability to secure suitable employment, emphasised the need for a more sympathetic service where staff had a better understanding of health matters.

8.2 What is 'good customer service'?

In the context of Jobcentre Plus services, throughout the research both customers and staff were asked to comment in an open way about what makes 'good customer service'. This enabled consideration of issues specifically about how Jobcentre Plus delivers its services as opposed to issues determined by policy and legislation. With this in mind, both staff and customers broadly agreed on the drivers of good customer service. Both agreed that the quality of engagement between staff and customers is determined by staff attitudes, respect, politeness and listening skills. Both customers and staff also felt that staff need to be up to date in their knowledge of benefit rules, eligibility and the services available to customers, as well as detailed knowledge of the local labour market. They also agreed that professionalism and issues of timeliness of meetings were important for maintaining the quality of the relationship. The quality of relationships between individual members of staff and customers appears to be crucial to delivering effective services related to employment outcomes, according to both customers and staff. In this regard the Lone Parent Adviser model was reported as positive as was the individualisation of services to meet specific individual customer needs. In addition, consistency and accuracy in the provision of information to customers was also seen by both customers and staff as essential.

8.3 What might be improved?

Staff and customer respondents were asked about what could be improved about the services which Jobcentre Plus delivers. A range of issues was covered including the composition of the staff in offices, the overall office environment, the type, availability and functionality of channels, delivery of services and benefits.

8.3.1 Staff perspective

First and foremost staff respondents reported being overstretched and stated a need for an increase in staff numbers in all areas of the business. The current economic downturn and the sharp increase in benefit applications has meant that staff perceive the volume and throughput of work to be constraining their ability to provide quality interventions to customers.

The number and type of targets placed on staff within the Contact Centres and Benefit Delivery Centres (BDCs) were reported as occasionally detracting from the quality of customer service delivery. They argued that work volume and throughput targets and control measures such as limitations on appointment times occasionally prohibit them from taking the time needed to support a customer, for instance in Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) and at the Fortnightly Job Review (FJR). While they recognised the need for efficiency, their suggestion was that enhanced autonomy and flexibility is also desirable to meet variable customer needs. Staff were also concerned that colleagues throughout all parts of the organisation have up-to-date training and awareness of common issues of relevance to customers such as benefit rules and regulations, Jobcentre Plus services and processes and local labour market knowledge and information.

Whilst a complaints process is in place, respondents felt that not enough time is taken to reflect on the comments and complaints made by customers. Continuous feedback was recognised as a crucial indicator of the service being provided and as an opportunity for the staff team to listen and address the issues by making the necessary changes. In order to improve the existing services, respondents suggested the following in-house dedicated support services for customers:

- a CV help/clinic available to all customers;
- internet access for customers to use the Jobcentre Plus website and view other jobs sites;
- a job club which was considered to be very successful when previously operational;
- a health Adviser to offer support and advice about what employment opportunities are suitable; and
- a housing representative to deal with customer enquiries which may relate to Jobcentre Plus benefits.

Many respondents viewed the website as basic with little functionality. Respondents thought that improvements to enhance the existing website would increase satisfaction. A facility to enable staff to reply back to customers online was discussed, as currently the system will accept on-line enquiries but staff can only reply to the query by telephone or by writing a letter. A suggestion was also made about an online tracking system, whereby customers can view the progress of their claim by logging in with their unique access information. Respondents acknowledged that this issue was not necessarily in their hands; however, many wanted to make more jobs available to offer customers.

8.3.2 Customer perspective

Customers acknowledged that advice is already offered in relation to employment and training opportunities; however, an improved service would encompass more relevant advice, taking into consideration customers' individual needs and career aspirations. According to customers an improved service would also require staff to be more positive, personable, supportive and encouraging.

There was a significant amount of support from respondents for a CV clinic/support service, which was also suggested by staff. Customers expressed a preference to receive this support at the Jobcentre Plus office rather than from external providers.

Respondents with specific health issues (mainly, although not exclusively IB customers) which are affecting their ability to be employed, emphasised the need for a more sympathetic service where staff had a better understanding of health matters. It was suggested that Jobcentre Plus provides lists of vacancies for different benefit types or for customers with varying physical abilities. This was suggested because many respondents were unhappy with previous advice given by Advisers which made them feel pressured to undertake what they classed as unsuitable.

In relation to the office environment, many respondents felt the existing levels of security at offices was excessive, intimidating and unnecessary, therefore removing some security guards would lead to an improvement. A small number of respondents thought that the furniture was inappropriate to accommodate their disabilities and, therefore, more consideration should be given at offices to improve the situation. The provision and availability of more private rooms within offices for customer meetings was considered to help ease the current concerns about the lack of privacy.

An improvement in the general maintenance and functionality of channels available would improve the overall service (see Chapter 7 for more information on individual channels). An increase in clarity about the correct use of channels and the provision of information to customers about channel functionality was identified as necessary to help customers benefit from various services. For example, an online service for customers to be able to update their personal details was requested by a few respondents; however, this facility is currently available. Several respondents supported the use of an additional channel where direct contact is made with the assigned Adviser, one respondent said:

'I would like to email them, that's the point. But I...you can use the website, obviously, but there's no actual email...a direct email to the person you're dealing with so...'

(Income Support (IS) customer)

The additional following suggested improvements were made by respondents in relation to how the services could be improved:

- more help and support to be made available with job searches and applications for employment;
- an increase in the amount of benefit paid to customers, as existing amounts were not considered to be sufficient;
- increased efficiency in benefits processing, hence, increasing speed of benefit payment;
- a more personable and sympathetic service from staff;
- an increase in the time allowed to claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), six months was not considered to be sufficient support to many customers – particularly those who had been in employment for long periods of time in specialist industries;
- increased number of staff to deal with a wider range of issues, both in a face-to-face and telephone capacity;
- an improved telephone service for all Jobcentre Plus services which advises the customer where they are in the call queue rather than playing music;
- more flexibility with appointment times and length where customers can discuss issues in more depth with an Adviser;

- an offer of pastoral support when customers encounter Jobcentre Plus for the first time;
- better incentives and support programmes to help customers back into work;
- provision of online access at offices;
- fewer forms which are less complex and written in simple English making them less onerous to complete; and
- a move towards less duplication of customer information amongst Jobcentre Plus and other agencies.

8.4 Conclusions and interpretation

- Both staff and customers were able to identify aspects of good customer service that Jobcentre Plus is able to influence. These are issues of implementation rather than policy design or legislative requirements. These should be kept at the forefront of the planning process as new initiatives are developed and the Standard Operating Model is reviewed.
- However, in considering issues of customer service it needs to be remembered that there are inherent in-built tensions between organisational goals and some dynamics of customer satisfaction which are not easy to resolve and are, in the main, related to Government policy.
- Both customers and staff would welcome more flexibility in the design and variety of services provided directly by Jobcentre Plus as opposed to providers. These included enhanced job search facilities (e.g. supported internet access in offices) and coaching with CVs and applying for jobs. Staff and customers also suggested that improvements in the detail of Adviser knowledge about specific industries/sectors and customer health needs would be beneficial.

9 Discussion and interpretation

9.1 Explaining the survey findings

The Customer Satisfaction Survey suggested that the vast majority of Jobcentre Plus customers are satisfied with the service that they have received from the organisation. Among those that are less satisfied, this research suggests that a range of factors accounts for this, some of which are within the control of Jobcentre Plus, and others which are not. These are set out in Table 9.1. What this shows is that while Jobcentre Plus might be able to make changes which will impact positively on those customers that currently report dissatisfaction, it will not be able to eliminate dissatisfaction entirely, since many of the most important causes of disgruntlement among customers lie outside its organisational control.

Table 9.1 Factors which impact on satisfaction and dissatisfaction

Control	Driver of satisfaction/dissatisfaction
Within the control of Jobcentre Plus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff treatment of customers (politeness, respect). • Staff knowledgeability in relation to customer queries. This is mainly benefit-related but also in some respects (at the Fortnightly Job Review) FJR and in Work Focused Interviews (WFIs)) labour market-related and for some customers health-related. • The consistency and accuracy of advice given by Jobcentre Plus staff. • Use-ability and accessibility of the different channels. • Speed of benefit processing. • Availability of tailored and individualised support to overcome barriers to work.
Outside the control of Jobcentre Plus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requirements (in relation to information provision) in relation to new benefit claims. • Eligibility for benefits. • Benefit payment levels. • Activation pressure, conditionality and sanctions.

Understanding these factors helps to unpack the reasons for differential levels of dissatisfaction, among different groups of customers:

- **Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers** – the survey suggested that these customers were less satisfied than other benefit groups. The qualitative follow-up research reported here suggests that dissatisfaction among these customers is linked to a dislike of the implications of benefit conditionality for the way in which they are 'forced' to interact with Jobcentre Plus services. There is also scope to suggest that this group of customers are particularly badly affected by their experience of the labour market and that discouragement in this context impacts on their satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus, especially when combined with conditionality and activation measures. Finally, there are some concerns that Jobcentre Plus may be able to address, such as access to services and support and the process and quality of service delivery. Among these, issues related to new and repeat claims processing stand out.
- **Gender** – the Customer Satisfaction Survey suggested that men are less satisfied than women. There may be some cross-over between male dissatisfaction and the dissatisfaction of JSA customers. Indeed, many of the responses from staff respondents linked explanations such as male pride with those raised above in relation to labour market experiences and resentment of activation pressures.
- **Ethnicity** – several ethnic groups were identified as being less satisfied by the survey, principally black, Chinese and mixed race customers. However, the qualitative research could not identify any credible reasons why this might be the case.
- **Region** – several regions came out of the Customer Satisfaction Survey as less satisfied. The research could not identify any reasons why customers in the South East or Wales might be less satisfied than customers from elsewhere. However, several plausible explanations for higher levels of dissatisfaction in London were suggested. These included a more volatile and transient labour market, impacting on both work volumes and staffing issues.

One group of customers that came out of the research as particularly satisfied was lone parents. In this respect respondents suggested that this level of satisfaction was related to the voluntary nature of services, the ability of Lone Parent Advisers to develop long-term and supportive relationships with customers (unhindered by the requirements of conditionality), and the availability of support for lone parents, which Advisers could refer them to (not always provided by Jobcentre Plus).

9.2 Explaining differences in the qualitative and quantitative findings

The findings from this research differ in one key respect from those in the Customer Satisfaction Survey. While most of the respondents to the survey were satisfied, most of the customers involved in the qualitative research were dissatisfied. This is explained by a series of biases in the approach taken to this research, some of which

was necessitated by factors outside the control of the research team. However, this does not make the findings useless. In fact, in some respects, it may make them more useful in explaining the issues underpinning dissatisfaction among the small proportions of customers who suggest that this is their predominant experience.

9.3 Considerations for future service provision

The research suggested a number of areas that might be considered in the development of future services and as part of the process of continual improvement:

- **Staff training** – improvements to staff training are either directly referenced or implied throughout the report. These include generic issues around the importance of ‘customer service’ in interaction and general awareness of information likely to be requested by customers. They also include specific areas such as identifying customers with additional needs, particularly hidden needs such as mental health, behavioural and basic skills problems and knowledge of the types of additional support that is available to meet these needs. The research also suggests that consideration of emotional issues in communication and behaviour change are essential for specific job roles particularly for FJR staff and Advisers.
- **Resources** – staff respondents suggested that additional resources may be necessary. Staff are always likely to raise this as an issue, but in this case additional staffing requirements were specifically related to the potential for increasing workloads as a result of the current economic climate. Resources were also raised in other respects. These included the capacity for Jobcentre Plus to provide a greater variety of services, some of which are currently contracted out, and to provide more capacity in contact channels.
- **Flexibility** – many staff and customer responses centred around rigidity in service provision and the need for flexibility, in some cases, to meet customers’ individual needs. This appears to be the case right from new claim through to job broking. In this respect new initiatives such as the Flexible New Deal should help to improve customer satisfaction.
- **Complaints** – there may be scope to introduce or raise awareness of less formal channels in the complaints system so that customer difficulties can both be resolved and learnt from to improve service provision. Wider awareness of existing literature (e.g. Jobcentre Plus, 2008b) that highlights these informal mechanisms might help in this regard.

An additional finding suggested by the research relates to the role of Jobcentre Plus in delivering services to social groups who are at serious risk of social exclusion and therefore, also political radicalisation. Some discussions with customers identified perceived dynamics of unfairness which are important to contain in periods of economic downturn. As such, delivering social justice in process and outcome needs to be an important consideration in future service development and may suggest support for initiatives such as the social equality duty proposed in the

recent Social Mobility White Paper or in the development of local outcome targets for child poverty as suggested in the recent child poverty strategy.

9.4 Future changes in 'customer satisfaction'

Given the evidence reported here there are several trends in policy, practice and context that are likely to impact on future trends in customer satisfaction. These include:

- the introduction of new initiatives such as Flexible New Deal and increasing Adviser autonomy, and plans to integrate the employment and skills systems, including improving customers' basic skills should have a positive influence on customer satisfaction. However, the extent to which this potential is realised will depend crucially on the way in which both are implemented;
- the more widespread development of existing initiatives such as Local Employer Partnerships (LEPs) and jobs and skills pledges may improve customer satisfaction, and there is evidence in the research that these initiatives provide opportunities that are welcomed by customers;
- the impact of the next generation of contracts for provision of services to Jobcentre Plus will be positive where they achieve greater variety and individualisation in support, but negative in the event of bulk, generic or poorly resourced programmes. The same set of issues in relation to the drivers of satisfaction are likely to be replicated for providers;
- the extension of conditionality and activation measures to additional groups such as lone parents and inactive benefit recipients is likely to have a negative impact on customer satisfaction. This is not to argue that this policy emphasis is misguided, just that given the evidence presented here this is likely not to be well received by customers, particularly lone parents who are currently the most satisfied group of customers. Over the long-term and in a period of economic recovery these initiatives may well have a more positive impact on customer satisfaction, especially where employment outcomes improve as a result;
- the economic context is likely to have a very damaging impact on customer satisfaction. This research suggests that the capacity of customers to find work has a key bearing on their satisfaction, and as such a decline in the employment prospects of existing and new customers is likely to erode satisfaction levels.

9.5 Considerations for future research on 'customer satisfaction'

Future research on customer satisfaction may need to consider:

- the need to track patterns in customer satisfaction on an ongoing and comparative basis;
- the importance of disaggregating satisfaction with intended and unintended consequences of service provision, to isolate what elements of satisfaction are related to the means of service delivery rather than contextual or policy/legislative dynamics;
- the importance of tracking how Jobcentre Plus services contribute to wider issues of social fairness and cohesion;
- the importance of assessing customer satisfaction with provider services on longitudinal and comparative basis.

Appendix A

Customer Focus Group topic guide

Jobcentre Plus Customer Satisfaction Qualitative Follow-Up

Customer Group/EM Focus Group Topic Guide

Facilitator:

Location:

Time:

Group No:

CHECKS

- Have permission slips have been handed out and completed – and alternative arrangements sorted for anyone not giving the basic permission to take part and be recorded?
- Is the recorder on?
- Are you using the correct topic guide?
- Now read the introductory statement.

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT (TO BE READ ONLY AFTER RECORDER STARTED)

We recently undertook a survey of Jobcentre Plus customers to assess their satisfaction with the services they receive from the organisation. The results of this survey were published in March 2008 on the DWP website. This research is intended to follow-up and gain more detail about some of the survey findings.

(website for survey report: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep480.pdf>)

We are interested in everyone's honest views of the services you received, why they were good or bad and how they might be improved. We will not reveal anyone's identity. Jobcentre Plus and the Department for Work and Pensions are interested in the views of their customers so that they can improve the quality of services that they provide.

Finally, before we start can I just remind everyone that while we want you to be honest in your views we have a responsibility for everyone here and to ensure that the discussion is not likely to offend anyone else involved in the discussion. As such, please try to be fair, polite and tolerant to other participants and to avoid unnecessary use of racist, foul or abusive language.

1 OVERALL SATISFACTION

- 1.1 How satisfied were you with the services that you received from Jobcentre Plus?
- 1.2 If you had to describe your experiences of the services provided to you by Jobcentre Plus in a single word, phrase or sentence?
- 1.3 What would you say were the best aspects of the services provided to you by Jobcentre Plus?
- 1.4 What would you say were the worst aspects of the services provided to you by Jobcentre Plus?

2 DIFFERENT SERVICES AND CHANNELS

2.1 Services used

2.1.1 Which Jobcentre Plus services have you used?

Prompts:

- New claims.
- Fortnightly signing.
- Job search.
- WFI adviser meeting.
- Disability Employment Adviser.
- Labour market or training advice.
- Referral to external providers of training or assistance.
- Other services, prompt which.

2.1.2 For those of you who have used the new claims service (NB should be everyone) (a) what is your view of this? (b) What was good, what was bad? (c) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Claims process and phone call etc.
- Speed in deciding/processing claim.
- Speed of paying benefits.
- Actual decision – i.e. they are unhappy with the benefit they were put on etc.
- Amount of benefits paid (i.e. legal levels of benefit).
- Other, what.
- NB – there is separate research project looking at this so ensure that time spent on this is limited.

2.1.3 For those of you who have done fortnightly signing (NB will not apply to IB/IS customers but should apply to all JSA customers) (a) what is your view of this? (b) What was/is good, what was bad? (c) How did/does it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Timeliness of appointment.
- Advice on jobsearch given etc.
- Helpfulness of staff.
- Attitude of staff.
- Other, what.

2.1.4 For those of you who have used job search services (NB some of this will conflict with channels questions below so limit to prompt issues) (a) what is your view of this? (b) What was/is good, what was bad? (c) How did/does it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- No and quality of vacancies.
- Staff knowledge of labour market and skills/qualifications requirements etc.
- Staff ability to advise on opportunities available.
- Other, what.

2.1.5 For those of you who have received labour market or training advice (NB some of this will conflict with q above – only ask where this is not discussed at q above) (a) what is your view of this? (b) What was/is good, what was bad? (c) How did/does it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Staff encouragement of own aspirations etc.
- Were own aspirations etc recorded in JSAG/Action Plan etc.
- Staff knowledge of labour market and skills/qualifications requirements etc.
- Staff ability to advise on opportunities available.
- Other, what.

2.1.6 For those of you who have discussed referral to external providers or been referred (a) what is your view of this? (b) What was/is good, what was bad? (c) How did/does it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Did they want things and weren't able to be referred to it, why?
- What was there general view of this (NB limit this for time reasons) and what was it that was good or bad?
- Other, what.

2.1.7 For those of you who have had WFI meetings with Adviser (a) what is your view of this? (b) What was/is good, what was bad? (c) How did/does it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Staff encouragement of own aspirations etc.
- Were own aspirations etc recorded in JSAG/Action Plan etc.
- Encouragement/advice to get a job.
- Staff ability to advise on opportunities available.
- Other, what.

2.1.8 For those of you who have seen a DEA or other specialist Adviser (a) what is your view of this? (b) What was/is good, what was bad? (c) How did/does it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Staff understanding of barriers to work.
- Staff ability to advise on how to overcome barriers?
- Staff encouragement of own aspirations etc.
- Were own aspirations etc recorded in JSAG/Action Plan etc.
- Encouragement/advice to get a job.
- Staff ability to advise on opportunities available.
- Other, what.

2.1.9 For those of you who have used other services (a) what is your view of this? (b) What was/is good, what was bad? (c) How did/does it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Obviously get them to say what.

2.2 Channels accessed

Text to read out:

Jobcentre Plus provides services in a number of different ways (channels) such as face-to-face meetings in local offices, use of the freephones in local offices, contact with call centres over the telephone and through written letters.

2.2.1 What is the usual way that you contact Jobcentre Plus?

Prompts:

- In person in a local office.
- Use of Jobpoints in local office.
- On the freephone in a local office.
- On the phone mobile.
- On the phone landline.
- On the Jobcentre Plus Website.
- Other, what are these.

2.2.2 Were you aware of all these different ways of contacting Jobcentre Plus?

Prompts:

- If not which ones weren't people aware of?
- Would awareness have affected their choice of channel?

2.2.3 Are there any channels that you are aware of but have decided not to use and why?

Prompts:

- In particular if not using self-service channels (e.g. website, phone, Warm Phone, Jobpoints), why not and how could this be changed?

2.2.4 Where you have been in a local office, what is your view of this?

Prompts:

- Office décor etc.
- Office cleanliness etc.
- Office atmosphere.
- No of staff available to help.
- Security arrangements.
- Accessibility arrangements.
- Other aspects of the office environment.

2.2.5 For those of you who have spoken face-to-face to staff available at the front of the office (i.e. for ad hoc or impromptu advice on using Jobpoints or for signing etc) (a) Why did you choose this channel? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Availability of staff to speak to you.
- Accessibility of these staff.
- Knowledge and ability to help.
- General attitude and willingness to help.
- Other.

2.2.6 For those of you who have spoken face-to-face with advisers in arranged meetings (i.e. for WFIs or agreeing JSAG etc) (a) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Availability of advisers and appointments.
- Knowledge and ability to help.
- General attitude and willingness to help.
- Help that they were able to give – i.e. training provision available etc.
- Other.

2.2.7 For those of you who have used Jobpoints in the local offices (i.e. for job search) (a) Why did you choose this channel? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Availability of Jobpoints (i.e. enough working machines etc.)
- Ease of use.
- Quality of information (i.e. what they searched for, no of vacancies available, correctness of information).
- Other.

2.2.8 For those of you who have used warm (free) phones in the local offices (i.e. for new claims, access to social fund, calling Jobseeker Direct) (a) Why did you choose this channel? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Availability of Warm Phones (i.e. enough working phones etc.)
- Ease of use.
- Comfort of using the phone.
- Privacy of using the phone (including availability of a booth/office where relevant).
- Quality of information provided (i.e. what they searched for, no of vacancies available, correctness of information).
- Other.

2.2.9 For those of you who have contacted Jobcentre Plus on your mobile phone (i.e. for new claims, access to social fund, calling Jobseeker Direct) (a) Why did you choose this channel and mobile? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Ability to get through.
- Cost.
- Availability of ring back.
- Quality of service provided (i.e. help provided at the other end).
- Other.

2.2.10 For those of you who have contacted Jobcentre Plus on landline phone (i.e. for new claims, access to social fund, calling Jobseeker Direct) (a) Why did you choose this channel and landline? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Ability to get through.
- Cost.
- Availability of ring back.
- Quality of service provided (i.e. help provided at the other end).
- Other.

2.2.11 For those of you who have used the Jobcentre Plus website (i.e. for new claims, job search, access to forms and information) (a) Why did you choose this channel? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) how 'user-friendly' did you find it to be? (e) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Ease of finding site on the web.
- Design and ease of navigation.
- Speed of the site.
- Quality of information provided (i.e. wrong or contradictory information, vacancy information etc).
- Other.

2.2.12 Do you ever move from one channel to another (i.e. from Website to Jobpoint or telephone to face-to-face) and, if so why?

2.2.13 Do you feel there is enough privacy in Jobcentre Plus offices?

Check whether this relates to the following and how...

- Fortnightly signing.
- Interviews with advisers.
- Warm Phone.
- New claims calls in the office (i.e. should be from designated phone).
- Jobpoints.
- Other, what?

3 PERCEIVED CHANGES IN QUALITY OF SERVICE

Text to read out:

Over recent years, Jobcentre Plus has made a number of changes to how it does things. You may have noticed some of these and they are interested to know whether they have got better or worse as a result of the changes they have made.

3.1.1 Have you noticed any changes in the types of services or the ways in which the same service is provided over time? What change have you noticed? Has this been to get better or worse? Why?

Prompts:

- New claims.
- Fortnightly signing.
- Job search.
- WFIs.
- DEASpecialist Adviser meetings.
- Labour market or training advice.
- Referral to external providers of training or assistance.
- Other services, prompt which.

4 EXPERIENCES OF PROBLEMS AND THE COMPLAINTS SYSTEM

- 4.1 Have you ever informed Jobcentre Plus about a change in your circumstances?
- 4.2 For those of you that have informed Jobcentre Plus of a change in circumstances, what happened when you did this?
- 4.3 Have any of you ever thought about complaining about any of the services that you have received?
- 4.4 For those of you that have thought about complaining, what was this about?
- 4.5 For those of you that have thought about complaining, did you actually make a complaint? If so, can you tell me about it?

Prompts:

- How did you complain?
 - Who did you complain to?
 - What did they do?
 - Was the complaint resolved to your satisfaction? Why/Why not?
- 4.6 For those of you that have thought about complaining but not actually done so, why didn't you complain?

5 MAKING THINGS BETTER

- 5.1 If you could change one or two things about the services Jobcentre Plus provides, or the ways in which it provides them, what would these be?
- 5.2 Is there any service that Jobcentre Plus provides, or way in which it provides its services, that definitely should not be changed?

6 OTHER

- 6.1 Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your experiences of Jobcentre Plus?

Text to read out:

Thank you very much for your time and participation. Your views and experiences are very much appreciated and you will be able to see the results of this research when it is published on the internet over the course of the next year.

Payment of expenses and cash gift, including arrangements for this.

Appendix B

Jobcentre staff topic guide

1 GENERAL VIEWS OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

1.1 What is your view of how satisfied customers are with Jobcentre Plus overall?

1.2 What factors underpin customer satisfaction?

i.e. what factors lead to dissatisfaction and satisfaction?

(e.g. prompts: office environment, access to services, information quality, timeliness of sorting benefit payments etc. and also external factors such as media representation of government policy).

Do these differ for different customer groups?

1.3 How do you think customer satisfaction is changing/has changed over the last year?

What has got better? (nb link to indicators/evidence of customer satisfaction).

What has got worse? (nb link to indicators/evidence of customer satisfaction).

And what has been the reason for this change?

2 EXPLAINING SURVEY FINDINGS

Please Read and be aware of relevant regional report.

2.1 Why might JSA customers be less satisfied than other customers?

2.2 Why might long-term claimants be less satisfied than other customers?

2.3 Why might men be less satisfied than women?

- 2.4 Why might customers from black, Chinese or mixed race ethnicities be less satisfied than others?
- 2.5 Why are non-whites and lone parents more likely than other groups to notice an improvement in services?
- 2.6 Why does the investment in services not lead to more customers reporting an improvement?
- 2.7 Why do customers indicate that they experience problems after a change in circumstances?
- 2.8 Why do you think so around 14 per cent of customers report that they have been given incorrect or contradictory information?
- 2.9 Why do you think so many customers indicate that they would like to make a complaint?
- 2.10 Why do you think so many customers that do want to make a complaint do not actually go on to do so?
- 2.11 Why do you think that customers that do make a complaint remain so unsatisfied, especially with the complaints process?

Regional questions.....

e.g. Why might customers in this region (London, South East and Wales) be less satisfied than in other regions?

3 CUSTOMERS WITH ADDITIONAL/SPECIFIC NEEDS (DEA AND MANAGER ONLY).

- 3.1 How do you identify customers who might have additional or specific needs?
- 3.2 What adjustments are you able to make for customers who you think have additional needs?
- 3.3 Do you feel confident in your ability to identify and provide assistance to customers with additional needs?
- 3.4 How do you/your office respond to 'Diversity Challenge'?
- 3.5 What Equalities monitoring do you undertake?

4 SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES

- 4.1 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with the new claims process?

- 4.2 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with FJR?
 - 4.3 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with job search?
 - 4.4 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with labour market/jobs advice offered in WFIs?
 - 4.5 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with external provision?
 - 4.6 What improvements might be made to the services provided by Jobcentre Plus to increase customer satisfaction?
 - 4.7 What new/different services could Jobcentre Plus provide to increase customer satisfaction?
- 5 SATISFACTION WITH CHANNELS
- 5.1 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with face-to-face contact in local offices?
 - 5.2 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with Jobpoints?
 - 5.3 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with Warm Phones?
 - 5.4 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with telephone contact with Jobcentre Plus?
 - 5.5 What factors do you think influence customers' satisfaction with the Jobcentre Plus website?
 - 5.6 What improvements might be made to contact channels to increase customer satisfaction?
 - 5.7 What new/different contact channels could increase customer satisfaction?

6 PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE QUALITY

- 6.1 What factors do you think are central to good quality customer service?
- 6.2 What factors do you think help you to deliver this in your work with customers?

Prompts: staff training, staff numbers, systems, processes, rules/flexibility, targets/performance management.

- 6.3 What factors do you think prevent you from delivering this in your work with customers?

Prompts: staff training, staff numbers, systems, processes, rules/flexibility, targets/performance management.

7 OTHER ISSUES

- 7.1 Are there any other issues that you think are relevant to customer satisfaction but which we haven't asked about already?

Appendix C

Benefit Delivery Centre staff topic guide

Jobcentre Plus Customer Satisfaction Qualitative Follow-Up

Facilitator/Note taker:

Location:

Date/Time:

Group No:

CHECKS

- Have permission slips have been handed out and completed – and alternative arrangements sorted for anyone not giving the basic permission to take part and be recorded?
- Is the recorder on?
- Are you using the correct topic guide?
- Now read the introductory statement.

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT (TO BE READ ONLY AFTER RECORDER STARTED)

We recently undertook a survey of Jobcentre Plus customers to assess their satisfaction with the services they receive from the organisation. The results of this survey were published in March 2008 on the DWP website. This research is intended to follow-up and gain more detail about some of the survey findings.

(Web address of survey report:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-008/rrep480.pdf>)

We are interested in everyone's honest views of the services you received, why they were good or bad and how they might be improved. We will not reveal anyone's identity. Jobcentre Plus and the Department for Work and Pensions are interested in the views of their customers so that they can improve, where needed, the quality of services that they provide.

Finally, before we start can I just remind everyone that while we want you to be honest in your views we have a responsibility for everyone here and to ensure that the discussion is not likely to offend anyone else involved in the discussion. As such, please try to be fair, polite and tolerant to other participants and to avoid unnecessary use of discriminatory, foul or abusive language.

1 OVERALL SATISFACTION

- 1.1 How satisfied were you with the services that you received from Jobcentre Plus?
- 1.2 If you had to describe your experiences of the services provided to you by Jobcentre Plus in a single word, phrase or sentence?
- 1.3 What would you say were the best aspects of the services provided to you by Jobcentre Plus?
- 1.4 What would you say were the worst aspects of the services provided to you by Jobcentre Plus?

2 DIFFERENT SERVICES AND CHANNELS

2.1 Services used

2.1.1 Which Jobcentre Plus services have you used?

Prompts:

- New claims.
- Fortnightly signing.
- Job search.
- Careers or training advice.
- Referral to external providers of training or assistance.
- Other services, prompt which.

2.1.2 For those of you who have used the new claims service (NB should be everyone) (a) what is your view of this, (b) What was good, what was bad about the service/process? (c) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Ability to understand process and answer questions.
- Claims process and phone call etc.
- Speed in deciding/processing claim.
- Speed of paying benefits.
- Actual decision – i.e. they are unhappy with the benefit they were put on etc.
- Amount of benefits paid (i.e. legal levels of benefit).
- Other, what.
- NB – there is separate research project looking at this so ensure that time spent on this is limited.

2.1.3 For those of you who have done fortnightly signing (NB will not apply to IB/IS customers but should apply to all JSA customers) (a) What is your view of this, (b) What was good, what was bad about the service/process? (c) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Staff understanding of problems you face in finding work.
- Timeliness of appointment.
- Advice on jobsearch given etc.
- Helpfulness of staff.
- Attitude of staff.
- Other, what.

2.1.4 For those of you who have used job search services (NB some of this will conflict with channels questions below so limit to prompt issues) (a) What is your view of this (b) What was good, what was bad about the service/process? (c) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Staff understanding of problems you face in finding work.
- No and quality of vacancies.
- Staff knowledge of labour market and skills/qualifications requirements etc.
- Staff ability to advise on opportunities available.
- Other, what.

2.1.5 For those of you who have received careers or training advice (NB some of this will conflict with q above – only ask where this is not discussed at q above) (a) What is your view of this? (b) What was good, what was bad about the service/process? (c) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Staff understanding of problems you face in finding suitable work.
- Staff encouragement of own aspirations etc.
- Were own aspirations etc recorded in JSAG etc (only relevant for JSA customers).
- Staff knowledge of labour market and skills/qualifications requirements etc.
- Staff ability to advise on opportunities available.
- Other, what.

2.1.6 For those of you who have discussed referral to external providers or been referred? (a) what is your view of this? (b) What was good, what was bad? (c) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Were staff able to identify your specific needs?
- Were they able to find you specific provision which was suitable to your needs?
- Did they want things and weren't able to be referred to it, why?
- What was there general view of this (NB limit this for time reasons) and what was it that was good or bad?
- Other, what.

2.1.7 For those of you who have used other services (a) What were they? (b) What is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (e) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Obviously get them to say what.
- 2.1.8 Have Jobcentre Plus been able to help you overcome or begin to overcome any problems you might have in finding work?

Prompts:

- What might be done differently.

2.2 Channels accessed

Text to read out:

Jobcentre Plus provides services in a number of different ways (channels) such as face-to-face meetings in local offices, use of the freephones in local offices, contact with call centres over the telephone and through written letters.

2.2.1 What is the usual way that you contact Jobcentre Plus?

Prompts:

- Face-to-face in a local office.
- On the freephone in a local office.
- On the phone mobile.
- On the phone landline.
- On the Jobcentre Plus Website.
- Other, what are these.

2.2.2 Were you aware of all these different ways of contacting Jobcentre Plus?

Prompts:

- If not which ones weren't people aware of?
 - Would awareness have affected their choice of channel?
- 2.2.3 Are there any channels that you are aware of but have decided not to use and why?

Prompts:

- In particular if not using self-service channels/services (e.g. website, phone, Warm Phone, Jobpoints), why not and how could this be changed?

2.2.4 Where you have been in a local office, what is your view of this?

Prompts:

- Office décor etc.
- Office cleanliness etc.
- Office atmosphere.
- No of staff available to help.
- Security arrangements.
- Accessibility arrangements.
- Other aspects of the office environment.

2.2.5 For those of you who have spoken face-to-face to staff available at the front of the office (i.e. for ad hoc or impromptu advice on using Jobpoints or for signing etc) (a) What is your view of this (b) What was good, what was bad? (c) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (d) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Availability of staff to speak to you.
- Accessibility of these staff.
- Knowledge and ability to help.
- General attitude and willingness to help.
- Other.

2.2.6 For those of you who have spoken face-to-face with advisers in arranged meetings (i.e. for WFIs or agreeing JSAG etc) (a) Why did you choose this channel (n.b. not always a choice – some interviews are mandatory)? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (e) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Availability of advisers and appointments.
- Knowledge and ability to help.
- General attitude and willingness to help.
- Help that they were able to give – i.e. training provision available etc.
- Other.

2.2.7 For those of you who have used Jobpoints in the local offices (i.e. for job search) (a) Why did you choose this channel? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (e) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Availability of Jobpoints (i.e. enough working machines etc.)
- Ease of use.
- Quality of information (i.e. what they searched for, no of vacancies available, correctness of information).
- Other.

2.2.8 For those of you who have used warm (free) phones in the local offices (i.e. for new claims, access to social fund, calling Jobseeker Direct) (a) Why did you choose this channel? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (e) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Availability of Warm Phones (i.e. enough working phones etc.)
- Ease of use.
- Comfort of using the phone.
- Privacy of using the phone (including availability of a booth/office where relevant).
- Quality of information provided (i.e. what they searched for, no of vacancies available, correctness of information).
- Other.

2.2.9 For those of you who have contacted Jobcentre Plus on your mobile phone (i.e. for new claims, access to social fund, calling Jobseeker Direct) (a) Why did you choose this channel? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (e) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Ability to get through.
- Cost.
- Availability of ring back.
- Quality of service provided (i.e. help provided at the other end).
- Other.

2.2.10 For those of you who have contacted Jobcentre Plus on landline phone (i.e. for new claims, access to social fund, calling Jobseeker Direct) (a) Why did you choose this channel? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (e) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Ability to get through.
- Cost.
- Availability of ring back.
- Quality of service provided (i.e. help provided at the other end).
- Other.

2.2.11 For those of you who have used the Jobcentre Plus website (i.e. for new claims, job search, access to forms and information) (a) Why did you choose this channel? (b) what is your view of this? (c) What was good, what was bad? (d) Was it easy to access/cause any problems? (e) How did it affect your overall satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Ease of finding site on the web.
- Design and ease of navigation.
- Speed of the site.
- Quality of information provided (i.e. wrong or contradictory information, vacancy information etc).
- Other.

3 PERCEIVED CHANGES IN QUALITY OF SERVICE

Text to read out:

Over recent years, Jobcentre Plus has made a number of changes to how it does things. You may have noticed some of these and they are interested to know whether they have got better or worse as a result of the changes they have made.

- 3.1.1 Have you noticed any changes in the types of services or the ways in which the same service is provided over time? What change have you noticed? Has this been to get better or worse? Why?

Prompts:

- New claims.
- Fortnightly signing.
- Job search.
- Careers or training advice.
- Referral to external providers of training or assistance.
- Other services, prompt which.

4 EXPERIENCES OF COMPLAINTS SYSTEM

- 4.1 Have any of you ever thought about complaining about any of the services that you have received?

- 4.2 For those of you that have thought about complaining, what was this about?

- 4.3 For those of you that have thought about complaining, did you actually make a complaint? If so, can you tell me about it?

Prompts:

- Who did you complain to?
 - What did they do?
 - Was the complaint resolved to your satisfaction? Why/Why not?
- 4.4 For those of you that have thought about complaining but not actually done so, why didn't you complain?

5 MAKING THINGS BETTER

- 5.1 If you could change one or two things about the services Jobcentre Plus provides, or the ways in which it provides them, what would these be?
- 5.2 Is there any service that Jobcentre Plus provides, or way in which it provides its services, that definitely should not be changed?

6 OTHER

- 6.1 Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your experiences of Jobcentre Plus?

Text to read out:

Thank you very much for your time and participation. Your views and experiences are very much appreciated and you will be able to see the results of this research when it is published on the internet over the course of the next year.

Payment of expenses and cash gift, including arrangements for this.

Appendix D

Telephone follow-up with selected customers

Jobcentre Plus Customer Satisfaction Qualitative Follow-Up

Follow-up Telephone Interviews with Selected Customers

Interviewer:

Date/Time:

Interviewee No:

CHECKS

Is the recorder on?

Are you using the correct topic guide?

Now read the introductory statement.

NB: REMEMBER TO READ RESPONDENT PROFILE AND ONLY ASK THE QUESTIONS IN THE RELEVANT SECTIONS FOR THIS CUSTOMER

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT (TO BE READ ONLY AFTER RECORDER STARTED)

Before we start there are a number of things that I need to go through with you.

You recently took part in a survey that we undertook with Jobcentre Plus customers to assess their satisfaction with the services they receive from the organisation. The results of this survey have now been published on the DWP website (<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep480.pdf>). This research is intended to follow-up and gain more detail about some of the survey findings.

We are interested in your honest views of the services you received, why they were good or bad and how they might be improved. We will not reveal your identity to anyone else. Jobcentre Plus and the Department for Work and Pensions are interested in the views of their customers so that they can improve the quality of services that they provide.

As I said, we will not reveal your name or identity to anyone as a result of taking part in this interview and it will not affect any entitlement that you have to benefits or access to any other government service. With this in mind are you happy to proceed with the telephone interview and that we record it to ensure that we record your views accurately (the recording will not be passed to anyone outside of this organization and will not be able to be linked to your name or other identifying details)?

Finally, before we start can I just remind you that while I want you to be honest in your views, please try to avoid unnecessary use of racist, foul or abusive language.

1 COMPLAINTS

You said in your survey interview that you had wanted to complain but hadn't...

or

You said in your survey interview that you had complained...

or

You said in your survey interview that you intended to complain...

1.1 Can you tell me a bit more about your complaint?

Prompts:

- What was it that you felt like complaining about/did complain about?
- Why didn't you pursue it? What would have made you pursue it (i.e. what could be different)?
- How did you pursue it?
- How did you complain?
- What was the outcome?
- Who dealt with the complaint?
- Were you satisfied with the outcome? Why/Why not?
- How could the complaints service be improved?

2 CONTACT WITH OTHER GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS/AGENCIES

You said in your survey interview that in addition to being in contact with Jobcentre Plus you had also had contact with other government departments or agencies...

2.1 Can you tell me a bit more about your experience of contacting other parts of DWP or other Government departments and agencies?

Prompts:

- Which other departments or agencies have you had contact with?

Some examples might include: DWP: Crisis Loan, social fund, other ill-health or caring related benefits. HMRC tax credits, Child Support Agency, Pensions Service, Local authority Housing Benefit.

- Was this before or after you had been in contact with Jobcentre Plus?

2.2 What are your views of this contact?

Prompts:

- Did it seem like you were having to give the same information or answer the same questions more than once?
- What do you think about this?
- Would you be happier to only provide this information once, or do concerns about personal information and confidentiality mean that you are happy to provide it separately? please give details of your views here?
- Do views differ in relation to different government departments or agencies?

2.3 How does your experience of dealing with any other government departments compare with that of dealing with Jobcentre Plus?

Prompts:

- Are there any that seem particularly good or bad?
- Are there any aspects of service that Jobcentre Plus should look to for best practice etc? and what/which are these?

3 ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

In your survey interview you mentioned thatfill in relevant access issue from pro-forma...

3.1 Can you tell me a bit more about the problems you had accessing Jobcentre Plus services?

Prompts:

- In what way was the service you wanted to use difficult to access?
- What specific problems did this cause you?
- How might accessibility be improved?
- Are they aware of other channels available? (office, private rooms in offices, telephone, website).
- Are they aware of ability to have assistance in claims etc process?

4 CHOICE OF CHANNELS

In your survey interview you mentioned that you were aware of but had not used insert service channel...

or

In your survey interview you mentioned that you were not aware ofinsert relevant service channels....

4.1 Can you tell me a bit more about your choice of channels?

Prompts:

- Were there specific reasons you didn't use a particular channel?
- In what form might additional information about the channels available have been given?

5 CHANGES IN THE QUALITY OF SERVICE

In your survey interview you said that you thought that the quality of the service had improved...

or

In your survey interview you said that you thought that the quality of the service had declined...

5.1 Can you tell me a bit more about the way in which the service had changed?

Prompts:

- What was it that you thought that had improved or declined?
- In what way had it improved or declined?

5.2 Are there ways in which further improvements could be made or deterioration in services might be offset?

6 OTHER ISSUES

6.1 Finally, is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences of dealing with Jobcentre Plus?

Appendix E

Senior Manager topic guide

Jobcentre Plus Customer Satisfaction Qualitative Research

Senior Manager Topic Guide

NOTE: Before the interview read the relevant regional report and identify any key regional variations. Please add your own questions in relation to the regional report under the broad headings below, I have done section 1 as an example.

- 1 OVERALL CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND DRIVERS
 - 1.1 What do you think 'customer satisfaction' means for Jobcentre Plus?
 - 1.2 What are the drivers of customer satisfaction?
 - Do these differ between different customer groups?
 - 1.3 Do you think customer satisfaction is changing/has changed over the last year?
 - And how?
 - Does this differ between different customer groups?
 - 1.4 Can you give an example of very good customer service provided by Jobcentre Plus?

Why good: staff (training, confidence etc), systems
 - 1.5 Can you give an example of poor customer service provided by Jobcentre Plus?
 - Why poor: staff (training, confidence etc), systems.
 - 1.6 What do you think is changing for the better and worse in terms of customer service?

2 REGION-SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

Add regional questions/prompts as necessary, examples follow:

- 2.1 Why might customers in this region (e.g. London) be less satisfied than in other regions?
- 2.2 Why do you think JSA claimants were less satisfied in this region than in others?

3 CUSTOMERS USE OF SERVICES

- 3.1 What factors impact on customer's perception and use of different services?
- 3.2 Why do you think customers switch between different channels to access services?
 - Does failure to deal with customers in one channel generate demand for others?
- 3.3 Do you think that staff are able to help customers with additional needs?
 - Are staff able to identify these? IF no, is this structural about processes or is it about training/skills/confidence?
 - Are staff able to meet these needs? And how is this facilitated by services/processes available and staff training/skills/confidence?
- 3.4 What is done regionally to ensure that customers with additional needs or barriers to use services are able to access the services that they need?

4 OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES

- 4.1 Do you think the survey is a fair reflection of customer satisfaction?
 - Why/Why not?

5 SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES AND PROCESSES

- 5.1 Do you think different parts of the organisational structure (e.g. Offices, CCs, BDCs) are sufficiently joined up to provide good customer service?
- 5.2 Are there any issues of gaming with performance information or budgets between the different parts of the organization?
- 5.3 Has the organisation got the right technology (e.g. telephony, computer systems etc) to deliver customer satisfaction?

- 5.4 Does the SOM help to provide good quality customer service?
- 5.5 How does performance management support customer service?
- 5.6 Are there any other process or systems in any part of the organization that detract from customer service?

6 OTHER ASPECTS OF SATISFACTION

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