

Research report

Using Jobcentre Plus services: Qualitative evidence from ethnic minority customers

by Rachel Marangozov, Anne Bellis and Helen Barnes

Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations

A-levels	Advanced level
CV	Curriculum vitae
DSO	Department's strategic objective
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
FJR	Fortnightly jobsearch reviews
GCSE	General certificate of secondary education
IS	Income Support
NUP	Newly unemployed professional
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
PA	Personal adviser
PSA	Public Service Agreement
WFIs	Work focused interviews
IES	Institute for Employment Studies
IB	Incapacity Benefit
WPLS	Work and Pensions Longitudinal Study
UK	United Kingdom
WCA	Work Capability Assessment
LMS	Labour Market Survey

Summary

Introduction

This report presents findings from qualitative research conducted with Jobcentre Plus customers in the summer of 2010 with a particular focus on those from an ethnic minority background. The research involved 83 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus customers in four locations across England. These customers were from Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, black Caribbean, black African, 'Mixed' and 'Other' ethnic backgrounds.¹ White British customers were also included in this research to explore whether the experiences reported are typical of the entire population sampled or unique to specific ethnic groups. All interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed thematically, using AtlasTi qualitative software.

This research was designed² to explore the experiences of ethnic minority customers using Jobcentre Plus services, and to identify any specific issues and how these might usefully be addressed. The research explored in depth whether ethnic minority customers are satisfied with the service received in terms of:

- satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services;
- access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services;
- parity in treatment.

As a qualitative study, it does not claim to be representative of all such customers, but does provide rich detail on customer perceptions and their view of the service they have received from Jobcentre Plus and how these influence their satisfaction with various aspects of that service.

Satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services

The research has discovered that overall levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services do not appear strongly linked to ethnicity, although there were some differences in relation to specific aspects of service delivery by ethnicity.³ In particular there is an apparent preference among ethnic minority groups for face-to-face contact, even though they are just as likely as white British customers to use other contact channels. There was also more of an emphasis among ethnic minority groups on the manner of staff and particularly the qualities of friendliness and politeness.

Customer groups emerged as an important factor in influencing overall levels of customer satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services, with Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers generally less satisfied than Income Support (IS) or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) customers.

¹ 'Mixed' refers to those customers who identify themselves as being children of inter-ethnic partnerships.

² It should be noted that the research was designed in winter 2009 when Departmental strategic objectives were still in place.

³ The 2005 and 2009 Jobcentre Plus customer satisfaction surveys found no significant differences in levels of satisfaction between ethnic groups.

Common features of good practice, as reported by customers, were repeat contact with a dedicated adviser, personalised and tailored help, helpful and friendly attitudes of staff, and a rapid and efficient resolution of queries.

Commonly cited causes of dissatisfaction were the waiting times at Jobcentre Plus offices and the feeling of being rushed through Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews (FJR). However, the most dissatisfied customers were those who felt they experienced process-driven adviser interaction at the expense of a more customer-focused and personalised approach.

The research indicates that while Jobcentre Plus is generally consistent regarding their processes, there is significantly less consistency regarding the timeliness of their services, the knowledge and help on offer by their advisers and the way in which their customers felt treated. These areas are detailed below.

Timeliness

Jobcentre Plus customers reported a mix of experiences in the timeliness of services within and across all ethnic groups. These referred largely to the timeliness of benefit payments, of appointments at the Jobcentre Plus office, and of the phone service.

Many customers were pleased with the timeliness of appointments and FJRs at the Jobcentre Plus office, as well as with the timeliness of their benefit payments and the processes in place to acknowledge claim forms and correspondence, and to keep them informed as their claim progresses. Many customers were also pleased with the timeliness (response times) of the phone service. Others were notably dissatisfied with the waiting times for FJRs, with some customers citing single instances of having to wait 30 minutes or more for a booked appointment. Customers also reported that their time with the adviser felt rushed, and was insufficient. JSA customers expressed dissatisfaction with both of the above issues more than other customer groups.

Knowledge and help of Jobcentre Plus staff

There was considerable variation in customer response to questions around the knowledge and helpfulness of Jobcentre Plus staff. These responses varied little by ethnic grouping but rather by the quality of the help received by Jobcentre staff, including the personalised way in which it was delivered.

Customers from all ethnic groups reported positive experiences of contact with knowledgeable and helpful Jobcentre Plus staff. This created the impression that staff had 'gone the extra mile' for them, or proactively supported them in some way. Specifically, tailored advice, help and guidance emerged as most beneficial to customers. The attitude and manner of staff – specifically, their willingness to offer personalised help and attention – was also an important feature of these experiences.

Conversely, among customers who reported more negative experiences, this was often because Jobcentre Plus staff had not provided advice that was relevant to their individual circumstances, interests or previous work experience. In these cases, customers described their responses from Jobcentre Plus staff as very much driven by standard procedures and, to a lesser degree, time constraints. This was particularly true of JSA customers, who were required to attend the Jobcentre Plus office at regular intervals, but did not always feel that they derived much benefit from doing so. Again, these experiences were reported by customers across all ethnic groups.

A small number of Bangladeshi respondents appeared notably more positive about the knowledge and helpfulness of Jobcentre Plus staff than other ethnic groups. This may be linked to broader satisfaction with the interpretation services available at Jobcentre Plus offices, as more Bangladeshi respondents than in other ethnic groups needed support with English. Potentially this offers an improved interaction due to meeting an adviser or interpreter from a shared linguistic and cultural background.

Treatment by Jobcentre Plus staff

Personalised guidance and a tailored service emerged as a central feature of what customers considered to be an exceptionally good treatment by staff. Conversely, process-driven interactions were strongly linked to poor treatment by Jobcentre Plus staff because they paid little attention to personal circumstances. This was particularly true of the signing-on requirements.

In some of these cases, customers believed that this was because Jobcentre Plus staff were too busy to grant them more attention on a regular basis. In other cases, customers believed that this was because Jobcentre Plus lacked respect for them because they were out of work and claiming benefits, and so treated them according to a 'negative stereotype' of job seekers. Customers' own ethnic backgrounds did not feature as a driver of dissatisfaction when asked explicitly about parity in treatment and outcomes.

These responses to treatment by Jobcentre Plus staff varied little according to ethnic grouping and geographic locations, with generally few differences in emphasis between white British customers and ethnic minority customers. However, ethnic minority customers did appear to place more of an emphasis on the importance of friendliness and politeness among Jobcentre Plus staff, and linked this more strongly to their overall experience of the service than white British customers.

Access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services

Customer experiences of access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services varied across ethnic groups. Customer group, the type of service used and personal customer preferences tended to be more influential in determining the way in which customers access the service. The one exception to this concerned customers who did not speak English as a first language, and so felt more comfortable having face-to-face contact with Jobcentre Plus services.

Overall levels of satisfaction among customers were generally high, particularly with regard to the process of making initial claims, accessing and using jobsearch facilities and accessing and using employability training provision. Repeat (face-to-face) contact with the same adviser and the ease with which customers could access the support they needed tended to be the main influence on customers' views on the service. This was particularly true of ethnic minority groups who favoured face-to-face contact because they thought it would yield a more satisfactory outcome, either in terms of resolving a query, getting more information, securing more help or, in some cases, fostering greater accountability regarding their individual case.⁴

⁴ Other evidence has also found that ethnic minority customers place more emphasis on face-to-face contact than white customers. For example, Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007). *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 407; Jones, M. and Tracy, I. (2010). *Ethnic minority customers' experiences of claiming disability benefits*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 609.

Positive experiences of accessing and using Jobcentre Plus services were frequently linked to face-to-face contact with an adviser, especially where there was an opportunity to build up a relationship with the same adviser, who was familiar with their circumstances and so perceived to be better able to tailor help and advice to individual circumstances. Repeat contact with the same adviser was also linked to not having to repeat information and ‘start over’ in terms of accounting for their circumstances, and more friendly discussions and contact with the adviser. Easy access to the necessary support was also a common feature of positive experiences of using Jobcentre Plus services – whether that be an adviser who can provide helpful information on childcare or additional financial support, a ‘touch screen’ Jobpoint, or a training course which addressed a particular need.

Conversely, less positive experiences of face-to-face contact with advisers was linked to a lack of/poor quality of information given, waiting times for booked appointments and instances where customers felt their time with the adviser was limited, all of which hindered customer access to the support they needed and face-to-face contact with advisers. Less positive experiences were also associated with being asked to repeat information which had already been volunteered, difficulties in having understood claim forms in the past and delays in receiving benefit payments.

There was a low level of awareness among all customers about Jobcentre Plus services to support those who may experience discrimination, bullying or other complaints against employers, despite a feeling among some ethnic minority and white British customers that employers harboured prejudices against them. The most commonly perceived reason for such prejudice was cited as age. More ethnic minority than white British customers cited incidents of perceived unfair dismissal from an employer, or experiences of being bullied while in employment, but they did not relate this specifically to racial discrimination.

Conclusions

A recurrent theme throughout this research is the central importance of the personal adviser in customers’ experience of using Jobcentre Plus services. The quality of the interaction with personal advisers emerges as critical in determining not just the adviser-customer relationship, but in determining customer levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services more broadly. This is true for all customers, but particularly ethnic minority customers who attach greater emphasis on advisers’ interpersonal skills and interaction. The variation in customer response to nearly all questions about Jobcentre Plus services is also indicative of inconsistency in the quality of adviser-customer interaction.

Based on this as well as other findings in this report, we draw the following conclusions:

- 1 The research findings from this study uncover few differences in levels of satisfaction between ethnic groups. This suggests that ethnic minorities may benefit from an overall improvement in service delivery, rather than a differentiated approach, targeted at their specific needs.
- 2 A recurrent theme in our findings is the inconsistency in Jobcentre Plus services with regard to the skills and attitude of the staff, and the extent to which the service is claimant focused and personalised. This finding is consistent across almost all customer groups and demographic characteristics. This finding has been documented in previous research,⁵ and this report gives

⁵ Hudson, M. et al, (2006). *Ethnic Minority Perceptions and Experiences of Jobcentre Plus*. Department for Work and Pension Research Report No. 349; Drew, P. et al. (2010). *A study of language and communication between advisers and claimants in Work Focused Interviews*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 633.

this further credence. This would suggest that **Jobcentre Plus prioritises greater consistency in standards of service delivery** in order to meet the Departmental priorities identified in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Structural Reform Plan, in particular priority 6.⁶

- 3 Another key message from this report is the central role of Jobcentre Plus staff in influencing customers' experiences of the service. This is particularly the case with regards to FJRs and work focused interviews (WFIs), where both a lack of adequate time and a process-driven content were reported as a major issue for many customers. The findings in this report indicate that it could be beneficial for **advisers to be granted more flexibility in the timing and content of their interactions with customers, to drive forward a more personalised service**. This is in line with recent policy developments, and the scope for increasing adviser flexibility (in terms of providing early access to some elements of what is normally offered six months into a claim and referring to alternative provision) is already being explored via the Delegated Flexibility Pilots⁷.
- 4 Specifically, our findings strongly indicate that routinely providing additional jobsearch and personalised guidance within FJRs and WFIs would be particularly beneficial for some customers.
- 5 DWP has already expressed a commitment to the principle of providing more flexibility in service delivery, and there is a possibility that Jobcentre Plus advisers may be granted more discretion to help customers at the local level.⁸ Some changes have already been introduced to give frontline advisers a greater degree of flexibility over the timing and content of some WFIs, and to tailor services to the individual claimant. For example, the Delegated Flexibility Pilots running in four Jobcentre Plus districts aim to explore the benefits (and any potential problems involved) of allowing a high degree of flexibility to advisers⁹. Jobcentre Plus have also made a commitment to rolling out Advisory Services of the Future Training to support the personalisation of adviser services¹⁰. These initiatives may provide a useful vehicle for developing the more personalised assistance which most respondents associated with a high-quality service.
- 6 The central role of the adviser also emerged through the criticisms of staff attitudes, in both the extent to which customers felt they were being helped to find work, and the extent to which they felt treated and respected as an individual. This suggests that an **ongoing investment in staff development and training**, which emphasises the importance of advisers' skills (and not simply processes) as an integral part of service delivery, is needed to improve the experience of using Jobcentre Plus services for many customers. Our findings indicate that this is particularly relevant for ethnic minority customers, who indicate a preference for face-to-face contact with advisers (even though they are just as likely as white British customers to use other channels of contact), and who place slightly more emphasis on the qualities of politeness and friendliness in their interaction with advisers.
- 7 Our findings suggest the need to raise awareness of Jobcentre Plus services to support those who may experience discrimination, bullying or other complaints against employers. Our findings indicate that this is likely to be particularly relevant to ethnic minority groups.

⁶ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/structural-reform-plan.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/delegated-flexibility-pilots.pdf>

⁸ Department for Work and Pensions. (2010). *21st Century Welfare*.

⁹ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/delegated-flexibility-pilots.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/jpbp-1011.pdf>

1 Introduction

It is one of the Government's aspirations to provide 'help for those who cannot work' and 'training and targeted support for those looking for work'¹¹. However, ethnic minority groups continue to face significant disadvantage in the labour market, both in terms of job entry and career progression. The current employment gap between ethnic minorities and the general population stands at 12 percentage points. One in eight working-age people in Great Britain are from an ethnic minority background, and only 60 per cent of this group are currently employed, compared with 72 per cent of the general population.¹²

For 2008–2011, the Government set out its priorities in the form of Public Service Agreements (PSAs). The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) led on PSA 8 'Maximise Employment Opportunity for All'. Jobcentre Plus plays a central role in the delivery of this PSA and has its own key objectives relating to the aspiration of inclusion for disadvantaged groups, in this case, people from ethnic minority backgrounds:

- Work towards parity of outcomes for ethnic minority customers.
- Help people facing the greatest barriers to employment to compete effectively in the labour market and move into and remain in work.

The coalition Government's Structural Reform Plan (DWP 2010¹³), replaces the old, top down, Departmental strategic objectives (DSOs)¹⁴. The document sets out six Departmental priorities including making the Department an exemplar of excellent customer service. This research examines customer perceptions of access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services, satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services and employment issues and barriers. In so doing, this study aims to identify common features of good practice and areas for improvement to inform the future development and continuous improvement of Jobcentre Plus service delivery.

1.1 About the research and research aims

This research is a qualitative study designed to explore why ethnic minorities might experience Jobcentre Plus services differentially, and designed to explore how specific issues and needs might usefully be addressed. The research explored in depth whether ethnic minority customers are satisfied with the service received in terms of:

- satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services;
- access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services;
- parity in treatment.

¹¹ Cabinet Office. (2010). *The Coalition: Our programme for government*.

¹² Labour Force Survey: Second Quarter, 2010.

¹³ Department for Work and Pensions. (2010). *Department for Work and Pensions Draft Structural Reform Plan*. July 2010. Accessed online in 17th August 2010 at: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/structural-reform-plan.pdf>

¹⁴ It should be noted that the research was designed in winter 2009 when DSOs were still in place.

The research also explored customer perceptions of employment barriers and issues.

White British customers were included to allow the research to explore whether the experiences reported are typical of the entire population sampled or unique to specific ethnic groups. The research was focused on ethnicity and did not directly address intersectionality with other equality issues, such as gender, disability, sexual orientation, age or religion and belief.

1.2 Research context

Measuring ethnic parity for Jobcentre Plus customers is extremely challenging, because fundamental differences between the employment profiles and histories of white British and ethnic minority groups mean that there is often no reliable comparator group;¹⁵ more use of qualitative research in this area has been recommended.

Previous research by Jobcentre Plus has shown that ethnic minority customers have tended to have a more negative view of the organisation than white customers. However, ethnic minorities accounted for only a small element of the research.¹⁶

Research carried out into the employment issues for ethnic minorities highlights a very diverse set of experiences and needs.¹⁷ Respondents in previous studies have reported very mixed experiences of Jobcentre Plus use, suggesting considerable inconsistency in the level of service received by customers across districts and offices. Satisfaction with the services of Jobcentre Plus appeared to be shaped less by ethnic group than by customer group. The 2005 and 2009 Jobcentre Plus customer satisfaction surveys also found the customer group to be influential in determining levels of satisfaction, with both (Incapacity Benefit (IB) and Income Support (IS) customers having the highest levels of satisfaction, while Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) clients were less likely to be satisfied.¹⁸

The most recent Jobcentre Plus survey of customer satisfaction shows that while there are some differences by ethnic group, these cannot be confidently linked to ethnicity alone. Although Asian customers were more satisfied than other customers (83 per cent satisfied) and black customers less satisfied (69 per cent satisfied), these findings appear to have been linked to other sub-group patterns. Specifically, the survey found that lower satisfaction rates among black customers was the result of the high concentration of black customers in London, where satisfaction was also lower than average. Also, the higher satisfaction among Asian customers were more linked to language, with Asian customers who did not speak English as their first language more satisfied than other Asian customers (87 per cent compared with 74 per cent).¹⁹

¹⁵ Crawford, C. et al. (2008). *Estimating ethnic parity in Jobcentre Plus programmes: A quantitative analysis using the Work and Pensions Longitudinal Study (WPLS)*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 491.

¹⁶ Ethnic Minority Task Force. (2004). *Equality. Opportunity. Success*.

¹⁷ Hudson, M. et al. (2006). *Ethnic Minority Perceptions and Experiences of Jobcentre Plus*. Department for Work and Pension Research Report No. 349; Tackey, N. D. et al. (2006). *Barriers to Employment for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Britain*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 360.

¹⁸ Sanderson, I. et al. (2005). *Jobcentre Plus national customer satisfaction survey 2005*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 282; Jones, M. and Tracy, I. (2010). *Ethnic minority customers' experiences of claiming disability benefits*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 609.

¹⁹ Thomas, A. et al. (2010). *2009 Jobcentre Plus customer satisfaction research*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 657.

Another common theme in previous research is that ‘ethnic minority customers appear to place more weight on face-to-face contact and the nature of the inter-personal communication with Jobcentre Plus staff than white customers²⁰’. The ethnic minorities booster survey also found that this ‘human factor’ is a particularly important issue for ethnic minority groups.²¹

1.3 Methodology

This research is a qualitative study based on 83 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus customers, with a particular focus on those from an ethnic minority background. Interviews were conducted in four locations across England during the summer of 2010. Jobcentre Plus customers were from Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, black Caribbean, black African, ‘Mixed’, ‘Other’ and white British ethnic backgrounds. This study does not claim to be representative of all such customers, but provides detail on the factors influencing customer perceptions of the quality of service they receive from Jobcentre Plus and how these influence their satisfaction with various aspects of that service.

Sample sites for recruitment of Jobcentre Plus customers were chosen on the basis that they would provide a mix of ethnically diverse areas and less ethnically diverse areas. For the purposes of this study, an ‘ethnically diverse area’ was broadly defined and selected as one which had a large population that had been born abroad, according to the 2001 Census. A ‘less ethnically diverse area’ was defined as that which had, in comparison, a relatively smaller population that had been born abroad. Hereafter, these are simply referred to as ‘diverse area’ and ‘less diverse area’ in the remainder of this report. The timescale for the research meant that these four sites were based in England only. The sample was intended to be broadly balanced in terms of demography (around half of the sample to be male, and around a quarter to be respectively in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s) and also aimed to include roughly equal numbers of people from the main ethnic groups in the UK (see Table 1.1). The design also included a mix of people claiming different benefits, but without specifying precise quotas as this would have been unrealistic given the number of other sampling variables. The achieved sample is set out below.

²⁰ Hasluck, C. and Green A. (2007). *What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 407; Jones, M. and Tracy, I. (2010). *Ethnic minority customers’ experiences of claiming disability benefits*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 609.

²¹ Johnson, S. and Fidler Y. (2006). *Jobcentre Plus customer satisfaction: Ethnic minority booster survey 2005*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 338.

10 Introduction

Table 1.1 Recruitment areas and sample breakdown by ethnicity and age

Ethnic group	Area 1 (diverse area)	Area 2 (diverse area)	Area 3 (less diverse area)	Area 4 (less diverse area)	Totals	Age groups			
						20s	30s	40s	50+
Pakistani	2	0	2	2	6				
Bangladeshi	1	3	2	2	8				
Indian	1	2	2	2	7				
Chinese	3	2	0	5	10				
Black African	0	3	1	5	9				
Black Caribbean	1	1	1	4	7				
Mixed*	1	2	2	3	8				
Other**	4	3	4	0	11				
White British	6	2	6	3	17				
Total interviews	19	18	20	26	83	21	29	19	14

* 'Mixed' refers to those customers who identify themselves as being children of inter-ethnic partnerships

** Includes Other Asian, and white non-British groups

The relatively small numbers of each group in particular areas mean that it is not possible to extrapolate findings about specific groups in particular areas. Hence, to assess any potential impact of location on levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services, the two more diverse areas have been collapsed, as have the two less diverse areas. It was not possible to achieve an approximate gender balance. Of the total of 83 respondents, 51 were female and 32 were male. The gender imbalance of our sample should be borne in mind when reading the findings of this report.

The sample achieved a relatively good spread across the four age groups: 21 customers were in their 20s, 29 were in their 30s, 19 were in their 40s and 14 were 50 plus. In terms of customer groups, most of our respondents were on JSA (56), with smaller numbers of IS (18) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) (10) customers. Hence the sample has allowed us to probe more into the experiences of JSA customers – a group which previous research has indicated tends to have lower levels of satisfaction in comparison with other customer groups.²²

In terms of recruitment processes, a randomised data sample from the National Benefits Database was provided by Jobcentre Plus and, following the expiry of the opt-out period, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) recruited people to fulfil the criteria above, and arranged interviews for agreed pre-booked time slots in local provider premises or at local community venues. Telephone recruitment also checked key personal details, including ethnicity and any language or disability access requirements.

A copy of the interview topic guide can be located in Appendix A. The main topics covered were:

- personal circumstances of customers;
- current employment status and profile;

²² Jones, M. and Tracy, I. (2010). *Ethnic minority customers' experiences of claiming disability benefits*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 609; Sanderson, I. et al. (2005). *Jobcentre Plus national customer satisfaction survey 2005*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 282; Hudson, M. et al. (2006) *Ethnic Minority Perceptions and Experiences of Jobcentre Plus*. Department for Work and Pension Research Report No. 349.

- access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services;
- satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services;
- employment issues and barriers.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Transcripts were analysed thematically, using AtlasTi qualitative software. Differences across and within subgroups (eg by ethnicity, gender, age group, claim status) were then systematically explored to look for factors influencing levels of satisfaction with the service received, and to identify different expectations and needs of Jobcentre Plus services arising from ethnicity or other factors. Brief overviews of each customer's experience of using Jobcentre Plus services were also collated, according to ethnic group and gender, to provide an early indication of any key differences between ethnic groups which might guide further analysis.

1.4 Structure of this report

Chapter 2 details the profiles of our respondents, both in terms of demographics but also in terms of their distance from the labour market and what they considered to be their main barriers to employment. Chapter 3 details our findings in terms of customers' use and access to Jobcentre Plus services, customer awareness of the DWP Customer Charter and formal complaints procedure, and customer views on ethnic monitoring procedures.

Chapter 4 details respondents' satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services, in terms of timeliness, the knowledge and helpfulness of advisers and the treatment by staff. It concludes by summarising some of the common features of good practice through customer feedback on their interactions with advisers.

The final chapter (5) sets out our conclusions arising out of our research and looks at the implications of our findings in the current context of benefit reform and economic downturn.

2 Client profile

Section 1.3 has already detailed some of the key demographics of respondents who participated in this research. This chapter provides more details on customers' background and household circumstances, employment and benefit profiles and barriers to employment.

2.1 Background and household circumstances

All white British customers had been born in the UK and spoke English as their first language. However, more customers who were 'Mixed', black Caribbean or Chinese were born abroad and many 'Mixed', black African and Chinese customers cited their first language as being something other than English. In terms of household circumstances, these varied considerably. Customers who lived with family usually reported these to be partners and children, although some mentioned other family members such as siblings and grandparents. Younger customers (in their 20s) tended to either be living with their parents or by themselves. A few customers were in temporary accommodation.

Living alone was prevalent among 'mixed' customers. However, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi customers were less likely to be living alone than other ethnic groups. Pakistani and Bangladeshi customers tended to live in larger households with extended family, often across two to three generations. Younger Bangladeshi and Pakistani customers were also more likely to be living with their parents than younger people in other ethnic groups.

White British customers generally reported more disabilities and long-standing health conditions, with some mentioning more than one health condition which prohibited them from working. Health issues varied across all ethnic groups and included depression, back trouble, arthritis, asthma, lung disease and strokes.

Black Caribbean and all white British customers had generally been born in the UK. In contrast, most black African had only been in the UK a relatively short time (up to five years) and spoke English as a second language. Some had originally arrived seeking asylum. Most Chinese customers had also been born abroad and spoke English as a second language. Generational differences were more pronounced among Bangladeshi and Pakistani customers, with older, first generation immigrants having been born abroad and speaking very little English and second or third generations being born in the UK and speaking fluent English. Some of the older Bangladeshi women had come to the UK as spouses.

2.2 Employment and benefit profiles

Almost all customers were seeking work or were not able to work at the time of interview, with only a small number of customers who had recently gained employment. Most customers had been unemployed for less than two years, with some unemployed for longer (two to five years) and a smaller group who had been unemployed for five years or more. Most customers were actively looking for work (most were Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers, so this would have been a requirement) in areas which they had prior experience. However, these customers were willing to be flexible and consider other alternatives should the opportunity arise. Of those not looking for work, this was because they were either looking after young children or experiencing poor health at the time.

In terms of benefit profiles, most respondents were JSA customers (see section 2.3). Most of these customers had been on JSA for between 0-24 months and many had claimed JSA in the past, when they had been out of work. A number of customers had switched between benefits due to changes in their circumstance. Examples include one customer moved from JSA to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) after they developed a serious health condition; another moved from ESA to JSA after they had been assessed as fit to work; and another had been moved from Income Support (IS) to JSA after their child had turned 12 years of age. A number of JSA customers were also claiming Council Tax and Housing Benefit. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who faced serious or multiple barriers to work tended to have been on JSA, ESA or IS for the longest periods of time. This held true across all ethnic groups.

Prior to claiming benefit, most customers had been in paid work. Some had been directly affected by the economic downturn and found themselves unemployed. A number of customers (all women) had been caring for young children and continued to do so, with others caring for a sick family member. Extended caring arrangements featured more among Bangladeshi customers with one customer reporting that they looked after grandchildren and some customers who looked after very sick parents. A number had previously been studying college courses and were now looking for work. Some customers had given up work due to ill health or fluctuating health conditions. Customers had often experienced more than one of the above issues with regards to giving up work. For example, one customer had to initially give up work to care for her child and then, at a later stage, gave up work again to pursue a part-time course alongside her childcare commitments as a lone parent.

Ethnic minority groups tended to have much less work experience in the United Kingdom (UK), particularly among the Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Chinese, black African and black Caribbean groups. A small number of older, female Bangladeshi and Pakistani customers had no work experience at all.

Most customers had a varied work history which was characterised by periods of short-term unemployment. Previous work included a range of relatively low-skilled, manual, retail or administration work, some of which had been secured through agencies or temporary contracts. Some customers had held down one previous job for a considerable length of time (over seven years), but had either been recently made redundant or had given up work due to ill health.

There were some JSA customers who were newly unemployed professionals (NUPs) with high levels of qualifications and skills, but who had found themselves unemployed as a result of the economic downturn. Although relatively small in number, NUP customers could be described as fairly atypical customers with a different set of needs.

Ethnic minority customers were more likely than white British customers to report experiences of bullying or perceived unfair dismissal in their previous work environment, although they did not relate these experiences specifically to racial discrimination. These were reported among the black Caribbean, black African, Chinese and 'Mixed' groups and were so serious that they had all resulted in unemployment for these customers. In most of the cases, this then impacted upon their ability to get future employment as they did not feel able to ask their previous employer for a reference.²³

²³ Similar views have also been identified in Hudson, M. *et al.* (2007). *Race discrimination claims: unrepresented claimants' and employers' views on Acas' conciliation in employment and tribunal cases*, Acas. See also Aston, J. *et al.* (2006). *The Experience of Claimants in Race Discrimination Employment Tribunal Cases*. Employment Relations Researcher Series ERRS55, Department of Trade and Industry.

Customers generally had some qualifications, obtained at school or college (General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs), National vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and some Advanced levels (A-levels)), and/or vocational qualifications. Some customers had started courses but not finished them. A few were currently studying part-time courses and degrees.

2.3 Key barriers to employment, training or education

When asked about their barriers to employment, training or education, most customers identified a lack of qualifications, or a lack of qualifications at a particular level. For some black African, Chinese, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian customers, the key barrier was English language skills. Many customers felt they also lacked sufficient experience in a particular field to gain employment. This was particularly true of ethnic minority customers who had a significant lack of UK work experience.

Intense competition for jobs was also commonly perceived to be a barrier to employment, with some customers citing the recent economic downturn as its cause. A number of customers (mainly women) felt that childcare was their key barrier. In some cases this did not necessarily restrict the ability to work, but merely the hours of work, which they reported would have to fit around school hours. Caring responsibilities, particularly extended caring responsibilities (for grandchildren, parents and other family members) was more prevalent among Bangladeshi customers.

A number of customers reported that health conditions and disabilities presented a barrier to finding work, either because they felt unable to work, or were concerned that potential employers would discriminate against them.

'I do find that there's prejudice against depression. So if they say "why have you been out of work a long period of time?", I just say "ill health".'

(White British female, ESA customer, diverse area)

A number of customers also saw their age as a barrier to gaining employment (although, interestingly, virtually no respondents identified their ethnicity as a barrier, in terms of employer discrimination).

'Even though it's illegal now, there is a lot of age discrimination still.'

(Bangladeshi male, JSA customer, less diverse area)

Customers with a past criminal record were concerned that this might negatively prejudice employers against recruiting them, while some other customers felt that they would have put in additional effort to get a job because of what they perceived to be a negative stereotype of job seekers among employers.

Another notable barrier was a lack of confidence and motivation, which many customers cited as a barrier to gaining employment. A number of different reasons were given for this, but a common cause was the process of unsuccessfully applying for jobs and repeatedly being rejected.

3 Access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services

This chapter sets out customers views on access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services, and specifically:

- customers' current access to and use of key Jobcentre Plus services;
- awareness of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Customer Charter and formal complaints procedure;
- customer's views on ethnic monitoring procedures.

3.1 Access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services

Customers reported that the most common Jobcentre Plus services they accessed were those that required face-to-face contact (such as Fortnightly jobsearch reviews (FJR) and booked appointments), the process of making initial benefit claims, jobsearch facilities and training provision.

3.1.1 Face-to-face contact

The nature of face-to-face contact with Jobcentre Plus staff tended to be determined by the type of benefit received, regardless of geographical location or ethnic grouping. Those on Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) (the majority of respondents) usually had face-to-face contact through their FJR; those on Income Support (IS) or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) were more likely to be called to attend for a review of their circumstances every three or six months or for work focused interviews (WFIs).

JSA customers were typically alternating between a weekly and fortnightly cycle of attendance, although some had recently attended a Personal Adviser (PA) interview, for example at the 13 or 26-week stage of their claim.

Customer views on the usefulness of face-to-face contact tended to depend less on the frequency by which they were required to attend the Jobcentre, and more on the extent to which they found that contact helpful. For example, one respondent who signed on weekly, found that this gave her an opportunity to talk to Jobcentre Plus staff. However, another respondent found limited value in 'signing on' weekly because he felt the contact with the adviser was of limited use to him and was 'just another hoop to jump through'.

'Helpful', face-to-face contact with Jobcentre Plus advisers was commonly linked to repeat contact with the same adviser. These tended to be customers with access to dedicated advisers, such as lone parents or those on IS. These customers often commented that repeat contact with one adviser meant that the adviser was more familiar with their personal circumstances and so better positioned to assist them. They also reported that repeat contact with the same adviser saved them from having to repeat information they might have already volunteered. Some customers on IS were particularly appreciative about the support they had received from their Lone Parent Adviser, for example with finding training opportunities, sources of funding or childcare.²⁴

²⁴ In previous studies, Lone Parent Advisers have received consistent praise for the support they give to parents on IS and this approach could well provide a model for other types of adviser-customer relationship. See for example Lewis, J. et al. (2000). *Lone Parents and Personal Advisers: Roles and Relationships*. DSS Research report No 122.

'I think if they've [the advisers] got an idea of your personal circumstances, it is a good idea. I think it should always be the same person because otherwise, you could just be starting again every time.'

(White British male, less diverse area, IS customer)

Access to face-to-face contact with Jobcentre Plus advisers was not generally reported as a problem among customers, as most had appointments booked in advance and on a regular basis. However, waiting times for such appointments at the Jobcentre Plus office was often reported as an issue, with some customers often left waiting 15-20 minutes, and a few reporting single incidents where they were left waiting in excess of 30 minutes. Levels of dissatisfaction about being kept waiting were highest among customers who had other pressures on their time (for example, childcare responsibilities, which were commonly cited).

'I can't be hanging around for 20 minutes. When you've got school runs to do and things like that, you don't want to be hanging around.'

('Mixed' female, diverse area)

In addition, some customers reported that they felt 'rushed' in their contact with Jobcentre Plus staff and that their allocated time with the staff was insufficient. Both of the above issues negatively impacted upon customer views of how easy it was to access face-to-face contact with advisers, particularly in those cases where customers could recall having experienced both problems in a single incident (waiting for an appointment only to then feel as if they did not receive sufficient time with the adviser).

3.1.2 Making initial claims

The standard procedure for any new claimant applying for JSA, IS or ESA is as follows:

- The initial claim is made over the phone, using the centralised Jobcentre Plus call centre number. Even when new customers visit their local Jobcentre, they will usually be directed to a phone to make the claim.
- JSA and IS customers are called in for an interview once their details have been recorded on the Labour Market System (LMS) system, should then receive a decision on their claim within 14 days. ESA customers are sent a form to complete about their medical condition, and should then start receiving payment pending a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) by week 14 of their claim.

When customers were asked about how they had made their initial claim, responses were fairly evenly divided between 'by phone' and 'in person', suggesting differences in how respondents recalled the experience, rather than variations in the procedure itself.

In a small number of cases, customers said they had applied online. There were no problems reported with applying over the internet, although it appeared that individuals choosing this approach were fairly confident with their IT skills.

When asked how satisfied they had been with the initial claims process, many responses were positive, whether this was with reference to contact by phone or face-to-face contact with an adviser. This was generally the case across ethnic and customer grouping. However, respondents on IS or ESA were more likely to state a preference for face-to-face contact if they had found the amount of information given to them over the phone overwhelming, or if their claim had not been straightforward.

Generally speaking, customers who described the experience as positive had found the initial claim procedure fairly 'straightforward' and easy to understand, Jobcentre Plus staff 'helpful', and the outcome satisfactory. Some customers, for example those with basic levels of English or lack of confidence in their literacy skills, positively reported the ease with which they accessed support in making the claim. In a number of instances an interpreter had been provided by Jobcentre Plus and, in all these cases, customers reported that they had been satisfied with this service. Others said they had received support with filling in the forms from the Jobcentre Plus adviser, from family or friends, from support workers or the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

However, for some customers, the initial claim procedure had been a less positive experience. In some instances, respondents reported that they had, in the past, found the ease of understanding the paperwork related to the claim rather confusing. This quote was typical of these experiences:

'The only thing I'd say was the form: it wasn't that clear. It wasn't hard...but it didn't actually put down what they wanted, so it was a bit confusing...'

(*'Mixed'* female, less diverse area)

The most negative experiences appear to have been in cases where the process of claiming had been delayed for some reason, often for want of sufficient evidence of eligibility to claim. The specific cause of dissatisfaction in these cases was often where customers felt they were being asked repeatedly to provide the same information and proof.

Other customers had encountered difficulties with the process of changing from one benefit to another, for example in cases where customers were moving between JSA and ESA. In these cases, respondents often mentioned that they would have appreciated more support from Jobcentre Plus staff to simplify the process of making the transition from one benefit to another.

'When I went over to Jobseeker's [Allowance], I thought that we had closed the ESA but it kept coming up that it was still live and that caused a problem for a few weeks...Job seekers said they can't help until ESA close it, so I had to be calling ESA every day.'

(Black Caribbean female, less diverse area)

Where there was a lack of understanding about the process, this often created the perception among customers that they were being handled by different Jobcentre Plus departments and that these departments were not communicating to each other.

3.1.3 Access and use of jobsearch facilities

Most customers, particularly those who were on JSA and who attended the Jobcentre regularly to sign on, reported frequent use of Jobcentre Plus jobsearch facilities. This was consistent across all ethnic groups. In particular, the 'touch screen' jobpoint was widely used and generally considered to be convenient, accessible and user-friendly.

A number of customers also reported using the DirectGov website, either when attending the Jobcentre or from home. Generally, the website was considered to be accessible and useful by customers who had used it and this was consistent across ethnic and customer groupings. Only a few customers said that they did not use IT facilities independently for jobsearch and these customers tended to be in the older (over 40s) age group.

How customers preferred to access the website (at home or at the Jobcentre) generally depended on whether they had internet access at home and whether they had the skills and resources to undertake this form of jobsearch by themselves, rather than on their ethnic background:

'If I do use their services, I use them online. I think it's a lot easier – a lot of my job searches I've done online...I've got my own resources where that's concerned. I don't feel the need to go to the Centre to go onto that screen – it's all on their website.'

(Black Caribbean female, diverse area)

Satisfaction with the DirectGov website tended to be more moderate among those customers who had experience with other commercial jobsearch sites, such as 'Monster' or 'Fish4jobs'. This was particularly true of those newly unemployed professionals (NUPs) who possessed the skills and confidence to undertake their jobsearch through a variety of different means, including other jobsearch websites and their own networks and contacts. As such, these customers, tended to consider the 'added value' of the DirectGov website in comparison to the other jobsearch methods to which they had access.

While customers generally preferred to conduct jobsearch online or via the 'touch screen' jobpoints, some mentioned that they had also made use of the Jobseeker Direct phone line, which they had found to be accessible, helpful and an easy service to use.

3.1.4 Access and use of training provision

A number of customers reported that they were attending (or had recently attended) a training provider, as a result of a referral from Jobcentre Plus staff. In most cases, the training was for support with jobsearch or employability skills, such as CV preparation, filling in application forms or developing interview techniques. Respondents across all ethnic groups generally said that they had found this type of training useful in improving their chances of gaining employment and moving them closer to work. Other types of training provision included basic skills (literacy, numeracy or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)); IT and computing skills; childcare or teaching assistant courses.

'I think it's fine. It was all about where to look and how to tailor your CV...how to act during interviews and all that kind of stuff. It was useful.'

(Black Caribbean, female, less diverse area)

Positive views were more likely to be expressed where the training had addressed the customer's self-identified needs and/or had a specific outcome (eg evidence of a demonstrated skill). Customers were often keen to take advantage of an opportunity to improve their skills and enhance their employability. For example, one customer, whose first language was not English and had no UK qualifications, had been referred by Jobcentre Plus to a training provider to improve both his English and jobsearch skills. He had found this very helpful because his longer term aim was to gain a GCSE in English to provide evidence of competence in the language to an employer.

Less positive views were more evident among those customers who had been required to attend a training provider on a mandatory basis, for example for supported jobsearch, but failed to see its relevance, usually because they did not feel this was progressing them towards employment. This was particularly the case among customers who had been referred to more than one course of a similar kind, but did not think this was helping them to gain employment. These customers tended to express frustration, albeit less with the provision itself than with the requirement to attend.

Dissatisfaction was also expressed by customers who had requested access to a particular type of training but had not got what they wanted or had been told they were ineligible. For example, some customers expressed frustration that they had been ineligible for modern apprenticeships in the past, on grounds of age and felt that the system discriminated against older customers in this respect.²⁵

3.2 Awareness of the DWP Customer Charter and complaints procedure

Most respondents, regardless of ethnicity, age or customer group, said that they were unaware of the existence of the DWP Customer Charter: only a small handful of people had heard of it. However, while overall awareness of the Customer Charter was low, it was clear from some customers' responses that their expectations of a good service were very much in line with one or more of the key drivers of satisfaction as listed in the Charter.²⁶ As a result, customers were generally already aware of what constituted a good service from Jobcentre Plus, even if they were not aware that these were formally enshrined in a Customer Charter. Of those who had heard of the Customer Charter, some thought it would be a good idea if this were promoted more visibly to customers in Jobcentre Plus offices.

'Maybe they should tell people about it...or give them a couple of leaflets or something on it.'

(Indian female, less diverse area)

Most customers were also not aware of the complaints procedure either, regardless of ethnicity. However, rather more stated that they knew about this, in comparison with awareness of the Customer Charter. A few instances were cited of formal complaints having been made; these tended to centre around dissatisfaction with waiting times at the Jobcentre Plus office and late benefit payments.

However, those who said they were unaware of either the customer charter or complaints procedure did not generally view this as particularly problematic and commented that they expected a large, public organisation like Jobcentre Plus to have such formal policies in place should they ever need to draw on them. While some respondents said they might have used the complaints procedure, had they been aware of it, others stated that they would not have used it as they had no reason to make an official complaint. A small number of customers said they would not complain in either case because they would have been worried about a potentially negative impact on their benefit payments.

Perhaps more problematic was the fact that most respondents were unaware that Jobcentre Plus could offer them support with complaints about an employer. In light of some customers' perceptions of employers discriminating on the grounds of age and ill health (see Chapter 2, section 2.3), this might possibly be a service worth promoting more widely, especially since this research also found that ethnic minority customers were more likely than white British customers to report experiences of bullying or perceived unfair dismissal in their previous work environment (see Chapter 2, section 2.2). While these customers did not relate these experiences specifically to racial discrimination, they had been serious enough to result in dismissal from employment.

²⁵ It should be noted that the upper age limit for modern apprenticeships has subsequently been removed.

²⁶ This is perhaps unsurprising as these were drivers which Jobcentre Plus customers themselves had reported as being important to them.

3.3 Customer awareness of and views on ethnic monitoring

Respondents were fairly evenly divided in terms of their awareness that Jobcentre Plus carried out ethnic monitoring of customers. Despite this, most stated that they had no problems about being asked about their ethnic background and felt comfortable with responding to questions of this kind. A common response, across all ethnic groups, was that they were used to being asked about their ethnic background and regarded this as part of the standard procedures in large public sector organisations, such as Jobcentre Plus. This quote was typical of these views:

'To be honest, so many places ask this sort of stuff, it's just part of the way it is.'

(Black Caribbean female, less diverse area)

When asked for their views on the purpose of ethnic monitoring, most respondents (again, across different ethnic groups) showed awareness of it as a process to provide evidence of equality of treatment to Jobcentre Plus customers, regardless of their background:

'They practise these policies, right? You have lots of people in this country...and you have rights... It's like they're doing these things because they want everyone to be treated equally.'

(Black Caribbean male, less diverse area)

These findings would tend to suggest that Jobcentre Plus staff should routinely ask for this information at the point of first contact (even if it is subsequently not volunteered), particularly as the Equality Act 2010 will require Jobcentre Plus to publish transparent monitoring data.

3.4 Chapter summary

Customer experiences of access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services varied across ethnic groups.

Customer group, the type of service used and personal customer preferences tended to be more influential in determining the way in which customers access the service. The one exception to this concerned customers who did not speak English as a first language, and so felt more comfortable having face-to-face contact with Jobcentre Plus services.

Overall levels of satisfaction among customers were generally high, particularly with regard to the process of making initial claims, accessing and using jobsearch facilities and accessing and using employability training provision. Repeat (face-to-face) contact with the same adviser and the ease with which customers could access the support they needed tend to be the main influence on customers' views on the service.

Positive experiences of accessing and using Jobcentre Plus services were frequently linked to face-to-face contact with an adviser, especially where there was an opportunity to build up a relationship with the same adviser, who was familiar with their circumstances. Customers also reported that contact with the same adviser saved them having to repeat information and facilitated friendly discussions and contact with the adviser. Easy access to the necessary support was also a common feature of positive experiences of using Jobcentre Plus services – whether that be an adviser who can provide helpful information on childcare or additional financial support, a 'touch screen' jobpoint, or a training course which addressed a particular need.

Conversely, less positive experiences of face-to-face contact with advisers was linked to a lack of/ poor quality of information given, waiting times for booked appointments and instances where customers felt their time with the adviser was limited, all of which hindered customer access to the support they needed and face-to-face contact with advisers. Less positive experiences were also associated with being asked to repeat information which had already been volunteered and delays in receiving benefit payments.

Few customers were aware that Jobcentre Plus could offer them support with complaints about an employer and this, together with the evidence presented in sections 2.2 and 2.3, would suggest that there could be value in promoting this service more widely.

4 Satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services

This chapter sets out customers' satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services, and specifically:

- satisfaction with the timeliness of Jobcentre Plus services;
- satisfaction with the knowledge and help of Jobcentre Plus staff;
- satisfaction with the treatment by Jobcentre Plus staff.

This chapter concludes by summarising common features of positive interactions with advisers, drawing on customer feedback.

4.1 Timeliness of Jobcentre Plus services

Jobcentre Plus customers reported a mix of experiences in the timeliness of services across ethnic groups. These experiences referred largely to the timeliness of benefit payments, of appointments at the Jobcentre Plus office, and of the phone service.

Customers were generally satisfied with the timeliness of appointments, their benefit payments, and also with the processes in place to acknowledge claim forms and correspondence and to keep them informed as their claim progresses. Dissatisfaction with the timeliness of benefit payments was largely confined to single incidents, such as delays in receiving an initial payment, processing payments or in making a transition from one benefit to another (these issues are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2).

In some cases, customers reported unresolved or ongoing delays in the processing of their payment, or frustration with repeated requests for evidence to support their claim. In these cases, overall satisfaction with the timeliness of Jobcentre Plus services was notably lower, mostly due to the negative financial impacts to the customer and customers not being kept updated as to the progress of their claim.

Customers' views about the timeliness of the phone services were equally mixed, and this was true across all ethnic groups. Some customers appreciated the convenience of the phone service, stating that it lessened their time travelling to, and waiting around the Jobcentre Plus office. Others felt that the phone services offered a more considered and less rushed experience than their experience at the Jobcentre Plus office, as this customer explained.

'They gave me the phone to ring someone about my benefits and they sorted it [the benefit query] straight away. They were really nice.'

(White British female, diverse area)

However, many customers also expressed dissatisfaction about the waiting times on the phone (both in making initial contact and in being kept on hold once contact had been made). This dissatisfaction was most prominent among those who reported that they often had insufficient money or credit on their mobile phones to make lengthy calls to those numbers that were charged by telephone and mobile operators. Jobcentre Plus will offer to call back anyone who is concerned about the cost of a call, but these particular customers were unaware of this.

Customer experiences of the timeliness of Jobcentre Plus services did not appear to vary significantly by customer group. More JSA customers expressed dissatisfaction with the waiting times at Jobcentre Plus offices than other customer groups, but this is likely to be because of the higher numbers of JSA customers among our interviewees.

4.2 Knowledge and help of Jobcentre Plus staff

There was considerable variation in customer response to questions around the knowledge and help of Jobcentre Plus staff, across all ethnic groups, geographic areas and age groups. This indicates an inconsistency in the quality of adviser-customer interaction, which was repeatedly borne out in customer responses around the levels of knowledge of Jobcentre staff, their ability to answer questions, and the extent to which they felt staff could help them find work or training. This was generally perceived by customers as random, a matter of luck; this quote is typical of many such views:

'If they can really help, that will be better. Some may be okay. I can't say all. It depends if you're lucky or not.'

(Chinese female, diverse area)

A common experience among customers was that some Jobcentre Plus staff had not provided personalised and tailored advice/help relevant to their individual circumstances, interests or previous work experience. In these cases, customers described the response from Jobcentre Plus staff as very much driven by standard procedures and, to a lesser degree, time constraints.

This finding was consistent across all ethnic groups, but in terms of customer groups, it was particularly true of JSA customers, who often felt that fortnightly signing-on requirements were driven by procedure and often not accompanied by sufficient jobsearch support and advice. The result was that customers, most of whom wanted to work, often expressed frustration at the fact that these procedures were not progressing them towards work.

Some JSA customers who were newly unemployed professionals (NUP), reported that Jobcentre Plus staff lacked the specialist knowledge that they needed to help them find work in a particular area of work, or specialist occupation. Sometimes this view was based on prior contact with Jobcentre Plus staff, but in a few cases this stemmed from a perception of Jobcentre Plus staff not being able to offer more specialist advice or focused jobsearch assistance. Overall, however, this issue was not problematic because these customers often felt they were skilled and confident enough to undertake their own jobsearch, utilising their own networks and contacts.

In contrast to these negative experiences, however, customers also reported many other instances where they had found Jobcentre Plus staff to be knowledgeable and helpful. This included instances where staff had provided accurate and relevant information to customers about their entitlement and related process, being able to answer customers' queries, drawing on specific schemes and discretionary funds to address particular needs, such as the Travel to Interview scheme, or carry out better-off calculations to help customers with their finances. For instance this customer described a better-off calculation which had helped her consider part-time work:

'It was quite good actually. She [adviser] goes through the financial side. She said that if I got a part-time job, then you still get the support with housing benefits. Then she showed me financially how I would be better off, so that was really helpful.'

(Pakistani female, less diverse area)

The helpfulness of staff in these instances was highly valued by all groups. For example, a number of customers reported that they had been given useful and relevant information and direction about a training course, or about suitable job vacancies. In other cases, the helpfulness of staff took the form of a willingness to address a particular issue or query, such as a delayed payment. The most positive reports came from customers who felt that the staff had ‘gone the extra mile’ for them, or proactively acted to progress them in some way towards their employment goal.

‘I usually go in and I’ll always ask “Is there any job searches going on with my needs?” and they’ll always give me a specification back and they’ll tell me all the information that I need. They sometimes help me out if I’ve got an interview, with how I should approach it.’

(White British male, less diverse area)

A personalised approach was also highly valued by all groups, with customers reporting that tailored advice, help and guidance had been most beneficial and relevant to them. An important part of this was also reported to be the attitude and manner of staff – specifically, their willingness to offer personalised help and attention. This is discussed in more detail in section 4.3 below.

While there were few marked differences in customer responses by ethnic grouping, the small number of Bangladeshi respondents appeared notably more positive about the knowledge and helpfulness of Jobcentre Plus staff than other ethnic groups. This may be linked to broader satisfaction with the interpretation services available at Jobcentre Plus offices, as more Bangladeshi respondents than other ethnic groups need support with English. Potentially this offers an improved interaction, due to meeting an adviser or interpreter from a shared linguistic or cultural background.

While a number of customers had used the phone service to contact Jobcentre Plus, their responses were as mixed as those using the Jobcentre Plus office. Some reported that the staff were no different from the staff in the Jobcentre Plus offices; others reported that they were better informed; while some reported that they were less helpful than the staff in the Jobcentre Plus offices. So, while many were positive about the phone service, no clear preference for it emerged.

Findings about the knowledge and helpfulness of Jobcentre Plus staff were broadly consistent across geographic areas, with mixed experiences emerging in both those areas with very diverse populations and those areas with less diverse populations. Findings were also consistent across age groups and customer groups.

4.3 Treatment by Jobcentre Plus staff

There were very mixed responses to how customers felt treated by Jobcentre Plus staff across all ethnic groups, and geographic locations, with few marked differences in emphasis between white British customers and ethnic minority customers. However, ethnic minority customers placed more of an emphasis on the importance of friendliness and politeness among Jobcentre Plus staff, and linked this more strongly to their overall experience of the service than white British customers. Ethnic minority customers also had a more notable preference for face-to-face contact than white British customers, despite being just as likely as white British customers to use other channels of contact. Overall, however, responses were very mixed across all ethnic groups, again suggesting inconsistency in Jobcentre Plus services with regard to staff attitudes and the extent to which the service offers personalised assistance in meeting customers’ needs.

4.3.1 The range in customer experiences

Customers said that they felt treated well and respected when they had found staff to be welcoming, polite and friendly. The extent to which staff were helpful and professional also influenced the extent to which customers felt treated and respected as individuals:

Personalised guidance and individual attention emerged as central features of what customers considered to be an exceptionally good service from staff. These positive experiences were often described in some detail, indicating not only the high quality of the service which these customers had received, but also the value they placed on the attitude and manner of the Jobcentre Plus staff.

‘The lady in the Jobcentre office, she literally got on the computer and said: “What kind of jobs are you looking for? Part time? Full-time?” She spent time, a bit longer, even though she had other people, she would look. She would say “They’re opening up a shop soon”. She’d go out of her way and say “Have you got any qualifications?” to which I said “No”. She then worked out any ways of getting me qualifications from training courses.’

(White British female, diverse area)

Ethnic minority customers placed more of an emphasis on the attitude and manner of Jobcentre Plus staff than white customers, and specifically on the qualities of politeness and friendliness. Moreover, ethnic minority customers tended to link these qualities to broader feelings of how welcome and comfortable they felt in the Jobcentre Plus office.

‘I find the staff quite welcoming. You come and claim that you are a foreigner and that this thing is new to you, but if you find someone who is calm, then that’s another thing. I really liked the staff.’

(Black African female, less diverse area)

This is not to say that white British customers did not also think these qualities important. However, ethnic minority customers attached more importance to these qualities than white British customers and a lack of these qualities tended to have a greater negative impact on their view of the Jobcentre Plus services more broadly. In particular, it negatively impacted upon how comfortable they felt having face-to-face contacts with Jobcentre Plus staff, as well as their expectations of staff willingness to help.

In this sense, ethnic minority customers tended to associate the manner of the Jobcentre Plus staff with some aspects of their broader experiences and expectations of the service. Ethnic minority customers also favoured face-to-face contact primarily because they thought it would yield a more satisfactory outcome, either in terms of resolving a query, getting more information, securing more help and, in some cases, fostering greater accountability to their individual case, as this customer reflected:

‘When they’re herding people in and out, it helps that you build a face-to-face relationship because you feel as if they know you more and then if there’s something that they need to carry out, they follow it through a bit more.’

(‘Other’ male, less diverse area)

This preference for face-to-face contact was most apparent among those ethnic minority customers who lacked English language skills, or had limited confidence in their language ability. These customers often felt that face-to-face communication yielded more information than phone contact.

Alongside these findings, however, there were also a number of negative responses about the treatment customers had received from Jobcentre Plus staff. A common feeling was that customers had not felt treated as individuals, and there were several reasons for this. First, many customers felt that their interactions with staff were driven mostly by procedure with little attention to their personal circumstances. This was particularly true of the signing-on requirements, with customers reporting that this was often more process driven, than customer focused. Second, some customers perceived Jobcentre Plus staff as being too busy to grant them more attention on a regular basis. Third, a number of customers reported that they felt that Jobcentre Plus staff did not respect them because they were out of work and claiming benefits. As a result, some customers described feeling demoralised and embarrassed when they went into the Jobcentre Plus office because the attitude of the advisers seemed haughty or patronising. This was particularly true of JSA customers, who accessed the Jobcentres more often for their FJR.

'They're not very nice because you take Jobseekers. They know you've got no job, so you come here for sign on. I get the feeling they're not really respecting people.'

(Chinese female, diverse area)

These feelings were also evident among NUPs who were highly skilled or qualified, but who felt as though these factors were not taken into account in their interactions with staff. People in this situation were particularly dissatisfied if they felt they had been negatively stereotyped, although their own views often reflected such stereotypes about others.

'The stereotypical jobseeker is somebody who doesn't have any ambition or any desire to want to go and find paid employment. It's just free money. But what they need to realise is that they're dealing with a new wave of people such as myself and I go to these interviews and they're asking you some really basic questions. It's quite patronising. They should put you on a level that's individual to the person that they're dealing with.'

(Black African female, diverse area)

Lastly, and to a lesser extent, these feelings of not being treated as an individual stemmed from a perception that staff did not care about customers' needs or circumstances. These perceptions often originated from frustration at the lack of help customers felt they were getting or what was perceived as a negative attitude on the part of staff.

These very mixed experiences of how customers felt treated by Jobcentre Plus staff and services were frequently reflected in customer comments, as many could recall both positive and negative experiences of their treatment by staff. Again this suggests an inconsistency in the standard of Jobcentre Plus service delivery, as this quote illustrates:

'To me it depends on who you're speaking to, because certain advisers didn't look up when you went to sign on, they didn't even acknowledge you. Yet some advisers were brilliant.'

(White British male, less diverse area)

4.4 Common features of good practice

As mentioned previously, customers engaged in this research frequently described instances where they had particularly positive experiences of using Jobcentre Plus services or where they thought services could be improved. Based on these, this section briefly summarises the common features of these experiences:

- Customers often noted the importance of personalised and tailored help from advisers when describing their positive experiences with Jobcentre Plus services. This was commonly linked to assistance and advice regarding jobsearch or assistance in identifying other opportunities, such as training or volunteering placements. For instance, one customer had been very pleased to receive help in finding an ESOL course locally.
- For a number of customers, positive experiences of personalised and tailored help were strongly linked to the fact that they had repeat contact with the same adviser, who knew their circumstances and could offer help according to these. Specifically, repeat contact with the same adviser was linked to not having to repeat information and ‘start over’ in terms of accounting for their circumstances, and more friendly discussions and contact with the adviser.
- Another common feature of positive experiences with Jobcentre Plus services was the attitude and friendliness of advisers. Customers frequently noted that welcoming, helpful and friendly advisers influenced their experience of the service, often noting that it made them feel more comfortable. Ethnic minority customers seemed to place more of an emphasis on the qualities of politeness and friendliness than white British customers, linking this more to their overall experience of using Jobcentre Plus services.
- Another common feature in positive experiences of using Jobcentre Plus services was the speed and efficiency with which staff had dealt with customers’ queries or requests. These requests varied from rescheduling appointments with advisers, to checking the status of claims or an outstanding query. Satisfaction was linked to both the outcome of the query/request and the fact that it had been dealt with speedily.

In almost all cases, customers linked positive experiences to a combination of one or more of the above features. This quote sums up the qualities of a good adviser, in terms of the customer experience:

‘The guy just really seemed to understand where I’m coming from. Sometimes you can feel a bit frowned upon because you’re claiming benefits and it’s been so long since you worked. But he was just sort of very open and understanding, suggesting different ways of looking at jobs and different websites and coming up with ideas that I hadn’t thought of which is very helpful at this stage.’

(White British female, diverse area)

4.5 Chapter summary

This chapter highlights an inconsistency in the perceived standards of Jobcentre Plus service delivery, with some customers reporting fairly high levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services and others reporting notable dissatisfaction. While Jobcentre Plus emerge as fairly consistent in terms of the delivery of procedures, there is much less consistency in terms of the timeliness of services, the levels of knowledge and help provided by Jobcentre Plus staff, and the attitude and manner of staff. The most dissatisfied customers were those who felt alienated from the services because they lacked personalised interaction with advisers. This was particularly true of JSA customers who often reported being rushed through their FJRs and not receiving sufficient time or help.

Levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services do vary across ethnic groups, age groups and geographic location. However, customer grouping emerges as more significant than ethnicity in determining levels of satisfaction, with JSA customers more dissatisfied than IS or ESA customers.

The role of the PAs emerges as a critical factor in determining not only the adviser-customer relationship, but also in influencing customer levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services more broadly. This is true for all customers, but particularly ethnic minority customers who place greater emphasis on advisers' interpersonal skills, manners and on face-to-face contact.

The findings presented in this chapter uncover few differences in levels of satisfaction between ethnic groups. This is consistent with findings from the most recent Jobcentre Plus survey of customer satisfaction, which also found no significant differences between ethnic groups. So, although Asian customers were more satisfied than other customers and black customers were less satisfied than other customers, the survey linked these findings to other sub-group patterns and not to ethnicity itself. Specifically, lower satisfaction among black customers was the result of the high concentration of black customers in London, where satisfaction was also lower than average. In a similar way, higher satisfaction among Asian customers was linked to language, with Asian customers who did not speak English as their first language more satisfied than other Asian customers.²⁷

The findings from this research suggests that ethnic minorities may benefit most from an overall improvement in service delivery, rather than a differentiated approach, targeted at their specific needs.

²⁷ Thomas, A. *et al.* (2010). *2009 Jobcentre Plus customer satisfaction research*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 657.

5 Conclusions

This research aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of ethnic minority customers to help Jobcentre Plus understand how the services they provide differentially affect customers from an ethnic minority background. However, this research has discovered that levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services appear to have little to do with ethnicity, although there is a preference among ethnic minority groups for face-to-face contact and more of an emphasis on the manner of staff, and particularly friendliness and politeness.

Customer groups emerge as more influential in determining levels of satisfaction with the services, with more Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers generally less satisfied than Income Support (IS) or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) customers. Particular areas of dissatisfaction are the waiting times at Jobcentre Plus offices, the feeling of being rushed through fortnightly jobsearch reviews (FJR) and the process-driven nature of adviser interaction, at the expense of a more customer-focused and personalised approach.

The findings of our research suggest that Jobcentre Plus are generally consistent in most of their processes, but are less consistent regarding the timeliness of their services, the knowledge and help on offer by their advisers, and the way in which staff treat customers. While a number of customers reported very positively on a number of different aspects of the services, such as accessibility, timeliness and the knowledge and helpfulness of advisers, other dissatisfied customers felt alienated from the service because they lacked a more personalised interaction with staff.

Common features of good practice, as reported by customers, were repeat contact with a dedicated adviser, personalised and tailored help, a helpful and friendly staff attitude, and a rapid and efficient resolution of queries.

What is perhaps one of the most recurrent themes throughout this research is the central importance of the personal adviser in customers' experience of using Jobcentre Plus services. The quality of the interaction with personal advisers emerges as critical in determining not just the adviser-customer relationship, but in influencing customer levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services more broadly. This is true for all customers, but particularly ethnic minority customers who place greater emphasis on advisers' interpersonal skills, manners and on face-to-face contact.

Based on the findings in this report, we draw the following conclusions:

- 1 A recurrent theme in our findings is the inconsistency in Jobcentre Plus services with regard to the skills and attitude of the staff and the extent to which the service is claimant focused and personalised. This finding is consistent across almost all customer groups and demographic characteristics. This finding has been documented in previous research,²⁸ and this report gives this further credence. As such, this report recommends that **Jobcentre Plus prioritises greater consistency in standards of service delivery** in order to meet the Departmental Priorities identified in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Structural Reform Plan, in particular priority 6.²⁹

²⁸ Hudson, M. et al, (2006). *Ethnic Minority Perceptions and Experiences of Jobcentre Plus*. Department for Work and Pension Research Report No. 349; Drew, P. et al. (2010). *A study of language and communication between advisers and claimants in Work Focused Interviews*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 633.

²⁹ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/structural-reform-plan.pdf>

- 2 Another key message from this report is the central role of Jobcentre Plus staff in influencing customers' experiences of the service. This is particularly the case with regards to FJRs and work focused interviews (WFIs), where both a lack of adequate time and a process-driven content were reported as a major issue for many customers. This report, therefore, recommends that **advisers be granted more flexibility in the timing and content of their interactions with customers, to drive forward a more personalised service**. This is in line with recent policy developments, and the scope for increasing adviser flexibility (in terms of providing early access to some elements of what is normally offered six months into a claim and referring to alternative provision) is already being explored via the Delegated Flexibility Pilots³⁰.
- 3 Specifically, our findings strongly indicate that routinely providing additional jobsearch and personalised guidance within FJRs and WFIs would be particularly beneficial for some customers.
- 4 DWP already has expressed a commitment to the principle of providing more flexibility in service delivery, and there is a possibility that Jobcentre Plus advisers may be granted more discretion to help customers at the local level.³¹ Some changes have already been introduced to give frontline advisers a greater degree of flexibility over the timing and content of some WFIs, and to tailor services to the individual claimant. For example, the Delegated Flexibility Pilots running in four Jobcentre Plus districts aim to explore the benefits (and any potential problems involved) of allowing a high degree of flexibility to advisers³². Jobcentre Plus have also made a commitment to rolling out Advisory Services of the Future training to support the personalisation of adviser services³³. These initiatives may provide a useful vehicle for developing the more personalised assistance which most respondents associated with a high-quality service.
- 5 The central role of the adviser also emerged through the criticisms of staff attitudes, in both the extent to which customers felt they were being helped to find work, and the extent to which they felt treated and respected as an individual. This suggests that an **ongoing investment in staff development and training**, which emphasises the importance of advisers' skills (and not simply processes) as an integral part of service delivery, is needed to improve the experience of using Jobcentre Plus services for many customers. Our findings indicate that this is particularly relevant for ethnic minority customers, who indicate a preference for face-to-face contact with advisers (although just as likely as white British customers to use other channels of contact), and who place slightly more emphasis on the qualities of politeness and friendliness in their interaction with advisers.
- 6 Our findings suggest the need to raise awareness of Jobcentre Plus services to support those who may experience discrimination, bullying or other complaints against employers. Our findings indicate that this is likely to be particularly relevant to ethnic minority groups.

³⁰ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/delegated-flexibility-pilots.pdf>

³¹ Department for Work and Pensions. (2010). *21st Century Welfare*.

³² <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/delegated-flexibility-pilots.pdf>

³³ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/jbpb-1011.pdf>

5.1 The adviser-customer relationship in the context of benefit reform, the economic downturn and cuts in public spending

DWP has recognised for some time now the significance of the relationship that advisers build with customers in providing a personalised and effective service that assists customers who are actively seeking work. However, the importance of the adviser role and practices is likely to become even more critical in the context of benefit reform, the recent economic downturn and recent and projected cuts in public spending.

The economic downturn, which began in 2008, and the subsequent rise in unemployment, has resulted in increased pressure on Jobcentre Plus services. This is likely to increase the tension between process-led and claimant focused approaches in WFIs and FJRs, as advisers learn to deal with increased volumes of customers. The economic downturn also means that advisers will have to deal with a new wave of customers, who are highly skilled former professionals, from particular sectors, who bring with them different needs and requirements.

Cuts in public spending may also have an effect on the adviser role in Jobcentre Plus offices. This is particularly relevant to the recommendations made in this report, all of which have resource implications for Jobcentre Plus. Nevertheless, these resource implications would be at least partly offset by the longer-term net savings brought about by finding people work, which would make such recommendations worth considering. Furthermore, as our research strongly suggests, Jobcentre Plus already has a great deal of good practice which they could build on and disseminate internally at relatively low cost. For example, a continued investment in staff development and training could usefully draw upon this good practice through mentoring or coaching schemes involving particularly experienced and skilled staff. Other research has also suggested that e-learning packages could be utilised.³⁴

Recent benefit reform is also likely to place more importance on the role of the adviser and adviser practices. From October 2010, DWP will begin reassessing Incapacity Benefit (IB) customers for ESA or JSA using the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). This will include customers who receive IS on the grounds of incapacity, including Severe Disablement Allowance. This is intended to start in two trial areas, with national reassessment commencing from February 2011, lasting for three years. It is estimated that around 1.5 million people will migrate from IB at a rate of about 10,000 per week. This will result in more JSA WFIs and FJRs being carried out, but also more JSA customers with health conditions. This, along with other changes, such as the inclusion of lone parents onto JSA, will mean the role of advisers becomes more significant, but also more demanding, in terms of progressing customers towards work.

Our research has found the adviser role to be critical to levels of customer satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services. The challenges detailed above place even greater emphasis on the role of Jobcentre Plus advisers. In the context of an economic downturn and severe spending cuts, however, the task of improving the quality and outcomes of adviser-customer interactions is likely to be more difficult to progress.

³⁴ Davis, S. James, L. and Tuohy, S. (2007). *Qualitative Assessment of Jobcentre Plus delivery of the JSA and New Deal Interventions*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 445.

Appendix A

Using Jobcentre Plus services – discussion guide

Personal circumstances of customer

I'd like to start the interview by asking a few questions to help me understand your personal situation. Do you mind me asking your age?

Can I ask you how you would describe your own ethnic group?

Have you always lived in the UK? (If not, when came to UK, and life stage at migration– ie whether educated abroad, came here as a child etc.)

What is your first language? (If not English) How well are you able to speak English?

Do you have any disability or long-standing health condition? Would you like to say any more about this?

Current employment status and profile

I'd like to just check, what your current employment situation is (eg employed, unemployed and looking for work, studying, caring for children, sick etc.)? How long have you been in this situation?

Probes:

- How does this compare with your usual situation?
- Do you have much experience of paid employment (in the UK/abroad)? When did you last have a paid job?
- What sort of work have you normally done in the past? (Usual occupation, hours)
- (If looking for work) Are you looking for similar work or something different? Can you tell me more about this?

Household situation

I'd like to understand a little about your household situation. Do you have a partner living with you? Are there any children in the household? (Check number and ages) Does anyone else live with you? (Probe for extended family arrangements or living with friends in shared household.)

Probes:

- Is your partner working? Full-time or part-time?
- Does s/he plan to return to work in the next year or so?
- What about other household members?
- Is everyone in good health or does anyone in the household have a long-term health condition or disability?

Access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services

Can you tell me which benefit are you currently claiming (eg ESA, JSA, IS for lone parents)? And how long have you been getting this benefit for?

Probes:

- What was their situation before claiming (eg in work, another benefit etc.)
- How found out about this benefit?
- How initially claimed (face-to-face, phone, internet)?
- Ease of access (clear process, attitude of staff, need for interpretation, promptness of payment etc.)
- Satisfaction with service (outcome, timeliness, right treatment)
- What went well? What could have been improved? What suggestions would you make to improve the service?

Is this the first time you have claimed this benefit? Have you claimed other benefits in the past?

Probes:

- How often (for how long) did you claim in the past?
- Which benefits? Which is the main benefit you have claimed?
- Why/how did you move from one benefit to another?

Which Jobcentre Plus services are you currently using?

Probes:

- In house (eg coming in to see a Jobcentre Plus adviser, signing on, using Jobsearch facilities at Jobcentre Plus)
- Provider (eg Job Broker, Pathways Provider)
- How did you find out about this (eg internet, telephone, face-to-face contact in a Jobcentre Plus office)
- Current pattern of service use (frequency, type, voluntary/mandatory)
- Awareness of other relevant services (eg nextstep, training provision etc.)
- (for ethnic minority customers) Awareness/use of Community Outreach initiatives? How they found about this? Who is running it? Views on these services?

What is your preferred way to look for work?

Probes:

- Newspapers and other print media
- Internet? Do you have Internet access at home? If not, where and how accessed?
- Agencies
- Word of mouth
- Jobcentre Plus

Do you receive any help with looking for work?

Probes:

- What kind of help (job clubs, CV preparation, help filing in applications, etc.)?
- Who provides this?
- How satisfied are you with this help?
- What went well? What could have been better? How would you like to see this improved?

Satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services

How knowledgeable and informative are the Jobcentre Plus staff you deal with?

Probes:

- Can they usually answer any questions you have? How accurate and helpful is the information provided?
- Does this vary according to which service you are using (eg telephone services, face-to-face) or the issue involved (eg claiming benefits, jobsearch, work-related activity)?
- Can you give me an example of a helpful (unhelpful) interaction with Jobcentre Plus staff?
- How does this compare with the service you receive in other public agencies (eg NHS, local council)?
- What issues have you had? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

Do you feel that you are respected and treated as an individual?

Probes:

- Does this vary according to which service you are using (eg telephone services, face-to-face) or the issue involved (eg claiming benefits, jobsearch, work-related activity)?
- Why do you feel this way? Can you give me an example of a time when you have/have not felt treated as an individual?
- What issues have you had? What improvements would you like to see?
- Based on your experiences of using Jobcentre Plus, what do you feel influences the relationship you have with the adviser (eg ethnic group, gender, age, adviser's skills and experience, adviser's attitude and manner, adviser's local knowledge)? Can you explain why you feel this way? Do you think that the same characteristics are important for telephone and face-to-face contact? Why do you feel this way?
- (if applicable and not already discussed) How able/willing are staff to pick up and handle issues to do with your ethnicity, including discrimination?
- (if applicable and not already discussed) How does this compare with times when you have claimed in the past?
- (if applicable) Have you used the interpreting service? How satisfied were you with this?

Are you aware that Jobcentre Plus has a customer charter?

Probes:

- How did you become aware of this?
- How do you feel about this?
- What difference does it make to your perception of the services offered?

Are you aware that Jobcentre Plus has a formal complaints procedure?

Probes:

- How did you become aware of this?
- Have you ever wanted to complain? About what?
- (If applicable) Do you know that Jobcentre Plus can offer support if you want to complain about an employer, for instance if you suspect discrimination?
- Have you ever made a formal complaint? About what?
- What was the outcome?
- Can you tell me about any issues you have had? What improvements would you like to see?

Parity of treatment/outcomes

As you might know, public services, including Jobcentre Plus, monitor people's ethnicity, and other characteristics, because they want to know how well their services meet the needs of their customers. Not only are they obliged to do this, to ensure their services are available and accessible to all, but they also need to know if they should be changing the way they do things or offering services in different ways to help improve access to them. Ethnic monitoring helps them to do this.

Are you aware of this happening in Jobcentre Plus? Can you tell me in your own words, why you think this is done?

As part of your claim have you personally been asked to state your ethnicity and agree to it being recorded?

Probes:

- Was this face-to-face or over the phone?
- How do you feel about being asked for this information?
- Would it have made a difference if it was face-to-face/over the phone? Do you mind telling me whether you agreed to provide this information?
- What would make you feel more comfortable with this?
- How comfortable did the staff seem to be in asking you for this information? Why do you think this is? What do you feel would help?

Do you feel that you get a service that meets your needs?

Probes:

- Why do you feel this way?
- Are any specific needs well catered for? What could be done better? What suggestions would you make to improve the service?
- (If applicable) How is the service for ethnic minority customers affected when they live in an area like this, where there are small numbers of ethnic minorities? How do you feel about this?

Employment issues and barriers

I'd like to finish the interview by asking what you see as the main barriers you face in finding employment.

Probes:

- Do you feel that you lack skills or qualifications that employers require? (if applicable) Are there problems in getting overseas qualifications recognised by employers?
- (if applicable) Does your spoken or written English present a problem in looking for work?
- Do you feel that there is a demand locally for the type of work you can do? Why do you feel this is the case?
- To what extent do you feel that employers tend to discriminate against people in your situation (eg by age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability or health status, social status)?
- Do you feel that you personally have ever faced discrimination when looking for work? Can you tell me more about this? Did Jobcentre Plus offer any support with this? How satisfied were you with this support?
- Do you feel that your health condition or disability limits the amount and/or the type of work you can do? How does it affect you?
- Do you have any childcare, eldercare or other caring responsibilities which limit the amount or the type of work you can do? Could you tell me more about this?
- To what extent do cultural or religious factors restrict the type or amount of work you would consider doing? For instance this might mean not working in certain occupations, avoiding alcohol, tobacco or gambling, or not working in a mixed workforce, on particular days or outside particular geographical areas? Could you tell me more about this?
- What issues have you faced? What improvements would you like to see?

We know that some people have problems getting work because of issues that can be sensitive or embarrassing to discuss, such as problems with reading and writing, spending time in care, homelessness, problems with drug and alcohol use, or being in trouble with the law. May I ask, have any of these been a problem for you? Would you like to say any more about this?

Is there anything else that you wanted to tell me about today that I haven't asked? Do you have any questions for me?

Explain that their interview will be analysed alongside those of other people and a report published which reflects their views and experiences. Check if they would like to be informed when the report is published or receive a summary of the findings.

Thanks, pay incentive, obtain receipt, and close.

This research was designed to explore the experiences of ethnic minority customers using Jobcentre Plus services, and to identify any specific issues and how these might usefully be addressed. It is based on qualitative research conducted with 83 Jobcentre Plus customers in four locations across England, which were chosen on the basis that they would provide a mix of diverse areas and less diverse areas in terms of their ethnic minority population. These customers were from eight of the main ethnic minority groups in the UK. White British customers were also included in this research to explore whether the experiences reported are typical of the entire population sampled or unique to specific ethnic groups.

The findings in this report detail levels of satisfaction among customers in terms of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services, access to and use of Jobcentre Plus services, and parity in treatment. The findings also detail customer perceptions of employment barriers and issues.

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