

Using Jobcentre Plus services: Qualitative evidence from ethnic minority customers

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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. 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, and parity in treatment. The research also explored customer perceptions of employment barriers and issues.

This research presents findings from qualitative research conducted with 83 Jobcentre Plus customers in the summer of 2010 in four locations across England. These customers were from eight of the main ethnic minority groups in the UK and also included white British customers.

Key findings

- This research set out to explore the experiences of ethnic minority customers, to help Jobcentre Plus understand how the services they provide might differentially affect customers from an ethnic minority background. However, its findings indicate 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.
- There is an apparent preference among ethnic minority groups for face-to-face contact and more of an emphasis on the manner of staff, and particularly the qualities of friendliness and politeness.

- There are few overall differences in levels of satisfaction between ethnic groups and this suggests that ethnic minorities may benefit from an overall improvement in service delivery, rather than a differentiated approach targeted at specific needs.
- Customer grouping 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.
- Common features of good practice 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.
- 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.
- Jobcentre Plus are generally consistent regarding their processes, but there was evidence of less consistency regarding the timeliness of their services, the knowledge and help offered by advisers and the way customers felt treated.

Methodology

This study involved in-depth, face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus customers from Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, black Caribbean, black African, 'mixed', 'other' and white British backgrounds. White British customers were included to explore whether the experiences reported are typical of the entire population sampled or unique to specific ethnic groups.

The sample was intended to be broadly balanced in terms of demography and also aimed to include roughly equal numbers of people from the main ethnic groups in the UK. The design also included a mix of people claiming different benefits. This study does not claim to be representative of all such customers, but provides rich detail on the factors influencing customer perceptions of the quality of service they receive from Jobcentre Plus.

Timeliness of Jobcentre Plus services

Jobcentre Plus customers reported a mix of experiences in the timeliness of services across ethnic groups. These 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 administrative paperwork. There was notable dissatisfaction with waiting times for booked appointments at Jobcentre Plus offices, with some customers citing single instances of having to wait 30 minutes or more for a booked appointment or Fortnightly Job Review (FJR). Some customers, particularly those on JSA, also reported that their time with the adviser felt rushed, and was insufficient.

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 Plus 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, which had created the impression that staff had ‘gone the extra mile’. Tailored advice, help and guidance emerged as most beneficial. Conversely, where customers reported more negative experiences, this was often because Jobcentre Plus staff had not provided advice relevant to their individual circumstances, interests or previous work experience. This was particularly marked among JSA customers, who did not always feel that they derived much benefit from FJRs. These experiences were reported across all ethnic groups.

A small number of Bangladeshi respondents were 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 needed support with English.

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, many customers linked poor treatment by Jobcentre Plus staff to interactions which appeared driven by procedure, and paid little attention to personal circumstances. This was particularly noted regarding signing-on requirements. Customers’ own ethnic backgrounds did not feature as a driver of dissatisfaction when asked explicitly about parity in treatment and outcomes.

These responses generally varied little according to ethnic grouping and geographic location. However, ethnic minority customers did appear to place more 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 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 preferences tended to be more influential in determining how customers accessed the service. The one exception was 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 all customers were generally high with regard to the initial claim process, 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 positive influence on customers' views on the service. Conversely, less positive experiences were linked to instances where customers felt their access to necessary support and face-to-face contact with advisers had been hindered. 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.

Few customers were aware that Jobcentre Plus could offer them support with complaints about an employer, despite the perception among some customers that employers discriminated against them on the grounds of age and ill health. This provision would have been particularly relevant to ethnic minority customers, who were more likely than white British customers to report experiences of bullying or perceived unfair dismissal in their previous work environment.

Conclusions

A recurrent theme throughout this research is the central importance of the personal adviser in customers' experience of using Jobcentre Plus services. This is true for all customers, but particularly ethnic minority customers who attach greater emphasis on advisers' interpersonal skills and interaction.

Based on this, and other findings, we draw the following conclusions:

- 1 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, suggests that Jobcentre Plus could prioritise greater consistency in standards of service delivery to meet the Departmental priorities identified in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Structural Reform Plan, in particular priority 6.¹
- 2 Reports of both a lack of adequate time for, and the process-driven content of many FJR and work focused interviews (WFIs) 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.
- 3 Specifically, our findings indicate the potential value of routinely providing additional jobsearch and personalised guidance within FJR and WFIs.
- 4 DWP has expressed a commitment to the principle of providing more flexibility in service delivery.² These initiatives may provide a useful vehicle for developing the more personalised assistance which many respondents associated with a high-quality service.

¹ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/structural-reform-plan.pdf>

² <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/delegated-flexibility-pilots.pdf>. The Delegated Flexibility Pilots, for example, is running in four Jobcentre Plus districts and aims to explore the benefits (and any potential problems involved) of allowing a high degree of flexibility to advisers.

- 5 The central role of the adviser 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. This may be particularly relevant for ethnic minority customers.
- 6 Our findings suggest the need to raise awareness of Jobcentre Plus services to support those who may experience discrimination or bullying by employers. This is likely to be particularly relevant to ethnic minority groups.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 899 7. Research Report 717. December 2010).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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