

The Jobcentre Plus Offer

Findings from the first year of the evaluation

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Launched in April 2011, the new Jobcentre Plus Offer was designed to change the way that Jobcentre Plus operates by placing an increased focus on outcomes rather than procedural targets. To achieve this there has been a move away from nationally mandated processes towards flexibility at the local level, with Jobcentre Plus staff being given the flexibility to provide tailored support which will best move claimants towards paid work.

Key findings

- From an organisational perspective the implementation of the Jobcentre Plus Offer has been successful. There has been a clear move away from a nationally determined structure to more locally-determined processes focused on getting claimants back in to work.
- The Offer appears to complement other initiatives, such as the Performance Management Framework, providing Jobcentre Plus offices with greater autonomy and focus on off flows.
- Jobcentre Plus staff identified aspects of the Offer that could be improved; including lack of availability and awareness of local provision, limited confidence and knowledge of the provision available; access to non-contracted funding; and, challenges purchasing services from other organisations. There were also specific challenges sourcing suitable support for clients with complex issues, especially for those who were Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants with health related needs.

- There is evidence that Jobcentre Plus are helping claimants who have general support needs while providing less support for those who are the least in need, reflecting the goal of the Offer to use resources in a more targeted manner.
- However, ESA claimants do not seem to discuss or receive support to the same extent as Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants. This is a particular concern for those who are currently looking for work (around 16 per cent of the ESA claimants surveyed). Similarly, JSA claimants with complex needs were not always having these needs identified and, as a result, support was not always being tailored appropriately.

Background

The evaluation of the Jobcentre Plus Offer involves two main strands. The first is a longitudinal survey of new JSA and ESA claimants, initially interviewed shortly after starting the Offer and then again as they off flow in to employment, the Work Programme or another destination. The second strand involves case studies in six Jobcentre Plus districts with two waves of site visits and depth interviews with staff and claimants.

The evaluation is being conducted over two years and this report covers the findings from the first year of the study.

Implementation of the Offer from an organisational perspective

The Offer was understood in different ways by Jobcentre Plus staff, and (as might be expected given the nature of the Offer) not always as a discrete and cohesive concept. Recent changes to

Jobcentre Plus working practices were seen as part of a cultural shift towards greater flexibility and a stronger focus on outcomes; shifts that could be associated not only with the new Offer, but also a range of initiatives, including the Performance Management Framework (PMF), Lean continuous improvement techniques, Developing our Advisory Service (DAS), and Local Autonomy pilots.

Across the case study districts it was clear that the principle of greater flexibility had been embraced, in part illustrated by the various delivery models that had emerged. Underpinning these variations were three key factors: offices' prior experience of related initiatives; local area characteristics and resources; and the extent to which off-flow targets had been devolved within the office.

The principle of flexible adviser support was valued by Jobcentre Plus staff, providing greater freedom to determine how advisers' time and resources could be applied to focus on outcomes. The extent to which advisers were able to use their discretion to make these decisions differed substantially between offices, reflecting varying levels of advisers' own skill and confidence, resource limitations, and the extent to which offices had devolved flexibility down to frontline staff.

It was clear from observations and staff interviews, that diagnosis of claimant needs was fairly unstructured, with advisers using their intuition, experience and knowledge as their main diagnosis approach rather than formal diagnostic tools. Rather than complete this during the NJI/New Joiner's Work Focused Interview (NJWFI), staff felt that the diagnosis process was a continual ongoing process and reliant on the rapport and relationship between claimant and adviser.

The flexible menu of support was seen to offer a wide range of programmes which could enable more personalised provision with fewer restrictions than previous programmes on when support could be offered within a claimant's 'journey'. Across the range of provision there was felt to be consistent barriers to use, which included: lack of availability and awareness of local provision; limited adviser

confidence and knowledge of the provision available; complicated access to non-contracted funding; and, challenges purchasing services from other organisations. There were also specific challenges in identifying and securing suitable support for clients with complex issues.

There was variation around how best practice was identified and shared across the case study districts. Given the different delivery models across the case study districts, there is high potential for offices to learn from each other and support ongoing improvements.

Who is taking part in the Offer

Around one in five JSA claimants had already off flowed in to employment by the time of the first interview. In effect, these were the claimants who should be receiving minimal support from Jobcentre Plus when it comes to adviser time and options from the flexible menu of support. Among the remaining new JSA claimants the motivation to find work certainly appears to be present, with nearly all saying that they would be happier in employment (95 per cent), and over four in five saying having any kind of paid job is better than not working (83 per cent). By the time of the interview, only a very small proportion of ESA claimants had off flowed in to employment but a significant minority (16 per cent) said that they were currently looking for work.

The availability of jobs was the biggest barrier cited by claimants looking for work and this was a particular concern for those who had been in work recently. Claimants who had not worked for a prolonged period of time were more likely to also mention issues relating to a health condition.

The demographic profiles of new JSA and ESA claimants were significantly different in a number of key areas. New ESA claimants were on average ten years older than new JSA claimants and were more likely to report having no qualifications. They were also more likely to have been out of work for considerably longer. In large part this is related to the fact that a significant proportion of new ESA

claimants had transitioned from Incapacity Benefit after a Work Capability Assessment. Over half of ESA claimants said that the thought of being in paid work makes them nervous.

How the Offer is experienced by claimants

NJI/NJWFI

For JSA claimants, the NJI focused heavily on jobsearch, with most covering the type of work they were looking for, as well as previous experience, how far they could travel for work, and skills and qualifications. There was some evidence of tailoring as claimants with low qualifications were more likely to have discussed the possibility of retraining or changing career. However, the depth interviews also indicated that for some disadvantaged claimants there were instances where their particular, more complex, barriers were not being discussed.

The experience of the NJWFI for ESA claimants was more varied. While it is true to say that the majority of ESA claimants discussed the possibility of working in the future (70 per cent) this means a substantial minority did not. Similarly, nearly half of all ESA claimants did not discuss what steps they could begin to take to find work in the future in the NJWFI. These findings were reflective of what was discovered in the sites visits and depth interviews where it was felt that discussions in the NJWFI lacked depth and probing in terms of identifying claimant needs.

In addition to this, ESA claimants were significantly more likely to report that they left their initial meeting with their adviser without an appointment for their next meeting and without being clear as to how often they would meet their adviser. These factors are indicative of the general 'light-touch' approach that advisers tended to take when dealing with ESA claimants.

Ongoing support

Claimants viewed their regular Jobsearch Review meeting as a box ticking exercise that was more

about conditionality than providing in-depth jobsearch support. This reflects what was learned from the case study visits, where staff talked about reducing adviser resource used on them and delegating tasks to Assistant Advisers. The majority of claimants felt that the time they had to spend with their adviser was sufficient although around a fifth to a quarter disagreed with this. JSA claimants and ESA claimants looking for work were likely to feel they had too little time as opposed to too much time, by a ratio of 2:1. For ESA claimants not looking for work, the ratio was reversed, with twice as many thinking they had spent too much time with their adviser.

Only half of all JSA claimants said they had seen the same adviser for each meeting, but only around two-fifths who had seen multiple advisers said they would have preferred to maintain continuity. The depth interviews showed that getting to know their adviser personally alleviated concerns about having to explain complex situations multiple times and so these claimants appreciated continuity.

Flexible menu of support

There was a significant difference in the provision of jobsearch support, such as help with CVs and suggestions about where to find job vacancies, between JSA claimants and ESA claimants who were currently looking for work. This perhaps indicates that advisers were not always identifying that some of the ESA claimants wanted to move in to employment.

Volunteering opportunities were one of the elements of the flexible menu that was significantly more likely to be offered to ESA claimants. Actual participation rates for volunteering among people who had discussed the opportunity was relatively low. However, the depth interviews indicated that this may in part be due to problems with signposting rather than reluctance on the part of claimants. There was evidence that the subject of volunteering was raised in conversations with an adviser but no clear steps were given to claimants as to how they could actually get started.

Assessment of support

Around seven in ten claimants felt that the advice and support they received matched their personal circumstances. There is some indication that the Offer has made progress in this area when comparing results to those seen in the Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) evaluation, although caution does need to be exercised due to some variation in sample profile and methodology.

It appeared that tailoring was most effective when the tailoring that was required was relatively standard; for example, a one-off offer of support to provide Construction Skills Certification Scheme training and card. For some claimants, good tailoring came when it involved listening to the claimant's circumstances and not pushing them at inappropriate times. JSA claimants who had only seen one adviser were also significantly more likely to feel that their support had been tailored to their needs – re-emphasising the importance of adviser continuity.

The biggest problems for tailoring were for disadvantaged JSA claimants. Both the survey and the case studies indicated that advisers did not necessarily manage to identify the complex needs of these claimants and as a result support was not always being tailored appropriately.

Recommendations

- There are opportunities for greater sharing of different approaches between offices and districts and it may be that this can be formalised to some extent. However it would be important that this information be communicated in such a way that it is not viewed as being a mandated way of operating – instead it should represent a series of different ideas to consider.
- In order to improve the chances of work-related activity being undertaken for ESA claimants, it may be beneficial if a more structured approach could be overlaid on to the NJWFI. This could be simply ensuring that advisers ascertain whether or not the ESA claimant is actually currently looking for work, and asking whether they are interested in the support options they are discussing rather than relying on them to state interest spontaneously when options are presented.
- Additional support may be required for staff who are administering NJWFIs/Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) to enable them to better identify claimants' often complex support needs. There may also be a need to implement specific monitoring to identify advisers who are struggling in this area, as simple off flow metrics will not work for this group.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 908523 94 5. Research Report 814. November 2012).

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