

Evaluation of the Off-Flows Potentially to Employment pilots (Waves One and Two)

By Sarah Culshaw, Stuart Deaton and Ann Purvis

This report sets out the findings from three stages of qualitative research to establish Jobcentre Plus staff views on the suitability of the current Job Outcome Target (JOT) and to explore the suitability and potential impact of introducing a new performance measure to underpin JOT, the Off-Flows Potentially to Employment (OPtE) measure. The pre-pilot research considered staff views on JOT before the introduction of OPtE; the second stage of research considered district-level staff views on an initial (Wave One) OPtE pilot that took place in 2008; the third stage revisited the pilot districts following the relaunch (Wave Two) of the OPtE measure in 2009. Field work was undertaken in July and August 2009, and it should be noted that there were a number of new initiatives and processes being introduced to districts at a similar time.

Three districts were involved in piloting both the Wave One and Wave Two OPtE measure; South London, South Yorkshire and The Marches. These three districts were also involved in the pre-pilot research along with three control districts; West London, West Yorkshire and Gloucester, Swindon and Wiltshire. Each wave comprised a series of one-to-one interviews with district and office level staff. This qualitative research contributed to the wider evaluation of the OPtE pilots, which also included a destinations survey of customers. The ultimate aim of the pilot evaluation was to determine whether the OPtE measure could be successfully incorporated into the suite of Jobcentre Plus performance targets and supporting measures.

Views on JOT

Most managers and staff recognised the importance of the JOT as the Jobcentre Plus target measuring the agency's ability to place job seekers into work. Many felt that it provided vital information for government and senior management in the organisation. However, most staff felt very detached from the measure at local office level, because JOT is produced as an aggregate measure above office level.

As a result of the perceived distance between staff and office activity and the outcome measure, JOT was not generally considered as a tool for driving office and individual performance. Instead, office managers and staff were using the Adviser Assessment Tool (AAT), introduced at a similar time to JOT, as the main driver of staff performance. More generally, staff noted that the strongest single motivating factor to improve or maintain job performance reported by advisers was the desire to help customers, rather than meet an 'administrative' target.

Staff reported a number of advantages of JOT over the previous Job Entry Target (JET). Many staff reflected on the benefits of receiving data on individual customer outcomes under JET, but recognised the intensity of the data collection required made it impractical. Some advisers suggested that the automated nature of JOT had released them to spend more time with customers. Staff also felt that JOT led to a reduction in some of the perverse behaviours that were felt to be caused by JET, such as inappropriate job submissions. It was felt that JOT was less open to manipulation than JET and had encouraged better teamwork.

However, the majority of those interviewed stated a preference for a measure that reported performance down to individual office level, broken down by the different customer groups. They also cited a number of other characteristics of useful performance measures. These included more immediate (and preferably real-time) reporting of performance, consideration of job sustainability and focus on outcomes over outputs from advisers' interventions with customers.

The new OPtE measure was designed to reflect a number of those characteristics. OPtE provides a figure for the number of individuals leaving working-age benefits excluding those who have:

- moved onto other benefits;
- died;
- left the register and returned within one week;
- retired; or
- taken up New Deal options.

This leaves a figure for the number of customers who are classed as potentially moving into employment.

Views on OPtE

During the initial OPtE pilot phase, district performance teams reported that OPtE did incorporate a number of the elements of a good performance measure raised at pre-pilot stage. OPtE was felt to be a useful addition to, or potential replacement for, JOT because it could show performance at office level, was more timely, and Jobcentre Plus did not have to rely on external agencies to produce the measure. This final issue in particular was felt to generate greater confidence among staff in the validity of the data.

Following the initial pilot phase, the OPtE measure was relaunched and Wave Two pilots began in April 2009. The evaluation fieldwork was conducted in July and August 2009. The

research and findings were, therefore, limited by the infancy of the pilot. In particular, it was difficult to ascertain the true impact of OPtE on the performance of offices and individuals, as OPtE figures from April 2009 had not been made available to the offices during the fieldwork period. However, interviewees did provide a range of views on the potential implications of introducing the OPtE measure.

Furthermore, the OPtE Wave Two pilot was being conducted during a period of significant change within Jobcentre Plus. The recession, Flexible New Deal (FND) and Local Employment Partnerships (LEPs) were all seen as having driven significant changes within the organisation. When discussing targets staff also suggested that the introduction of the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) Off-Flow KMI had more impact than the pilot of OPtE. There was a general perception that OPtE was aligned with and supported the changes but was not a key driver of them.

OPtE was seen by staff to fit with the overarching Jobcentre Plus aim of getting people into work. While it was agreed that OPtE went some way to closing the distance between frontline activity and the performance measure of that activity seen with JOT, it was still generally regarded as an overarching measure of performance most useful for government and Jobcentre Plus senior management. It was not generally seen as the most appropriate tool for driving performance at office level because it was not felt to be sufficiently timely and could not identify the cause(s) of that performance. However, a number of staff suggested OPtE would provide a useful comparison of the relative performance of offices within a district. Other performance measures and office practices can then be explored in more detail in high and low performing offices to identify what produces good overall performance.

The majority of staff interviewed saw the tasks and activities they conducted as influencing OPtE performance. However, they also regarded their influence on OPtE performance

as limited by overarching issues, such as register numbers, the availability of jobs, Jobcentre Plus staffing levels and customer attitudes toward taking up specific jobs offered.

Generally, managers and staff felt that OPtE would lead to offices ensuring that current Jobcentre Plus processes are carried out correctly, rather than introducing any new ways of working. Staff also suggested that OPtE might encourage a renewed focus in areas of administrative 'housekeeping'. That is the accurate recording of job submissions and closing claims down quickly and correctly to ensure all off-flows are captured.

The research explored staff views on three potential impacts of OPtE on customers; customer targeting, job submissions and decision making and appeals (DMA) activity.

There were mixed views on whether and how OPtE may affect customer targeting. OPtE is a contrast to JOT, in that it is a measure based on the raw numbers of customers flowing off benefit, rather than a priority group, points-based system. A number of interviewees suggested they focused more on priority group customers under JOT because it was a points-based system, but that there was now a greater sense that all customers should receive appropriate support to help them get back into work. This rebalancing, supported by the OPtE measure, was generally viewed as positive by staff, who reported feeling the focus on priority group customers had been detrimental to other customers.

Staff suggested two ways in which OPtE might have a positive impact on job submission behaviour. Firstly, OPtE could encourage more appropriate job submissions as advisers could be more likely to submit the most appropriate customer for the job rather than the customer with the highest points (under JOT). Secondly, OPtE could encourage more submissions to jobs that were not captured under JOT but are captured under OPtE, for example those under the lower earnings limit.

The third potential impact explored was that on sanctioning behaviour. Some staff speculated whether OPtE would encourage advisers to move customers off benefits through sanctioning. Undertaking appropriate decision making activity and more frequent attendance interviewing were both reported as priorities by staff. However, there was no clear indication whether the increased focus on sanctioning behaviour was driven by or simply supported by OPtE.

Given the infancy of the pilot at the time of the research, it has not been possible to ascertain whether OPtE has had the impacts outlined above. While the principle of the OPtE measure was broadly welcomed in the three pilot districts, further research will be required to establish precisely how OPtE does affect day-to-day activity in Jobcentre Plus offices.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 778 5. Research Report 660. July 2010).

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

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Paul Noakes,
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3rd Floor, Caxton House,
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