

Exploring staff perceptions of Jobcentre Plus downturn measures

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Introduction

The recent economic downturn and subsequent increase in Jobseeker’s Allowance claimant numbers has resulted in a rising demand for Jobcentre Plus services. In order to meet this demand, Jobcentre Plus introduced a range of initiatives offering additional support to its customers, including the Six Month Offer and the Young Person’s Guarantee. In addition, Jobcentre Plus recruited some 16,000 new staff, which was equivalent to a more than 20 per cent increase in full-time personnel.

At the same time, a package of temporary ‘downturn measures’ was developed for use at Jobcentre Plus offices as a short-term solution to help manage increasing customer volumes and staff workloads, whilst maintaining levels of customer service. For the purposes of this research, the measures have been grouped into six categories, as described in Table 1. As the impact of the economic downturn was not geographically uniform, the measures were implemented in Jobcentre Plus offices where they were likely to be most effective, rather than being rolled-out on a national basis.

Table 1 Categories of downturn measures

Category	Description
Focused Interventions	Measures designed to maximise the number of jobseeker appointments available by varying the average length of labour market interventions according to customers’ needs.
Less Frequent Interventions	Measures designed to manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices by combining interventions and delivering them jointly, or by relaxing the requirement on customers to attend certain interventions.
Telephone and Postal Interventions	Measures designed to manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices by delivering interventions by telephone or by post, rather than face-to-face.
Group Interventions	Measures designed to manage staff workloads by delivering interventions to groups of customers rather than to individuals.
Externally Conducted Interventions	Measures designed to manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices by delivering interventions at external locations.
Optimising Customer Flows	Measures designed to manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices by allowing customers to see the next available adviser, rather than seeing advisers by appointment.

Research objectives

The aim of the research was to explore Jobcentre Plus staff perceptions of the

downturn measures in order to determine how and whether they assisted in maintaining levels of customer service in the context of rising customer volumes. Specifically, staff

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views were sought regarding the impact of the downturn measures on:

- customer volumes and staff workloads;
- customer service and satisfaction; and
- Jobcentre Plus staff.

Staff views were also sought concerning the potential for wider and longer-term implementation of the downturn measures across Jobcentre Plus.

It is important to note that this research focused on the downturn measures and was not concerned with evaluating the success of the additional support provided for jobseekers during the recession.

Approach

The research was qualitative in nature and involved in-depth face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus front-line operational staff and managers. Telephone interviews were conducted with senior members of staff including National, Regional and District level directors and managers. In total, 61 interviews were undertaken across 8 Jobcentre Plus offices; 2 in each of 4 regions. To help ensure sufficient coverage of the downturn measures, the offices were selected based on the number of measures that had been implemented and the length of implementation. Only those measures implemented at offices participating in the research were explored in detail, so not all of the measures were covered.

Summary of findings

There was consensus among respondents that the downturn measures have generally been successful in assisting with managing the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads. The key findings relating to each category of downturn measures are summarised separately below.

Focused Interventions

The downturn measures in this category include:

- 35 Minute New Jobseeker Interviews;
- 4/7 Minute Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews.

The introduction of the Focused Interventions was perceived to have a positive impact on managing customer volumes, specifically because more customers were being accommodated daily as the availability of appointments increased. This was particularly the case for the 4/7 Minute Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews (FJR), which were felt by advisers as still being sufficient to check that customers are actively seeking work. However, some staff argued that this measure had a negative impact on customer service due to the reduced length of interaction between staff and customers. The overall impact on customer service levels of the 35 Minute New Jobseeker's Interview (NJI) was perceived as minimal. However, a need was identified to ensure that there is sufficient time available to deliver relevant support information as part of the additional support package provided for jobseekers during the recession. There was no consistent view as to whether the Focused Interventions should remain in place as unemployment falls.

Less Frequent Interventions

The downturn measures in this category include:

- 13 and 26 Week Reviews Combined with FJR;
- Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) Back to Work Group Sessions Combined with 13 Week Review Group Session;
- Relaxation of Weekly Signing in Weeks 13-19;
- Excused Signing (customers not required to attend FJR).

The 13 Week Reviews Combined with FJR measure was perceived to have assisted offices to manage the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads as the number of separate appointments scheduled for customers was reduced. However, overall, there was limited evidence available from the research on the impact of the Less Frequent Interventions group of measures. None of the offices included in the research were operating the Relaxation of Weekly Signing in Weeks 13-19 and Excused Signing measures as they are rarely implemented and only available as a 'last resort' where absolutely necessary.

Telephone and Postal Interventions

The downturn measures in this category include:

- Flexible Financial Assessor (conducting Financial Assessments over the telephone prior to customers attending a Jobcentre Plus office);
- Postal Signing;
- Telephone Signing.

The Flexible Financial Assessor (FFA) measure was considered to have *increased* staff workloads, largely as a result of the time spent in trying unsuccessfully to contact customers by telephone. As a result, a number of offices had stopped using the measure prior to the research being undertaken. There were mixed views in relation to the effect of the FFA measure on customer satisfaction. In circumstances when the Financial Assessment could be completed successfully over the telephone, the subsequent requirement to see only one adviser at the Jobcentre Plus office and the opportunity to focus on the advisory element of the process were viewed positively. However, some customers were reportedly dissatisfied with contact by telephone and were reluctant to repeat personal information that they had provided previously to the Contact Centre through this medium. As a result of the problems identified with the FFA measure, most respondents were not in favour of its continuation.

No evidence was available in relation to Postal Signing and Telephone Signing as these measures were withdrawn from Jobcentre Plus offices prior to the research.

Group Interventions

The downturn measures in this category include:

- 13 Week Review Group Sessions;
- 26 Week Review Group Sessions;
- Group Orientation Sessions;
- Lone Parent 'Trigger' Interview Group Sessions;
- Initial Lone Parent Work Focused Interview Group Sessions.

The 13 Week Review Group Sessions, Lone Parent Trigger Interview Group Sessions and Lone Parent Work Focused Interview (WFI) Group Sessions were perceived to have had a positive impact on assisting with the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads as interventions were delivered simultaneously to groups of customers, which saved advisers' time. Improvements in the consistency of information provided to customers were also reported as a result of the introduction of group sessions, and the opportunity to deliver the interventions in question in a group environment was received positively by staff. The impact of Group Interventions on customer satisfaction was felt to be highly dependent upon individual customer preference. It was reported that some customers responded positively to group activities, becoming engaged and receptive to information; while others felt uncomfortable, particularly when expected to discuss personal issues. The potential for Group Interventions to compromise customers' privacy was also noted. As a result of these issues, there were mixed views as to whether Group Interventions should be delivered on a more permanent basis.

There was little evidence available concerning the 26 Week Review Group Sessions and the Group Orientation Sessions.

Externally Conducted Interventions

The downturn measures in this category include:

- Conducting 1st WFIs in Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas at Provider Premises;
- Shorter 1st WFIs in Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas;
- Increase in Outreach Activities (Jobcentre Plus services delivered at external premises).

Conducting 1st WFIs in Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas at Provider Premises was perceived to have assisted with managing staff workloads and improved support for customers. Benefits for customers were said to include a smoother transition between Jobcentre Plus and providers, convenience of location and a more neutral environment.

There was little evidence on the Shorter 1st WFIs in Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas and Increase in Outreach Activities measures.

Optimising Customer Flows

The downturn measures in this category include:

- Optimising Customer Flows for NJIs;
- Optimising Customer Flows for FJR's;
- Optimising Customer Flows for 13 & 26 Week Reviews;
- Adviser Response Teams (to ensure 'front-of-house' desk space is utilised to avoid delays for customers).

The introduction of Optimising Customer Flows (also known as 'taxi-ranking') measures allowed customers to see the next available adviser rather than an appointed one. These measures were perceived to have had a positive impact on advisers' diary management and resulted in an improvement in the flow of customers, therefore assisting with the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads. Optimising Customer Flows for NJIs and FJR's was thought to be particularly effective when used in combination with the Focused Interventions. However, taxi-ranking for NJIs was not universally welcomed, mainly because of the perceived increased likelihood of NJIs overrunning, as there was an expectation that waiting customers would be accommodated by other advisers. Despite this, taxi-ranking for NJIs was reported as impacting positively on levels of customer satisfaction due to reduced waiting times and greater flexibility to accommodate late-running customers. Lack of staff preparation time for interviews, lack of continuity in terms of the relationship between adviser and customer; and the potential for adverse effects on staff behaviour were identified as negative outcomes of the Optimising Customer Flows measures.

There was limited evidence in relation to Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 26 Week Reviews and Adviser Response Teams.

Conclusions

There was consensus among respondents that the downturn measures, particularly Focused Interventions and Optimising Customer Flows, have generally been successful in assisting with managing the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads. In the majority of cases staff believed this has been achieved without having a detrimental impact on customer service. Indeed, improvements in customer service and satisfaction were identified as a key outcome in some cases, particularly in relation to the Externally Conducted Interventions. Many respondents agreed that some of the measures could and should become a feature of the Jobcentre Plus business model, particularly the Optimising Customer Flows and Focused Intervention measures. However, there were reservations as to whether the measures should become a permanent feature or just remain operational whilst customer volumes are high. There was also an overall preference for the measures to be optional rather than mandatory, to be used at the discretion of individual offices.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 787 7. Research Report 668. August 2010).

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

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