

Qualitative Research into Enhanced Jobseeker's Allowance Provision for the 50+

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Background

Additional support was introduced from April 2010 for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers over 50 years of age believed to face age related issues, in the form of three voluntary measures: access to work trials from day one; entitlement to an extra 30 minutes of adviser time; and eligibility to be fast tracked to Stage 3 of Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND). Planned bespoke 50+ Support Contract modules were withdrawn in July 2010 due to funding constraints. Enhanced adviser training was introduced at the same time to support the changes.

Insite Research and Consulting was commissioned to carry out qualitative research into the effects of the new measures and the adviser training in the first six months from their introduction.

Research aims and methods

The research was carried out between October and December 2010 and aimed to examine the experience of being unemployed for older workers and whether (and in what ways) the new measures introduced for JSA customers aged over 50 had offered support in helping them to return to work. The research also assessed the additional training that advisers had received, and aimed to examine how advisers engaged with customers aged over 50 and how they were addressing customers' perceptions of the barriers to work that they faced.

The research comprised five in depth interviews with Head Office staff in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus, 35 interviews with Jobcentre Plus advisers in seven districts across England, Wales and Scotland, and 60 interviews with JSA customers aged over 50 who had experienced

one of the three new support measures at some point in their most recent JSA claim.

Key findings

Advisers had benefited from the training and it had succeeded in raising the profile of the 50+ customer group. However, training had not yet reached all those with contact with 50+ customers, and needed targeting in particular on those with customer contact in early stages of JSA claims.

The new 50+ measures were seen by many advisers as a meaningful 'package' only alongside bespoke Support Contract modules and thus as having been undermined by the decision in July 2010 not to continue these. The remaining measures had a low profile among advisers, many of whom had used the measures only very infrequently, if at all.

The 50+ customer group was found to have a number of key weaknesses in their search for employment (such as lack of interview experience and no practice at curriculum vitae (CV) writing) which, ironically, stemmed directly from the success many of them had achieved in sustaining long working histories.

50+ customers in the early months of unemployment were said often to move from early optimism about a return to work (and perceived lack of need for help) followed by disillusionment and depression after some weeks. Advisers were having to deal with this, and the timing of support interventions were crucial in meeting customers' needs and in keeping them engaged with the processes of job searching.

Customers generally reported very good relations with their personal advisers and made many positive comments about the support they had received

from them. However, the new measures were not widely being used to facilitate timely interventions, and were seen by many advisers as not providing anything that could be used to the benefit of customers over and above what was already in place before their introduction and achievable through the application of existing flexibilities.

Adviser training

About half the total expected number of advisers had completed the workbook element of the training in the first six-seven months, and a smaller number had gone on to undertake the interview skills facilitation element. However, those who had completed the training by October 2010 may not have been those who by undertaking it could most affect the success of the 50+ measures.

Almost all found at least some elements of the workbook useful and several were using parts of it directly with customers.

The training was generally felt to be most relevant to less experienced advisers, though its structure was seen as close to other general skills training being undertaken and, as such, the specific 50+ content and relevance was sometimes being overlooked and undervalued.

Adviser perceptions of the 50+ customer group

Advisers showed good understanding of 50+ customers and were generally confident that they were able to recognise and meet the needs for support into work that they might have. The age of 55 was seen by many as a more defining 'watershed' than 50, but age was not automatically treated as an issue nor flagged as a problem unless already seen as such by a customer.

Perceived proximity to State Pension Age (SPA) was seen as a prominent feature affecting the way 50+ customers thought about work. Many older customers were said to be looking to 'wind down' their work in terms of hours, travel and stress, and many advisers felt that this mind-shift towards

retirement was difficult to argue against and that there were no obvious incentives to keep a customer seeking work if their inclination was to sign off and the financial pressures on them to work were not an over-riding factor in their employment decision making.

Customers with a long and solid history of working prior to a recent redundancy, whether from unskilled manual backgrounds or trades, or from managerial and supervisory work roles, stood out for advisers as being most different from customers of other (younger) ages.

As well as barriers such as ill health, high wage expectation, and employer age discrimination, the 50+ were seen to face an important set of challenges deriving, ironically, directly from the strength of their previous work record.

Delivering the 50+ measures

The timing of support interventions was said to be made difficult by the heterogeneity of the 50+ customer group: while a considerable number were seen as likely to benefit from earlier support, an equally large group were felt to first require time to adjust to their situation.

50+ customers were said to be mostly highly motivated and focused on getting back to work, and as such the processes designed to remind customers of their obligations as benefit claimants, and to enforce JSA conditionality, were seen as less appropriate for many 50+ customers and as potentially counter-productive.

In helping older customers, advisers felt that although the available, generic Support Contract provision was a useful 'first port of call', there was a need for more bespoke provision focused on specific 50+ needs. Large groups of mixed ages and motivations were raising concerns that the specific needs of older customers were not being met. Where 50+ specific provision existed locally through non-contracted providers it was being widely used and was said to be appreciated by customers.

The three available measures for 50+ customers all had a low profile and advisers had little personal experience of using them. Most advisers felt the measures made most sense 'as a package' and had been seriously weakened by the decision in July 2010 not to go ahead with the planned new 50+ support modules because of funding constraints.

Work trials, although widely seen as highly suited to older job seekers, were no longer being promoted in several districts, but where they were being used they were said to be effective in getting people to try new types of work, prove themselves to employers, gain confidence in new roles and most importantly to get into sustained jobs.

Extra interview time was somewhat obscured in practice, and in the minds of advisers, by numerous other stated opportunities to provide customers with interviews if they needed them: while advisers generally felt they could provide extra time whenever it was needed, it was not clear whether the intended 'ring-fencing' of extra interviews for the 50+ was resulting in a greater proportion of time being allocated to this customer group or not.

Very little fast-tracking of 50+ customers to Stage 3 was taking place, and where it was it was almost always for customers with health issues or those seeking to go down the self-employment route. There was a widely expressed feeling that outside these two groups there was little point in fast-tracking 50+ customers because there was not much in the way of extra help available after fast-tracking that could not be provided without it.

The 50+ customer experience

Customers typically started with optimism that they would quickly return to work, though often experienced something of a crisis after a few months if still out of work. Experiences of failed job seeking tended to reinforce suspicions that their age was a significant barrier to their finding work.

Many customers wanted to get back into full-time work as soon as possible, but there was a discernible shift in attitudes among those close to SPA, with thoughts of retirement being more prominent.

Significant numbers of customers were seeking to down-size their work in terms of the hours, travel time and stress involved, and saw their current job seeking as an opportunity to do this.

Because many customers had never set foot in a Jobcentre (or not for a long time) they felt disorientated and out of place there and some were very distressed by the experience. Most customers professed a feeling of alienation, heightened by what they described as an impersonal process early on. In particular, 50+ customers felt their proven work history entitled them to a different sort of treatment to other claimants.

There was a high level of expectation for more active help from Jobcentre Plus, and many customers expressed the wish for personal adviser support from very early on; even from day one. Customers generally reported very good relations with their adviser and in particular appreciated the personal interest shown, the continuity of support provided and the pro-active help they often received. The balance of evidence appeared to point to generally good practice from advisers in addressing age related issues, with the possible exception of some customers close to SPA who thought advisers had encouraged them to give up trying to find work.

Customers' comments about support contract provision to which they had been referred echoed many of the concerns expressed by advisers, though most had managed to get something positive from it. Customers experiences of the 50+ measures also mirrored the low profile of these measures in the minds of advisers.

Conclusions

There was a demand from both advisers and customers for bespoke 50+ provision, and evidence that existing generic Support Contract provision was not always serving older customers well. The lack of such specialist modules made advisers reluctant to fast-track people, despite a demand from many customers for more intensive adviser support from early in their JSA claims.

The three 50+ measures had a low profile everywhere, and some local district policy decisions, such as the non-promotion of work trials, could be seen to be acting counter to the intended effect of the initiative. The strong operational imperative felt by advisers was for a tangible 'end-product', in the form of an incentive or a referral, from meetings with their customers.

Support needs assessment processes for 50+ customers were not entirely clear. The default in most cases was that customers were recognised as having extra support needs because they had remained out of work for a certain length of time.

Implications for policy

There is a need to re-iterate that training in 50+ issues should be available for all advisers who come into contact with 50+ customers. For the measures to be as effective as possible, the adviser training supporting them needs to be targeted on advisers seeing customers early in their claims, and perhaps also on other front line staff.

Availability of bespoke 50+ provision to which advisers can refer customers would add important content and focus to advisory meetings.

It would be worth considering whether the training for staff could be re-focused around the key points in the customer journey through JSA, which would make it more readily recognisable by advisers and might relate more directly to their operational experience and priorities.

The current tension between off-flow targets (which can be met through a customer's retirement or effective retirement and signing off the register) and the broad policy aim of extending working lives, appears to warrant attention, and clear policy priorities need drawing up regarding how to treat customers approaching SPA.

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

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