

In-house Research

Working Age Claimants with Complex Needs: Qualitative Study

by Dan Donaldson

Department for Work and Pensions

In-House Research No 12

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Dan Donaldson

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Executive Summary

This report sets out the findings from a small-scale qualitative study of frontline Jobcentre Plus staff, commissioned to supplement the existing evidence base that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) holds about working age claimants with complex needs. The study explored how complex needs are defined by Jobcentre Plus staff, which claimants Jobcentre Plus staff consider to have complex needs and why, and identify any areas for improvement to the service

Key findings are as follows:

- Advisers cite multiple reasons why an individual can be identified as having complex needs – they think that some needs have become more common over time.
- Advisers think that claimants with complex needs can not be treated as a group – an individual’s need must be assessed on a case-by-case basis and tailored support provided accordingly.
- Whilst some claimants with complex needs are easily identifiable, many do not disclose readily, making them harder to help.
- An effective adviser needs:
 - Skills in building trust and rapport with individuals, listening to their needs, probing and questioning to identify issues;
 - Consistent case management processes in place to build up the trust of the individual;
 - Flexibility in diary management; in the support they can offer and the conditions they apply – to allow timely and appropriate intervention; and
 - An environment where the individual feels able to disclose.
- Advisers think that specialist advice and support is important – as is working closely with third sector and other public sector providers.

The findings from this study will inform ongoing efforts to improve the effectiveness of DWP’s delivery services, the implementation of Welfare Reform policies and future policy development.

1 Background

1.1 Aims of the study

This Report sets out the findings from a small-scale qualitative study of Jobcentre Plus frontline staff. This study was conducted to better understand how effectively DWP's services work for working age claimants with complex needs, specifically:

- which claimants staff classify as having complex needs and whether they can be grouped based on the type or level of need;
- whether individuals with complex needs disclose their needs and if not, how staff assess their situation;
- how DWP's current services work for these individuals; and
- opportunities available to improve delivery efficiency and positive outcomes for individuals with complex needs.

For the purposes of this study, 'complex needs' are defined as requiring the support of one or more specialist organisation (other than Jobcentre Plus) to move closer to the labour market.

1.2 Approach

1.2.1 Recruitment

The fieldwork comprised of six focus groups, with a total of forty-nine participants, (advisers and assistant advisers). The research also involved four one-to-one interviews with advisers/ assistant advisers, and four one-to-one interviews with adviser managers to support the findings. Fieldwork was completed between 19 July and 4 August 2011. Participants volunteered to attend focus groups. The discussions took place in:

- Greater Manchester
- East London
- Durham & Tees Valley
- Glasgow, Lanarkshire and East Dunbartonshire
- Thames Valley
- West Yorkshire

Locations were chosen to give a view of areas of high and low deprivation in urban and rural locations.

Discussion guides were developed in consultation with policy and delivery teams across the Department, and are attached as Appendices A and B for reference.

1.2.2 How the focus group and interviews were conducted

Interviews took place in Jobcentre Plus offices with two members of the DWP Insight team (one facilitating discussion in line with the discussion guide, one taking notes). Focus groups were completed with advisers and assistant advisers; adviser managers were not present. One-to-one interviews were completed after the initial focus groups.

2 Findings

2.1 Identification and disclosure

2.1.1 Claimants identified as having complex needs

Participants were asked to identify the characteristics of claimants they think have complex needs. The chart below shows the types of characteristics staff identified. The size of the text indicates the frequency with which certain characteristics were mentioned.



2.1.2 Claimants becoming more common over time

Participants were asked if any claimants with complex needs had become more common over time. Staff identified some changes and attributed the increase to three causes:

- Reassessment of Incapacity Benefit claimants following the introduction of Employment Support Allowance. As a result participants felt they were encountering more people with:
 - mental health and cognitive conditions (for instance, several participants mentioned more contact with people who had a condition on the autism spectrum);

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- physical disabilities and mobility conditions; and
- learning difficulties.
- The current economic climate. Participants felt that this had led to an increase in:
 - homeless people;
 - claimants with debt problems;
 - young people (18-24 year old) not in education, employment or training (NEETs); and
 - people who had drug and/or alcohol addictions.

Participants identified further characteristics within this group:

- an increase in professionals; and
- a tendency to have multiple issues.
- Location specific issues. Some participants identified issues that they felt had become more common in the area where their Jobcentre Plus office was located. This included:
 - cultural issues (e.g. itinerant groups)
 - those for whom English is not a first language; and
 - areas close to military bases where participants had seen an increase in ex-members of the armed forces who have complex needs.

2.1.3 Grouping claimants on the basis of need or approach

Participants were asked whether they could group types of claimants based on their needs. Participants largely said they were unable to do this as each individual's needs varied. Claimants with similar issues would deal with those issues differently and the adviser's approach needed to be tailored to the individual.

“...everyone is different, even people with the same issues are different and need an individual approach.”

2.1.4 Identifying and disclosing needs

Many participants said that some needs were more easily identifiable or readily disclosed by claimants, for example:

- Claimants who had been found 'fit for work' following the Incapacity Benefit/ Employment Support Allowance reassessment, or those placed in the Work Related Activity Group, more readily disclosed their condition.
- Claimants who tended to seek early benefit payments or make applications for crisis loans often had complex needs.

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- Claimants with substance addiction (drug or alcohol) who showed obvious signs of addiction – in some cases people with drug addiction disclosed their issues quite readily.
- People with visible physical disabilities.
- Ex-offenders and those with criminal records because they often had appointments made by the institution where they had been held in custody, or said they would not pass a criminal-record check.
- In some cases, claimants attended appointments with friends, relatives or support workers, who advised on their needs.

However participants said that a lot of claimants did not disclose their needs readily. Disclosure often depended on the immediacy of the actual need or the complexity of the issue(s) at hand. How an individual experiencing complex needs felt about their personal circumstances was also important. Participants said this was due to different reasons:

- Some claimants felt work was the solution to their complex needs (as it would bring stability), and feared disclosure could jeopardise their search for work.
- Some claimants feared being stigmatised because of their complex needs.
- Some claimants felt that Jobcentre Plus offices were not private enough or that asking to use an interview room made it obvious to other claimants that they had issues.
- Some people with mental health conditions were unaware of their condition.

2.1.5 Assessing an individual's circumstances

When discussing the skills and working practices required to effectively support people with complex needs, advisers spoke of the importance of:

- Early identification – understanding a claimant's issues early on was seen as key to working effectively with people to overcome their complex needs. It prevented new complexities from developing and allowed advisers to build trust with claimants thus getting their 'buy-in' to work together to move closer to the labour market.
- Good interviewing techniques – the need to be able to ask the right probing questions in the right way to draw out the issues the individual was facing and the ability to listen.
- The ability to build a good rapport with claimants.
- Flexibility to tailor their approach, their time allocation, their language and the support offered based on the individual's needs.

Advisers spoke about how skills developed over time and said that experience was important in working with this claimant group. Experienced advisers could identify issues from claimant behaviour, either in adviser interviews, or in the actions of the claimant such as frequent applications for social fund and crisis loans.

Once rapport and trust had been built with a claimant, advisers were often seen as the first point of call in a time of crisis or difficulty.

“As an adviser you’ve got many hats: mentor, social worker, negotiator, counsellor, crisis worker, mother, father – you’re everything.”

2.2 Effectiveness of the service provided

2.2.1 How current services work for these claimants

Participants spoke about a number of services and support tools available to them which they felt worked well. This differed based on what was available in different locations, however common themes included:

- Consistent contact with the same adviser which helped to build rapport and trust with an individual. It enabled advisers and claimants to work together to identify needs, develop action plans with achievable steps and monitor progress. It also made it easier for advisers to encourage individuals to take personal responsibility – balancing the provision of adviser support with setting conditions for the claimant and ensuring these were met.
- Multi-agency case conferencing with other organisations which enabled a joined-up approach to working with and supporting an individual and proved effective (e.g. working with a social worker, probation officer, etc).
- The value of assistance from local support organisations, especially those in the third sector who had the experience and knowledge of specific needs.
- Outreach working which could help to better identify and understand claimants with complex needs. Participants said that needs were sometimes more readily disclosed outside of the Jobcentre Plus environment, and that afterwards claimants were more willing to engage within the Jobcentre Plus offices.
- Useful tools included:
 - Better-off calculations – the ability to show claimants how financially better off they would be in different jobs compared to their benefit income – enabled advisers to challenge claimant’s perceptions.
 - Diagnostic interviews – helped advisers to use their time to get to know individuals and understanding their needs.

- District intranet sites (where available and updated) were seen as a good source of information about what was available locally for people with complex needs.

Across the focus groups it was evident that participants had a real passion and desire to help individuals into work. Often the extra support given was discrete, with managers not being told.

“You put in extra time – everything behind the scenes, you call at 7am in the morning of an interview; you say I’m waiting for you at the venue...”

2.2.2 Conditionality

Staff supported the role of conditionality and felt that claimants needed to understand and meet their responsibilities in return for the support they received. However, discretion in how conditionality was applied was important to participants when working with claimants with complex needs as:

- The claimant did not always fully understand the implications of sanctions, and therefore sanctions did not prevent an individual from failing to meet conditionality rules or a jobseeker’s direction.
- In some circumstances, the use of sanctions only exacerbated the individual’s circumstances further.

2.2.3 Areas for improvement

Participants identified some areas of the service that could work more effectively for individuals with complex needs. Participants talked about:

- Giving advisers greater flexibility to manage their own time and diary commitments, allowing them to spend more time with people who need support and less with people who did not. At present, participants felt that time-limited interviews restricted their ability to make a difference.
- Placing greater emphasis on dealing with people’s complex issues upfront (whilst relaxing the requirement to look for work), returning to more focused job search activity once there is an improved chance of success.
- The need to protect the percentage of time advisers could spend outside of interviews (currently 20%) to research and complete administrative tasks related to moving claimants forward.
- The need to ensure specialist support is available and easily accessed. Advisers were concerned about a decrease in specialist advisers within Jobcentre Plus where some specialist knowledge would enable better commissioning of tailored support to help an individual. Many participants were also unsure of the process to refer an individual for specialised support or put off by a perceived bureaucracy. Participants were concerned that Jobcentre Plus’s main contracted provision would be too generic for some claimants with complex needs.

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- The need to check appropriate measures to ensure accessibility for claimants were in place, e.g. ensuring lifts and text phones were working.

In addition to the areas identified within Jobcentre Plus, participants identified other areas where improvements could be made, but recognised these areas were not necessarily within the control of the Department. These issues included:

- Specialist support from the third sector – participants were concerned this was in decline due to lack of funding.
- The strong influence of medical professionals on claimants' personal perceptions of whether they are able to work.
- The challenge of moving claimants with complex needs into sustainable employment in the current economic climate as employers could choose skilled workers and professionals to fill low skilled jobs.

2.2.4 Financial constraints as a barrier

Participants identified that claimants with complex needs were frequently in debt, disincentivising low paid jobs as once claimants were employed, creditors would seek bigger debt repayments.

Participants said that financial stability was important to people with complex needs, particularly when they were in debt and benefits provided this stability.

“A lot of clients put a lot of energy into maintaining the status quo and staying on benefits – we must be able to channel that energy in a better way.”

In some focus groups, participants noted that local employment opportunities were biased towards call centres or the finance industry where employers required credit checks to be undertaken, but long-term benefit claimants often had poor credit ratings.

3 Conclusions

Jobcentre Plus advisers see a wide range of claimants who they perceive to have complex needs including some groups which they believe are increasing in size due to the introduction of ESA, the current economic climate, or local factors.

In general, participants felt claimants with complex needs could not be grouped. Each person needed an individual approach based on how they managed their issues. Whilst many claimants did not tell their advisers about their issues and needs, building rapport and effective adviser skills could encourage people to disclose, enabling early, more effective intervention. Advisers thought the freedom to manage their time flexibly, the opportunity to work consistently with the same individual and close working with other public and third sector organisations would help to overcome complex needs and issues. Advisers also recognised that there are a number of mechanisms in place to support them i.e. guidance and procedures for dealing with vulnerable people, and that Jobcentre Plus is working with customer representative groups to address specific issues. Overall they believed that flexibility, consistency and local specialist knowledge (both within JCP and with third sector organisations) was vital in delivering a good service to these claimants.

In the main, areas for improvement focused on empowering advisers to be more flexible in their approach in terms of time management, frequency of interviews, support offered and conditions set. Advisers recognised that no one individual or organisation could specialise in the breadth of issues faced by claimants but that preserving specialist knowledge and provision was important.

Appendix A - Focus group topic guide

Customers with Complex Additional Needs – Discussion Guide

Staff Focus Groups

20 July 2011

1. TYPES OF CUSTOMERS

10 to 15 Minutes

1.1 When you hear the phrase ‘customers with complex additional needs’, what does this mean to you?

Prompt:

- What are the complex issues of people you would put into this category?
- Think about customers you’ve seen recently?
- Are there any customers who have taken more time than usual to understand their needs?
- Customer who required the support of one or more specialist organisations.
- Customers who have issues to address before they are fully ready for work?

1.2 Are there any specific types of customers that have become more common over time?

Probe:

- Why do you think this is?
- Are there any groups you think may become more prevalent in the future?
- Why so you think this is?
- Which one do you see the most of?

1.3 Looking at the types of people you have identified, are there any groups who have common needs in terms of the support to get them back to work.? What are these?

2. UNDERSTANDING THE GROUPS 30 minutes per group

Identification and Assessment

2.1 How do you identify these customers?

Probe:

- How willing are customers to divulge their needs?
- How can you identify them if they don't tell you they have complex needs?

2.2 What are their [customer's] needs?

Probe:

- How are their needs assessed?
- Do customers tell you they have these needs?
 - If so, when do they do this, and how (e.g. at the beginning of a claim, face to face or on the telephone)?
- How do you decide how to work with the customer to address these needs?
- Do we meet the needs of this customer group?
- Does this customer group need extra support/ assistance?
- Do they need different conditionality?

2.3 Do customers disclose any issues with managing their money?

Probe:

- Is it obvious that budgeting is an issue or is it hidden?
- How do customers tend to reveal this?
- What do they say?
- Is it just about running out of money/applying for crisis loans/do they mention use of credit/money lenders?
- Do these issues affect people's decision making when considering returning to work?
- Are there any particular tools/support you offer people with money management problems?
- Or signposting for debt advice/money management advice?

Service Provided and Evaluation

2.4 What works well with customers in this group?

Probe:

- What have been the successes; how did you take this forward?
- Any examples you can give?
- Are there increased numbers of interaction with this customer group?

2.5 Is the way you communicate (i.e. telephone, face to face, etc) the most suitable for this customer group?

Probe:

- If not, which is a better method of interaction?
- Are the customers in this group usually accompanied by a carer or representative perhaps?

2.6 Is there any additional time taken to work with this customer group?

Probe:

- Who else in Jobcentre Plus sees these customers?
- How often do they attend the office in a week?
- Is this different to the time allocated to other customers?
- How does this impact on staff and other customers and your ability to manage your caseload?
 - If yes, how does this affect the way work with this customer?

Service Improvement

2.7 If you could, what would you do differently to work better with this customer group?

Probe:

- What particular adviser skills do you need for working with these customers?
- What tools do you have for working with this customer group?
 - If no, what do you need to help you work with this group effectively?
- Are there any examples of what hasn't worked so well?

2.8 Are there any occasions when you work with another organisation support these customers?

Probe:

- Do you have any knowledge of specialist 3rd party services, e.g. drug rehabilitation services, crisis centres, homeless hostels etc? (Not necessarily a formal provider for JCP.)
 - If yes, do you signpost to these services?
 - If not, why not?
- Under what circumstance should we refer to these organisations?
- What do other organisations bring/ do that moves people closer to the labour market?

2.9 Is there anything you think might prevent customers from developing complex additional needs?

3. GENERAL

10 minutes

3.1 Are there any points you would like to make, that you don't think we have already covered in the discussion today?

Probe:

- Any further improvements that you think could be made that we haven't covered.
- Are there any points you would like to make relating to something we said earlier?

4. CLOSE

Appendix B – One to One interview topic guide

Customers with Complex Additional Needs

One-to-one interview

14 July 2011

1. Staff have identified that customer with the following list are thought to have complex additional needs:
[show list produced in focus group]
Do you think this accurately reflects this customer group?

2. Considering the groups above, what is your involvement with these customers?
Is your interaction with these customers face to face or in an advisory capacity to staff?
How much of your time, on average, does this customer group require?
What tasks are completed during this time allocation?

3. Thinking collectively about staff resources across the office, how much more time is take when working with these customer groups?
Does this impact on the ability to deliver the service to other customers (not in this category)?

4. Do you think you as a JCP manager are well equipped to support these customer groups?
What do you think should be done differently?
What do you think works well?

5. Do you feel you are well equipped to support your staff who are working with these customer groups?
What do you think should be done differently?
What works well?

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6. Do you think staff themselves feel well equipped to work with these customer groups?

What do you think should be done differently?

What works well?

7. How confident do you feel when working with this customer group?

Where can you go for support and advice?

Do you feel supported when working with these groups of customers?

8. How much discretion are you able to allow when working with this customer group?

What do you think should be done differently?

What do you think works well?

9. Is there anything else you would like to add about this issue, that we have not already covered today?

This small-scale qualitative study of frontline Jobcentre Plus staff was commissioned to supplement the existing evidence base that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) holds about working age claimants with complex needs.

The study explored: how complex needs are defined by Jobcentre Plus staff, which claimants Jobcentre Plus staff consider to have complex needs and why, and areas for improvement to the service identified by staff.

The fieldwork comprised six focus groups of Jobcentre Plus staff, conducted during July and August 2011. They took place in six areas across the Country (Greater Manchester; East London; Durham and Tees Valley; Glasgow, Lanarkshire and East Dunbartonshire; Thames Valley; and West Yorkshire).

Findings from the research will be used to inform ongoing efforts to improve service delivery for working age claimants with complex needs by DWP Operations. The research will also add to the wider evidence base for working age claimants with complex needs to inform the implementation of Welfare Reform policies and future policy developments.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please contact:

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<http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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