

Exploring staff perceptions of Jobcentre Plus downturn measures

by Penny Wymer and Sukvinder Jassi

Department for Work and Pensions

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Penny Wymer and Sukvinder Jassi

A report of research carried out by the Policy Research Institute at Leeds
Metropolitan University on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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The project team

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Abbreviations

AAT	Adviser Assessment Tool
ADF	Adviser Discretion Fund
ASM	Advisory Services Manager
BOC	Better Off Calculation
BtWGS	Back to Work Group Session
CSD	Customer Service Directorate
CSOM	Customer Services Operations Manager
DMA	Decision Making and Appeals
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
FA	Financial Assessor
FFA	Flexible Financial Assessor
FJF	Future Jobs Fund
FJR	Fortnightly Jobsearch Review
FTA	Failed To Attend
IB	Incapacity Benefit
JRFND	Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
JSAg	Jobseeker's Agreement
LMS	Labour Market System

LV	Left Voluntarily
MFA	More Frequent Attendance
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NJI	New Jobseeker Interview
ODN	Operational Delivery Network
PA	Personal Adviser
PLP	Provider-led Pathways (to Work)
PRI	Policy Research Institute
6MO	Six Month Offer
SNU	Support for the Newly Unemployed
SOM	Standard Operating Model
WFI	Work Focused Interview
YPG	Young Person's Guarantee

Summary

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, while 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 to determine how and whether they assisted in maintaining levels of customer service in the context of rising customer volumes. Specifically, staff 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 eight Jobcentre Plus offices; two in each of four 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 Review Combined with FJR's 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 First WFIs in Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas at Provider Premises;
- Shorter First WFIs in Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas;
- Increase in Outreach Activities (Jobcentre Plus services delivered at external premises).

Conducting First 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 first 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 FJRs;
- Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 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 FJRs 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 while 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.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Policy Research Institute (PRI) was commissioned by Jobcentre Plus to undertake research to explore staff perceptions of 'downturn measures' introduced to help Jobcentre Plus meet the increased demand for their services due to the economic downturn. The primary aim of the research was to provide an insight into the effectiveness of the downturn measures and to identify the measures that could be further integrated into the Jobcentre Plus business model as a permanent feature.

While the research focused specifically on the introduction of the downturn measures, it is important to understand the context in which they have been introduced. Jobcentre Plus has experienced a rapid period of change over the last two years, some of which was planned and some of which has been as a direct response to the economic downturn and rising unemployment. Most of these changes have focused on delivering improved or additional support to customers to help them overcome barriers and enter employment. For example, such support includes long-term planned changes such as the introduction of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) and responses such as Support for the Newly Unemployed (SNU), the Six Month Offer (6MO), the Young Persons Guarantee (YPG), Future Jobs Fund (FJF) and extending the Rapid Response Service for people who are made redundant, which have been introduced to offer support in the current context. The delivery of this additional support, along with the increased demand for Jobcentre Plus services, required the recruitment of some 16,000 new staff, which was equivalent to a more than 20 per cent increase in full-time personnel.

At the same time as the additional support for jobseekers was being implemented, a package of 21 special 'downturn measures' was developed for use at Jobcentre Plus offices as a short-term, temporary solution to aid the management of increasing customer volumes and staff workloads. Jobcentre Plus recognised that the impact of the economic downturn was not geographically uniform and therefore the package of downturn measures was not intended for full or national implementation. The measures were developed and introduced to enable the

continuity and delivery of core business, while maintaining good customer service. The downturn measures became available for use to all Jobcentre Plus offices in April 2009. However, through necessity, some Jobcentre Plus offices had begun utilising a number of the measures prior to this date. It is important to reiterate that this research focused on the downturn measures and was not concerned with evaluating the success of the additional support for jobseekers described previously.

For the purposes of this research, the downturn measures have been grouped into six categories, as described in Table 2.

Table 1.1 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.

Of the 21 downturn measures developed, seven primary measures (see Table 1.2 overleaf) were initially intended for implementation across all Jobcentre Plus offices. The remaining measures were designated as optional and could be adopted on a Jobcentre Plus office-by-office basis, as deemed necessary in response to local circumstances. The optional measures required prior approval before implementation by the relevant Operational Delivery Network (ODN). In addition, a few of the measures required the approval of the Director of the Customer Service Directorate (CSD).

Table 1.2 List of downturn measures

Category	Name of downturn measure
Focused Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35 Minute New Jobseeker Interviews (NJIs) • 4/7 Minute Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews (FJR)
Less Frequent Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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) *
Telephone and Postal Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible Financial Assessor • (Postal Signing) • (Telephone Signing)
Group Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 (WFI) Group Sessions
Externally Conducted Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting 1st WFI in Provider-led Pathways to Work (PLP) Areas at Provider Premises • Shorter 1st WFI in Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas • Increase in Outreach Activities
Optimising Customer Flows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimising Customer Flows for NJIs • Optimising Customer Flows for FJR • Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 26 Week Review • Adviser Response Teams

Key:

Bold = Primary measure

Non-bold = Optional measure

* = Requires prior approval from the Director of the CSD

() = Measure withdrawn prior to fieldwork and not included in the research

Full details of the individual measures can be found in Appendix A.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research objectives

The broad aim of the research was to explore Jobcentre Plus staff perceptions of the downturn measures to determine how and whether they assisted in maintaining levels of customer service, in the context of rising customer volumes. Specifically, staff views were sought regarding the impact of the downturn measures on:

- managing 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 measures across Jobcentre Plus.

Given the number of downturn measures developed (as illustrated in Table 1.2), it was decided that the main focus of the study would be the seven primary measures that initially had been intended for implementation across all Jobcentre Plus offices. However, though the emphasis was on the primary measures, findings relating to the optional measures are also reported where possible.

2.2 Approach

The research was a qualitative study of Jobcentre Plus staff perceptions of the downturn measures and involved in-depth, face-to-face interviews with front-line operational staff and managers. Telephone interviews were conducted with senior members of staff, including National, Regional and District level directors and managers. Sixty-one interviews were conducted in total.

2.3 Sample selection

Four Jobcentre Plus regions volunteered to participate in the research, with two offices from separate districts in each region being selected to take part. 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. Steps were also taken to ensure the selection reflected a range of office sizes and locations, and included both Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas and Phase One/Phase Two Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) Districts.

2.4 Fieldwork

On contacting Jobcentre Plus offices to arrange visits to undertake fieldwork, it became apparent that many were not operating all of the seven primary downturn measures. Therefore, through negotiation with district and local level contacts provided by Jobcentre Plus, a range of respondents was identified and selected on the basis of working with a mixture of primary and optional measures. Table 2.1 provides a breakdown of the roles of respondents.

Table 2.1 Summary of interviews undertaken

Role	Achieved Interviews
National/Regional level	
Director/Customer Service Director	5
District level	
District Manager/District Performance Manager	8
Office level	
Business Manager/Jobcentre Manager	7
Advisory Services Manager (ASM)	3
Customer Services Operations Manager (CSOM)	4
JSA Personal Adviser	8
FJR Staff	8
Financial Assessor (FA)	4
IB/ESA Adviser (PLP areas)	3
Additional job roles interviewed	
FJR Team Manager/Leader/CSM	2
Other roles	9
Total	61

The fieldwork interviews were conducted using a semi-structured topic guide (see Appendix 2). All of the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVIVO software.

2.5 Scope of the research

The research adopted a qualitative case study approach and, as such, the findings are not representative of all Jobcentre Plus offices. The research instead offers an in-depth insight into staff perceptions of the downturn measures within a selection of Jobcentre Plus offices. Only those measures implemented at the participating offices were explored in detail and therefore not all of the measures, particularly the optional ones, were covered by the research (see Table 2.2 overleaf). In addition, while managers at all levels within the organisation appeared to have a good overview of the implementation and operation of most of the downturn measures, some front-line staff were only comfortable discussing the measures with which they have been directly involved. Therefore, where specific measures were being operated at a single office or small number of offices, it should be noted that there is less evidence available. Table 2.2 illustrates the downturn measures that were operating at the participating offices during the period when the research was undertaken. However, many respondents were also able to discuss measures which previously had been implemented at their office, but had been withdrawn because they were viewed as unsuccessful.

A key issue emerging from the research was the respondents' inability to disaggregate the impacts of individual downturn measures on specific issues such as customer service levels (and associated labour market outcomes) and customer satisfaction. This was due in large part to the changes, both planned (e.g. the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and JRFND) and those introduced in response to the economic downturn (e.g. Six Month Offer (6MO) and Support for the Newly Unemployed (SNU)), that the organisation has recently implemented. Further, some staff found it difficult to differentiate between the individual downturn measures.

Due to time constraints, it was not possible to include customer views in the research and therefore findings are based solely on staff perceptions. There is also a possibility that there may be a more positive bias towards some of the downturn measures in the research findings because of the composition of the offices selected to participate in the research. During the course of the fieldwork it became apparent that in two of the regions, some of the offices included in the research had been involved in developing, implementing, piloting and continuously improving the downturn measures which may have influenced opinions. These offices also implemented the measures significantly earlier than their formal implementation in April 2009. Therefore, as they had had a longer period for the downturn measures to become fully embedded, satisfaction with the measures may be more pronounced than at those offices where they have been introduced more recently.

Despite the limitations of the research, the study provides a valuable insight into the perceived effectiveness of the downturn measures. In particular, the research reveals the extent to which staff perceived that the measures have eased staff workloads, which was the primary aim of their implementation. Importantly, it also examines any potential trade-offs that this process has had with levels of customer service; and in so doing, it identifies areas where the measures have impacted both positively and negatively on customer satisfaction. The research has also assisted in unravelling the relationships that exist between measures and how they impact on one another at office level; it has also highlighted those which complement each other and identified the circumstances in which they are most effective.

2.6 Report structure

Chapters 3 to 8 discuss staff perceptions of the Jobcentre Plus downturn measures. The report structure is as follows:

- Chapter 3 considers the Focused Interventions;
- Less Frequent Interventions are examined in Chapter 4;
- Chapter 5 examines the Telephone and Postal Interventions which includes the Flexible Financial Assessor (FFA) measure;

- Four individual measures which are categorised as the Group Interventions are covered in Chapter 6;
- Chapter 7 provides an account of the Externally Conducted Interventions;
- The various measures categorised as Optimising Customer Flows are discussed in Chapter 8;
- Finally, Chapter 9 provides an overview of the research findings and captures themes that are common to several categories of downturn measures.

3 Focused Interventions

3.1 Introduction

The downturn measures in this category include:

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

The Focused Interventions have been designed to help manage the increase in Jobcentre Plus customer volumes by reducing the average length of certain labour market interventions; this reduction in duration increases the number of appointments available for customers.

Customers making a new claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) attend a New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) with a Personal Adviser (PA) in a Jobcentre Plus office, to discuss their previous work history, job aspirations and to complete a Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg). Prior to the introduction of the downturn measures, the NJI lasted an average of 40 minutes. This was reduced in length on implementation of the 35 Minute NJI. The reduction in duration was achieved by delivering the Better Off Calculation (BOC) and certain Decision Making and Appeals (DMA) actions outside the NJI.

Following the NJI, JSA customers are required to attend a Jobcentre Plus office on a fortnightly basis to participate in a Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR). At the FJR, customers confirm their availability for work, declare any work undertaken in the previous fortnight and provide evidence of their jobsearch activities. If necessary, FJR staff conduct a jobsearch to identify suitable vacancies for the customer, although this does not routinely involve matching and submitting customers to jobs. Prior to the introduction of the downturn measures, the FJR had taken either five or ten minutes with this being reduced to an average of either four or seven minutes under the new measure. The decision as to whether a customer receives a four or seven minute FJR is determined at the NJI and is dependent upon the customer's ability to self-manage their jobsearch activities. This is assessed using the Customer Identification Tool and adviser discretion and it was estimated that

approximately 65 per cent of customers would fall into the four minute category. The reduction in the duration of the FJR is achieved by making the intervention more focused and by removing the jobsearch conducted by FJR staff from the shorter four minute intervention.

For the first 13 weeks of a claim, customers who can self-manage their jobsearch attend the four minute 'conditionality review' and, rather than FJR staff conducting a jobsearch for them, they are required to use the self-service channels (e.g. Jobpoints and Jobseeker Direct). Customers identified as not being able to manage their own jobsearch activities, and customers from specific priority groups (e.g. customers residing in deprived local authority wards), attend the seven minute 'supported regime' which includes specialist jobsearch assistance from FJR staff. From week 13 onwards, all customers still claiming JSA are moved onto the seven minute supported jobsearch regime. In addition, customers can be switched from the conditionality review to the supported regime before week 13 if it is found that they require more support.

3.2 Impact on customer volumes and staff workloads

Overall, respondents reported that the Focused Interventions had greatly assisted with managing the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads; it was reported that as the Focused Interventions were shorter in length, they had enabled a higher number of customers to be accommodated daily as the number of appointments available increased. This was most noticeable in relation to FJR diary management by advisers where a significant increase in capacity was reported. Respondents stated that the 35 Minute NJI also had a positive impact on customer volumes but this was not nearly as marked as for the 4/7 Minute FJR; this was to be expected, because the proportional reduction in the length of the NJI was far lower than for the FJR. Nonetheless, the introduction of the 35 Minute NJI had increased the number of appointments available which, in turn, reduced the amount of time new customers had to wait between making their initial claim and attending a Jobcentre Plus office for their NJI.

It was difficult for respondents to identify the perceived impact of the 35 Minute NJI on staff workloads because there has reportedly been a large degree of flexibility in implementation. For example, it was widely perceived by front-line staff that it is acceptable to take longer than the specified 35 minutes if the customer requires more time, therefore the overall duration of the intervention varied enormously. It was also suggested that historically there has always been some flexibility within the NJI system, because of the recognition that some customer interviews will require more or less time depending on the amount of support required.

Respondents recognised that the additional support made available to jobseekers during the recession was of great benefit to the customer and could potentially increase JSA off-flows. However, the majority of adviser respondents involved in delivering NJIs agreed that the introduction of the additional support, particularly

the Support for the Newly Unemployed (SNU) and the extension of the Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF) resulted in the duration of the NJI being extended, therefore having a negative impact on staff workloads. The identification of suitable provision and referral thereto was also identified as an extra task to complete during the NJI. This view was also reflected in the findings from the *Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal, the Six Month Offer and Support for the Newly Unemployed evaluations* (Knight *et al.*, 2010) which found that time was a major issue at the NJI and that advisers felt hard pressed to cover all of the required content, especially in relation to the additional support available via the SNU.

The introduction of the 4/7 Minute FJR was viewed as having a positive influence on staff workloads as customers were categorised by their ability to self-manage their jobsearch. This also enabled managers to target staff resources more effectively towards customers that needed it most. As one respondent, a FJR Team Manager explained:

'...if we were still doing the five and ten minute interviews we would have had to have a lot more staff to actually cope with the demand and really, it didn't make sense to spend that amount of time on people when they could help themselves. So now, if they are screened right at the new claim interview...especially in these times, because a lot of the customers we're getting now are actually executive people so really they probably wouldn't need the help of the jobcentre...then the people that are obviously more in need of help, they get the seven minute interviews.'

(FJR Team Manager)

Nevertheless, one office had decided that all new customers would receive the longer seven minute supported intervention. Respondents at this office suggested that this was because additional specialist help was necessary given current local labour market conditions and support required for jobsearch techniques, especially for customers who had never been unemployed or who had previously been long-term employed. However, it was generally accepted that the 4/7 Minute FJRs did target customer needs, as those that required more support were recognised and allocated the seven minute supported intervention.

3.3 Impact on customers

There was a diverse range of responses regarding the impact that the Focused Interventions have had on customer service and customer satisfaction. In general it was felt that the introduction of the 35 Minute NJI had not adversely affected the level of customer service provided as the intervention could still be tailored to meet the individual's needs, the system allowing for a degree of flexibility in its delivery. Furthermore, it was suggested that since many of the customers who participate in the 35 Minute NJIs are new to Jobcentre Plus or have not used it for many years, they do not have a previous experience to compare it with and are broadly satisfied with the service they received.

However, overall, the findings were mixed in relation to the impact the Focused Interventions had on perceived customer satisfaction. For example, respondents reported that the duration of the NJI has varied considerably in practice (see Section 3.2), as it is widely perceived by front-line staff that a degree of flexibility exists with the NJI system. A reported consequence of this flexible approach was that where appointments took longer than 35 minutes, it resulted in an increase in waiting time and delays for some NJI customers, having a negative impact on customer satisfaction. The delays were also reportedly attributed to the introduction of the Optimising Customer Flows (taxi-ranking) for NJIs (see Chapter 8), where customers see the next available adviser. As a consequence, Personal Advisers (PAs) no longer have the use of a personal diary, which had formerly dictated the degree of flexibility an adviser had over the amount of time that interviews could be extended. However, following the introduction of taxi-ranking, some advisers assumed that it was more acceptable to extend interviews because, if their individual case over-ran, there would be other advisers available to see the next customer.

In direct response to the 35 Minute NJI persistently taking longer to deliver, one office had begun piloting a 60 minute NJI to ensure there is enough time to make customers fully aware of the additional support available to jobseekers. It was too early to obtain any feedback on this NJI pilot because it had just begun, but respondents at this office very much welcomed the change and believed it could only strengthen customer service. Other offices had produced information sheets detailing the new initiatives for customers to take away with them, as it was also noted that the amount of information customers now had to absorb during the NJI had greatly increased.

Some front-line staff suggested that the introduction of the 4/7 Minute FJR had a negative impact on customer satisfaction, specifically because advisers frequently felt that they rushed customers through the intervention, and were unable to spend as much time exchanging pleasantries or interacting with customers as they had previously. One respondent stated that they had needed to adapt their approach to customers, specifying that they had become 'firmer', especially when referring customers to the self-service channels rather than undertaking a jobsearch for them. That said, respondents recognised that prior to the 4/7 Minute FJR being introduced, staff had been under extreme pressure to cope with the increase in customer volumes and customer service had been adversely affected by this. It was reported that before their implementation, customers had experienced longer waiting times and queues, which increased tension in the office and had resulted in a number of unpleasant incidents and, to some extent, this had been countered by the introduction of the measures.

Further, some respondents argued that the 4/7 Minute FJR could actually enhance customer satisfaction if the allocation of the four or seven minutes was targeted correctly from the outset. This corroborates evidence from previous research into customer satisfaction (Nunn *et al.* 2009) where customers reported dissatisfaction with the jobsearch activity undertaken by FJR staff, since the vacancies identified

were often unsuitable and this was viewed by customers as merely a 'box ticking' exercise. It was also noted that some customers seemed to appreciate being allocated a four minute review as it implied that they were self-sufficient and able to manage their own jobsearch activities, which increased their confidence.

The 4/7 Minute FJR was considered to have improved satisfaction amongst customers who were perceived by respondents as not genuinely seeking work because less was required of them. However, other respondents felt that the introduction of this measure, at least initially, had an adverse effect on customer satisfaction, stating that some customers did not react positively if staff would not conduct a full jobsearch for them.

There also appeared to be some disagreement about whether the shorter 4/7 Minute FJR had received a positive or negative response from the Professional and Executive customer group. Some staff members felt that such customers were satisfied with a shorter review because they just wanted to come in, sign and leave as quickly as possible. Another respondent felt that the Professional and Executive customers were not satisfied with the intervention since they had higher expectations, often requesting more information or clarification and that it was not always possible to provide this within the time, as highlighted below:

'...they're the ones that are asking for more time...I sort of wish I could spend more time explaining things to them. But again the stats show that there's more of a chance of them getting a job themselves, then I think I'd be doing a disservice really by spending more time with them when, in theory, they probably do need less help. Yes they're inquisitive, they want to know what [provision] they're going on but they're probably likely to find a job themselves.'

(FJR staff member)

However, it was generally noted that as 4/7 Minute FJR became more firmly embedded, both staff and customers adapted to the new system and it was now accepted as the norm. Respondents also reported that where the 4/7 Minute FJR was operational with the Optimising Customers Flows for FJR, it introduced a degree of flexibility to the FJR process whereby interventions could be extended, if necessary, due to availability of other staff to see the next customer.

It was also noted that where some aspects of customer service and customer satisfaction were thought to have declined through a reduction of the duration of the Focused Interventions, this had been countered by the introduction of additional support for jobseekers. Both FJR and NJI staff stated that having a range of additional support available from 'day one' (rather than customers having to wait until they had been claiming JSA for a certain period of time) had enhanced the service for customers across the board and customer satisfaction increased as a result. Again this is supported by previous research into customer satisfaction (Nunn *et al.* 2009) where staff reported customers being dissatisfied at not being able to access extra support until they had been unemployed for

a specified length of time. Further, as the additional support now available has been designed to accommodate the specific needs of certain customer groups (for example, externally delivered seminars for customers who had previously been employed in professional/executive roles), there was no longer a 'one size fits all' approach and it can be tailored to meet an individual's need.

There was little evidence available as to any specific effect that the Focused Interventions may have had on customers' labour market outcomes. Some respondents stated that JSA off-flows had remained fairly constant since the introduction of the measures. However, this was thought to be more as a result of local labour market conditions or the additional support available rather than the actual measures. A small number of respondents considered that the 4/7 Minute FJR may have had an adverse impact on JSA off-flows. Again, it was acknowledged that this was an assumption and could not be supported by any evidence.

3.4 Impact on staff

The introduction of the Focused Intervention measures was cited as having received a negative reaction from staff and reportedly led to an initial decline in staff morale. This was particularly apparent in the case of staff who had been employed by Jobcentre Plus for a longer duration and were used to 'the old system'. For the 35 Minute NJI measure, it was reported that there was ongoing concern from front-line staff and managers about the volume of information associated with the additional support for jobseekers, which staff needed to be aware of in order to communicate it effectively to customers. An associated issue highlighted throughout the research was the lack of time available to deliver the relevant additional information to customers. One such concern is expressed below:

'...the thing I worry about is as an adviser is being given time to deliver [the additional support for jobseekers]. Because I do worry that I know a lot of colleagues are feeling the strain of having to deliver the amount of information in the allotted time. I know why we're doing it all but it doesn't make it any easier on the actual adviser.'

(Outreach Adviser)

The implementation of the 4/7 Minute FJR measure was perceived as a significant change in practice and many had initially questioned whether it was actually possible to carry out the intervention in the shorter time. Respondents also expressed their concerns about the additional pressure generated by seeing more customers and the inability to catch up with paperwork or other administrative duties. It was also noted that on implementation, some FJR staff had attempted to deliver the same actions as under the 'old system' but just in a shorter time. A number of managers stated that they had needed to spend additional time with staff involved in delivering this measure to ensure that they fully understood the difference between the two types of FJR, what each involved and the process of determining why customers received the different reviews. However, it was

found that after an initial decline in morale, respondents reported gaining a better understanding of how the intervention had changed and subsequently became more positive about the measure.

3.5 Future use

Some respondents felt that the 35 Minute NJI measure should be removed in light of the additional support now available to customers from day one and revert to its former duration of 40 minutes; this would allow extra time for staff to inform customers of the initiatives available to them. However, even with the current volume of information that needs to be conveyed, the evidence still suggests that given the degree of flexibility in the system, NJIs are being delivered successfully in an average of 35 minutes. Further, the shorter duration does not appear to have had a negative impact on customer service or customer satisfaction. This being the case, it would appear feasible for the measure to remain in place in the future.

At the time of conducting fieldwork, there was little evidence available in relation to the impact of the 35 Minute NJI on labour market outcomes. There was also very little evidence about referral rates to provision and take-up rates of additional support which are associated with labour market outcomes. If this factor is deemed to be the (or a) major determinant for future use, then this would necessitate further investigation or consideration of other sources of evidence, for example the outcome of the extended 60 minute NJI pilot. If the pilot demonstrates that a 60 minute NJI increases take-up rates of additional support and referrals to provision, ultimately resulting in more job outcomes for customers, then the investment of additional resources at this early stage of the customer journey may be worthwhile and more cost effective.

The 4/7 Minute FJR, was perceived as having been extremely effective in dealing with the initial increase in customer volumes. However, many respondents thought that as the number of customers claiming JSA decreases, the intervention should return to its former duration. It was suggested that the former length of the FJR and NJI had offered a higher level of customer service and customer satisfaction. Conversely, other respondents stated that the reduced FJR measure should remain in place even if the number of customers claiming JSA returns to previous levels because, after the initial bedding in period, staff and customers have adapted to the new timings. It was noted that staff were able to deliver the intervention in the shorter times and this had been achieved without it having too detrimental an effect on customer service or customer satisfaction. Likewise, it was also reported that where the jobsearch was conducted as an aspect of the 4/7 Minute FJR, the reduction of the length of this element of the intervention had no discernable impact on testing labour market conditionality.

Some respondents also questioned whether the previous FJR process had generated additional JSA off-flows to employment, stating that these had remained fairly constant after the Focused Interventions measures were introduced. This view

was consistent with previous research conducted into the impact of shorter FJRs (*Middlemas, 2006*), where the JSA off-flow rates for customers who received the standard FJR was measured against those receiving a shorter FJR; it was found that there was no statistically significant difference in JSA off-flow rates between the two groups. In fact, there was very strong and robust evidence from this research that the length of the intervention was relatively unimportant and it demonstrated conclusively that fortnightly contact does have a positive impact on JSA off-flows. However, it should be noted that this research was undertaken in very different labour market conditions and, given the current economic climate, the findings may not be directly comparable. Therefore, further investigation into JSA off-flows in the current downturn position should be considered.

Respondents who thought that there had been no adverse impact on JSA off-flows also felt that it would be more efficient for the business to keep the 4/7 Minute FJR measure in place and, where this releases resources, these should be directed towards adviser-led interventions which achieve more job outcomes for customers. On balance, while the 4/7 Minute FJR has both advantages and disadvantages, it does appear to be operating effectively and has been accepted as a new way of working.

3.6 Summary

- The introduction of Focused Interventions, including the 35 Minute NJI and the 4/7 Minute FJR, was generally perceived to have been positive in terms of managing the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads. In particular, a higher volume of customers was being accommodated on a daily basis as the number of appointments available increased due to the interventions being shorter in duration.
- The impact of the 35 Minute NJI on staff workloads was less apparent, largely because the duration of the intervention can vary enormously, raising the potential for increased waiting times as customer volumes rise.
- The 4/7 Minute FJRs were viewed as focused and appropriate for targeting customers' needs.
- Levels of customer service were perceived to be largely unaffected by the introduction of the 35 Minute NJI. However, the 4/7 Minute FJR was felt by some front-line staff to have had a negative impact on customer service as the length of interaction between staff and customers was reduced. An initial decline in staff morale was also reported in relation to the 4/7 Minute FJR, although as understanding of the changes increased, staff became more positive about its implementation.
- There was no consistent view as to whether the Focused Interventions should remain in place as unemployment falls. However, a need was identified to ensure sufficient time is available for the delivery of relevant information and support to customers, particularly in relation to the additional support for jobseekers that needs to be covered during the NJI process.

4 Less Frequent Interventions

4.1 Introduction

The downturn measures in this category include:

- 13 and 26 Week Reviews Combined with Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) (Primary);
- Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) Back to Work Group Sessions Combined with 13 Week Review Group Session (Optional);
- Relaxation of Weekly Signing in Weeks 13-19 (Optional – prior approval required from Director of Customer Service Directorate (CSD));
- Excused Signing (Optional – prior approval required from Director of CSD).

In addition to attending FJRs, customers who have been claiming Jobseeker's Allowance for 13 weeks and 26 weeks are also required to attend a Jobcentre Plus office for review sessions with a Personal Adviser (PA). By combining the 13 or 26 Week Reviews with FJRs, or at least by conducting them on the same day, it was anticipated that this measure would help manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices and enable more efficient utilisation of staff resources. Likewise, JSA customers in JRFND Phase 1 districts are required to attend Back-to-Work group sessions and 13 Week Reviews; again by combining these interventions it was anticipated that customer volumes would be managed and staff resources utilised more effectively.

When JSA customers reach the 13 week stage of their claim, for the next six weeks they are required to attend a Jobcentre Plus office on a weekly rather than fortnightly basis in order for staff to assess and review their jobsearch activities. The relaxation of Weekly Signing (in weeks 13 to 19) allows offices to relax this requirement for some customers (i.e. those on provision, claiming credits only or other customers at advisers' discretion) and they continue to sign fortnightly. The Excused Signing measure is available only as a 'last resort' as it allows Jobcentre Plus offices to excuse customers from signing altogether. This measure is very

rarely implemented and only used in certain circumstances and for a specified period, for example if building work is being carried out in Jobcentre Plus offices. Both the aforementioned measures aim to manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices.

It should be noted that the research produced limited information about all of the Less Frequent Interventions measures. None of the Jobcentre Plus offices included in the fieldwork were operating the Relaxation of Weekly Signing in Weeks 13-19 or Excused Signing measures, although it was reported that they had been used within other offices.

4.2 Impact on customer volumes and staff workloads

Where evidence was available, it was reported that the 13 Week Review Combined with FJR had helped offices to manage the increase in customer volumes and was beneficial to staff workloads. It was considered that the two interventions delivered together by a member of staff was a good way to utilise PA resources. At one Jobcentre Plus office it was reported that by using the measure, PAs have been able to concentrate a greater proportion of time on conducting New Jobseeker Interview (NJIs) which assisted with achieving their Date To Claim target, where offices are expected to see customers within three days of their initial call to a Contact Centre. The PAs had previously been unable to assist with this, except on an ad-hoc basis, since 13 Week Reviews were booked so far in advance that there was no capacity to undertake any other interventions. However, some respondents stated that it was not always possible to co-ordinate the interventions for the same time or day and others were unable to combine the reviews with FJRs as they were conducting the 13 Week Reviews in group sessions (see Chapter 6).

There was no evidence available in relation to the impact that the other Less Frequent Interventions have had on helping to manage the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads.

4.3 Impact on customers

The 13 Week Review Combined with the FJR was considered by staff to have had a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Respondents stated that customers were appreciative that they had to make fewer visits to the Jobcentre Plus office and were able to combine the interview with the fortnightly intervention. However, some respondents questioned whether the measure has had an adverse impact on JSA off-flows, as the two interventions combined could potentially lose their intended focus and reduce the frequency of contact. This view is supported by previous research (Middlemas, 2006) which demonstrated that greater frequency of contact with customers increases JSA off-flows. As such, one office did report returning the 13 Week Reviews to PAs when customer volumes became more manageable, to ensure that the adviser interventions retained their focus and to revert to the former frequency of contact.

It was reported that JRFND Back-to-Work Group Sessions Combined with 13 Week Review Group Sessions was viewed positively by customers, as this required them to visit the office less frequently. It was noted that these groups were well attended; a session that had been introduced in one office which ran from 5.00pm to 6.00pm, was fully attended by 15 customers.

4.4 Impact on staff

Respondents perceived the Less Frequent Interventions measures as freeing up capacity for staff to be able to concentrate on other areas of work, including providing more support to the many new members of staff that had recently been recruited to the organisation.

4.5 Future use

As specified, there was very little information available regarding the Less Frequent Interventions group of downturn measures and it is not possible to make any recommendation for future use based on the data. While the Excused Signing and Relaxation of Weekly Signing in Weeks 13-19 interventions were not widely used, it was reported that where they had been deployed previously they were considered to be effective in terms of managing customer volumes. However, respondents expressed the view that these measures increase the risk of fraud as customers are not required to attend the office as regularly and therefore could not be monitored as closely. This is supported by previous research (*Middlemas, 2006*) which demonstrated that Excused Signing reduces JSA off-flows; therefore this measure and the Relaxation of Weekly Signing should be used with caution and only where specific circumstances necessitate it.

4.6 Summary of findings

- Limited evidence is available from the research on the impact of the Less Frequent Interventions group of downturn measures.
- The 13 Week Reviews Combined with FJRs were perceived to have helped offices manage the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads. It was also felt to have had a positive impact on customer satisfaction as a result of the reduction in the number of times that customers are required to attend the office.

5 Telephone and Postal Interventions

5.1 Introduction

The downturn measures in this category include:

- Flexible Financial Assessor (Primary);
- Postal Signing (measure withdrawn and excluded from the research);
- Telephone Signing (measure withdrawn and excluded from the research).

The only measure in the Telephone and Postal Interventions category that was still in operation at the time of fieldwork, and therefore included in the research, was the Flexible Financial Assessor (FFA). The aim of this measure is to help manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices by undertaking Financial Assessor (FA) activities with customers by telephone rather than face-to-face at the office. It was initially anticipated that up to 80 per cent of cases could be conducted in this way.

Prior to the introduction of the FFA, customers making a new claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) telephoned a Jobcentre Plus Contact Centre and completed an initial claim interview. The Contact Centre produced a statement detailing the information supplied by the customer and booked two further interviews for the customer at a Jobcentre Plus office. The customer would first attend a 20 minute face-to-face interview to complete the FA activities, which involved a review of the claim statement, the completion of any missing information, the checking of the customer's identity and copying any supporting documents. The claim statement and copies of documents would then be forwarded to a Benefit Processing Centre. Following the FA interview, customers would meet with a Personal Adviser (PA) for a 40 minute New Jobseeker Interview (NJI).

Where the FFA measure is in operation, customers are contacted by telephone prior to attending the Jobcentre Plus office, thus enabling the FA activities to be completed in advance. Customers do not need to meet the FA at the Jobcentre Plus office and any identity checks or submissions of documentation are undertaken by the PA at the NJI or by another member of staff at the office.

5.2 Impact on customer volumes and staff workloads

Over half of the Jobcentre Plus offices included in the research reported that they had implemented the FFA measure but had subsequently withdrawn it, as it was not viewed as an effective use of staff time. There was widespread agreement that the FFA measure had a negative impact on staff workloads, mainly due to the additional amount of time involved in trying unsuccessfully to contact customers by telephone. Respondents stated that on average they were able to contact only about half of the customers by telephone even after making multiple attempts. Further, it was reported that the FFA measure was often impractical as it required at least a day to elapse after the customer made their original call to a Contact Centre for the paperwork to be retrieved and reviewed in the office and for the FA to make contact by telephone. However, in reality, many customers were attending NJIs on the same or following day that they registered their new claim with the Contact Centre, which enabled new claims to be processed quickly and claim processing targets to be met. Therefore, there was not enough time for the FFA activities to be undertaken prior to the NJI.

However, it was acknowledged by one office that if the timing allowed and the paperwork could be completed over the telephone, this did relieve the demands on the FAs in the office. In addition, by making telephone contact prior to the NJI, the FAs were able to establish in advance if a customer was claiming the wrong benefit and also identify claims that would not be pursued. This allowed problems to be addressed before the customer attended the office and freed up interview slots if an NJI was no longer necessary.

5.3 Impact on customers

Respondents' views on the effect of the FFA measure on customer service and satisfaction were mixed. On a positive note, it was reported that both customer service and satisfaction were often enhanced if the customer could be contacted and was able to complete the FA by telephone. This benefited the customer as they would need to see only one adviser at the Jobcentre Plus office, reducing any potential delays and waiting time between interviews and the overall amount of time they would need to spend at the Jobcentre Plus office. Additionally, when the customer did attend their NJI they could focus directly on the advisory element of the interview. Again, previous research into customer satisfaction (*Nunn et al.* 2009) supports this finding, with staff reporting that customers were frequently more concerned that their claim is processed and benefit paid, with the work focused element of the interview being obscured.

However, some elements of the FFA measure were perceived as having a negative effect on customer satisfaction. It was reported by staff that some customers were dissatisfied at being contacted by telephone as they were not always aware that they would be receiving the call and may not be in an appropriate environment for the discussion of personal and financial information. It was also stated that some

customers questioned the authenticity of the call as they had already provided their personal information to the Jobcentre Plus Contact Centre and did not understand why they were being asked for the same information by another part of the same organisation. As one Jobcentre Manager explained:

'...there have been comments as to why they're having to do something with us over the telephone. Not all customers want to do that and I think some customers still do prefer a face-to-face. They've spent 40 minutes on the interview with the Contact Centre and then we ring them up and say right we're just going to go through a few things so we have had customers comment "I thought I'd already given you this information over the telephone".'

(Jobcentre Manager)

To some extent, while customers have always needed to repeat and verify the information they have given to the Contact Centre, respondents felt that this situation was far easier to explain to the customer in a face-to-face interview. By conducting the interview by telephone some respondents felt the level of customer service declined. Again, previous customer satisfaction research (Johnson and Fidler 2008) supports this viewpoint, with findings suggesting a slightly lower level of customer satisfaction in relation to contacts by telephone as compared to face-to-face contacts.

5.4 Impact on staff

In many instances, staff reported frustration at spending so much time trying without success to contact customers by telephone. This was often exacerbated by having received incorrect or incomplete contact information. Advisers stated that they spent a lot of time reviewing claims and then trying to contact customers whose claims could have been dealt with by telephone but, because they could not be contacted or did not answer the phone, came in to be seen anyway. This frustration is described below:

'I spent a whole day a couple of weeks ago trying to ring people up and didn't get an answer all day. We identified that when the customers did actually come to the interview the following day the [telephone] numbers were incorrect on the system and then we found that some customers weren't picking the phone up because it comes up as a private number and they don't like to answer their mobile if that's the case. So that's the difficulty we were having when we attempted it.'

(Financial Assessor)

5.5 Future use

It was reported that many Jobcentre Plus offices had stopped using the FFA measure because it was not considered to improve the service for customers;

however, other offices were still operating it to varying degrees of success. Of those offices that had stopped using the FFA, some had not ruled out using it again in the future and were monitoring offices within their district which were still operating the measure to see how successful it was and to assess what lessons could be learned, before making a decision about whether to reintroduce it.

An issue which needs to be considered when determining future use is the potential for the FFA measure to lead to errors in customer information and fraud. Respondents suggested that if FAs did not see the customers face-to-face, the responsibility for checking documentation and identification could fall to other less experienced staff members. However, it was recognised that the likelihood of this happening was low provided that careful monitoring is in place.

In order for the FFA measure to be effective in the future and for it to have a positive rather than negative impact on staff workloads, the main issue of not being able to contact customers by telephone would need to be resolved. This would undoubtedly be problematic as it is largely dependent on customer behaviour and co-operation. Nevertheless, for those elements of the process that Jobcentre Plus can influence, additional investment may be worthwhile; for example, attempting to improve the quality and accuracy of the contact telephone data collected during the initial call to the Contact Centre.

5.6 Summary of findings

- The FFA measure was considered to have had a negative impact on staff workloads, largely as a result of the time spent in unsuccessfully trying to contact customers by telephone. As a result, a number of offices had stopped using the measure.
- There were mixed views as to the effect of the FFA measure on customer satisfaction. In circumstances when the FA 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 reluctant to repeat personal information that they had already provided to the Contact Centre through this medium.
- The majority of respondents were not in favour of continuing with the FFA measure. However, the problematic issues associated with the FFA measure would need to be resolved if this were to be deployed successfully in the future.

6 Group Interventions

6.1 Introduction

The downturn measures in this category include:

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

The Group Intervention measures are designed to help manage staff workloads by providing certain labour market interventions simultaneously to groups of customers rather than on an individual basis. Where the measures have been introduced, customers are encouraged to attend the group sessions but participation is voluntary and if the customer states a preference for a one-to-one meeting then the request should be accommodated.

Prior to the introduction of the group measures, customers claiming JSA for 13 and 26 weeks were required to attend 30 and 40 minute one-to-one review meeting with a Personal Adviser (PA), respectively. At the 13 Week Review meeting, jobsearch activities and job goals would be reviewed and any additional employment and training opportunities discussed. If appropriate, customers' Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) would be revised and referrals to programme provision made. At the 26 Week Review meeting, progress would be reviewed and additional PA support and opportunities, especially those available under the new Six Month Offer (6MO) could be offered. The 6MO also provides a range of new initiatives which customers at the 26 week stage can access (e.g. recruitment subsidies, volunteering and self-employment opportunities and training). An action plan would be agreed between the customer and PA, outlining any future activities to be undertaken and the timing of further one-to-one meetings.

Where the 13 Week Review Group Sessions and 26 Week Review Group Sessions were operational, customers who would have previously attended a 30 minute one-to-one interview were offered the option to attend a session held for a group of customers. The group sessions provide general information, guidance and advice relating to the additional support and opportunities available for jobseekers at the 13 and 26 week stage. Following both 13 and 26 Week Review Group Sessions, attendees must then take part in a shorter (ten to 15 minute) one-to-one meeting with an adviser instead of the former 30/40 minute meetings that were in place before the downturn measures were implemented. For those customers at the 13 week stage, this involves reviewing and, if appropriate, revising the JSAG and referrals to provision. Customers at the 26 week stage agree their individual action plans with the adviser.

The Group Orientation Session measure was introduced to support Jobcentre Plus' Rapid Response Service. Where large scale redundancies occur, Jobcentre Plus staff can deliver group sessions to workers considered to be under threat of redundancy away from the Jobcentre Plus office at an appropriate location. The sessions provide information on the claims process, support available and advice and guidance on jobsearch. In addition, the Self-Completion JSAG Tool can be used to generate individual JSAGs at the off-site location. Customers who attend Group Orientation Sessions, and proceed with a claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), are still required to attend a New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) at a Jobcentre Plus office. However, this will usually be of shorter duration since much of the information will have been covered in the group session and a JSAG completed.

Lone parents claiming benefit solely on the grounds of being a lone parent, and who are capable of work, are required to claim JSA when their youngest child reaches a certain age (12 or over from November 2008, ten or over from October 2009 and seven or over from October 2010). Given this obligation, lone parents moving onto JSA are required to attend a Work Focused Interview (WFI). At the WFI, the JSAG will be developed and customers given the opportunity to sign up to the New Deal for lone parents (NDLP) programme. In addition, preparatory 'trigger' interviews are offered to lone parents who will be moving onto JSA in the near future. The trigger interview outlines the JSA requirements and also provides the opportunity for customers to sign up to NDLP. Where the downturn measures are operating, the Lone Parent Trigger Interview and the initial Lone Parent WFIs are delivered as group sessions rather than on a one-to-one basis. The group sessions are held either at a Jobcentre Plus office or, given the customer group involved, at convenient off-site locations such as children's centres. Following the sessions, lone parent customers who do not sign up to NDLP are seen for a short one-to-one follow up interview.

All of the Group Interventions measures are deemed to be optional, so not all districts that participated in the research were operating them. Therefore, the findings in this section are derived from a limited number of respondents and should be considered in this context.

6.2 Impact on customer volumes and staff workloads

The 13 Week Review Group Sessions were generally acknowledged as being effective in assisting with the increase in customer volumes and managing staff workloads. Delivering a one hour session to a group of customers reduced their subsequent one-to-one meetings from 30 to 15 minutes. It was noted that the shorter follow-up meetings were more focused as customers were more prepared and aware of the options available to them:

'...because customers are pre-informed of what is available and what their options are they are better prepared and customers will then come and say, 'I really want a work trial' or they will say 'you know I need help in such and such area' like what is available. "I heard in the group session that this was available to me" so rather than having to explain everything again to them you can actually just get on and get the referral done.'

(Adviser)

However, the saving in staff time was reported to be dependent on the number of customers attending the group. If the number of attendees was below a certain level, the administrative resources required to set up the group session outweighed the saving made by having a single adviser deliver a group review session, as indicated below:

'From the adviser's side of things I would have said that the group information sessions help with the volumes of interviews we are doing. There comes a point where it becomes impractical sometimes if you haven't got the flow of people in. If you are only getting six in and that sort of thing, then you may as well see them individually. But if you're getting 12 or 15 people in on each session then it is good.'

(Personal Adviser)

In addition, it was reported that the availability of accommodation often determined whether or not offices could deliver group sessions and how many customers could be accommodated at each.

Both the Lone Parent Trigger Interview Group Sessions and the Lone Parent WFI Group Sessions were also perceived to help in utilising staff time better. By holding group sessions, advisers were able to see the same number of customers in a much shorter time, which created flexibility to undertake other duties. For example, it was stated that advisers were able to see their other job-ready customers more regularly and provide more support for customers who previously had to wait for appointments, as explained below:

'It's maximised our diary spaces, so whereas we'd have a scan at the beginning of the week and we'd be booking individual bookings in the diaries for our advisers and we could go three, four weeks ahead...we're now able to clear the scan within a day by booking them into group sessions.'

(Adviser)

6.3 Impact on customers

The findings were mixed in relation to the impact of the 13 Week Group Sessions on customer satisfaction. Some respondents reported that 13 Week Group Review Sessions were well attended and customers benefited from being part of a group with other people in a similar situation. Others felt that some customers were not comfortable discussing personal issues in a group environment and preferred one-to-one meetings. However, it was acknowledged that attendance was voluntary and one-to-one follow-up meetings were available for customers to discuss their individual needs:

'I think sometimes in a group environment, people respond differently. There is that element perhaps that they are not going to say anything, we've all been there in that group input session...so I think it's really important that the advisers when they run those [group sessions] [they] actually see people individually as well.'

(Personal Adviser)

There was limited information about whether the 13 Week Review Group Sessions had affected customers' labour market outcomes, but where data was available views were divided. Some respondents reported that referrals to provision had improved through holding 13 Week Review Group Sessions and considered that this had contributed positively to labour market outcomes. Conversely, other respondents felt that the 13 Week Review Group Sessions were not beneficial in helping move customers back into employment and that one-to-one sessions were far more productive for this. As one District level respondent explains:

'...looking at it from the customer's point of view, customers are much more likely to find a one-to-one face-to-face intervention help support them on their journey back into work than a group session would do. Because we were doing the group sessions we were losing the quality of what we needed to do. Group sessions are fine if you are just imparting information; informing customers about a range of support and help that's available. If you are trying to test out for the customer whether they are genuinely seeking work for example, available for work, whether they are being realistic in the types of jobs they are going for, you can't do that in a group session.'

(District level respondent)

Likewise, there was also a mixed response in relation to the impact that Lone Parent Trigger Interview Group Sessions and the Lone Parent WFI Group Sessions had on customer satisfaction. Some respondents reported that the interventions had been very well received by customers and it was perceived that customers were more receptive and became more involved when part of a group. As a result, respondents stated that the take-up rate of initiatives such as work trials and the Better Off Calculation (BOC) had increased dramatically since the introduction of the group sessions:

'...the take-up rate was relatively low when we were doing it on a one-to-one basis. When we started doing it on a group basis the engagement or take-up rate jumped quite considerably. I think the reason for that is... people encouraging each other within the group so it wasn't just an adviser saying this was good, it was somebody in the same position as you saying yeah, this is good, and this is how I've overcome that.'

(Customer Service Operations Manager)

It was reported that one office had discussed terminating the use of group sessions for lone parents and returning to one-to-one meetings. Another office had implemented the Lone Parent Trigger Group Sessions, but stopped using them as they were not thought to be as effective as one-to-one interviews, because of the individual requirements of the customers. Other offices had dismissed the option of introducing the group sessions for similar reasons, as expressed below:

'...given some of the issues that lone parents are coming in with, to try and do a group session with them, I just wouldn't ever want to take us down that road.'

(District level respondent)

More generally, some respondents stated that not all customers like attending group sessions and, in their opinion, it was more effective to give customers information in a one-to-one interview. Respondents also expressed concerns over the potential for group sessions to allow some customers to 'hide' behind others and suggested that this could have a negative impact on labour market outcomes; once again it was thought that the one-to-one follow-up interviews would help to resolve this issue. It was also suggested that group sessions had the potential to infringe a customer's privacy and confidentiality. However, it was broadly acknowledged that one aspect of customer service that was improved by the group sessions was the consistency of information being provided to customers. It was accepted that, albeit unintentionally, advisers could sometimes give a slightly different message or level of information depending on their approach. Having one or two advisers presenting information to a group of customers was considered to reduce the risk of inconsistency and misinterpretation.

6.4 Impact on staff

In general, respondents viewed the Group Interventions as having a positive impact on staff morale, especially for those staff members who had volunteered for, and were delivering, the sessions. While some staff were already involved in the delivery of group sessions through the Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) programme, the introduction of these sessions offered staff the opportunity to try something new and improve their skills, thus adding to their job satisfaction and morale. However, it was noted that not all staff enjoy undertaking this type of activity and staff should not feel pressured into delivering group sessions. It was recognised that the quality of the sessions was dependent on the ability of the

adviser delivering it and that this should be a factor in determining which staff should be employed in these roles. The opportunity for staff members to observe and share best practice before delivering sessions themselves was identified as beneficial to the process.

6.5 Future use

The Group Interventions downturn measures provoked the greatest discussions and diverse views as to whether they should remain as part of the Jobcentre Plus model. While many respondents viewed the measures as a positive intervention for both customers and staff alike, other respondents questioned the ability to tailor a group session to meet the needs of each individual customer. Despite this criticism, it was recognised that the follow-up one-to-one sessions for JSA customers at 13 and 26 weeks resolve the issue for the majority of customers. Respondents also argued that Group Interventions were effective for the delivery of necessary generic information, but that anything more specific should be delivered via a one-to-one session. Other respondents countered this by specifying the positive support derived by customers from being in a group with others in similar circumstances to their own. Given the diverse views generated, it is recommended that further investigation is conducted before determining the extent to which Group Interventions should be retained for future use beyond the recession and, where possible, this should include the views and experiences of a range of customers groups to determine their levels of satisfaction.

6.6 Summary of findings

- The 13 Week Review Group Sessions, Lone Parent Trigger Interview Group Session and Lone Parent WFI Group Session are all perceived to have had a positive impact on helping to manage the increase in customer volumes as staff time is better utilised by delivering interventions to a group of customers rather than an individual.
- The impact of Group Interventions on customer satisfaction is felt to be highly dependent upon individual customer preference. It was reported that some customers respond well to group activities, becoming engaged and receptive to information, while others can feel uncomfortable, particularly when expected to discuss personal issues, and can withdraw from the group.
- The consistency of information provided to customers was perceived to improve as a result of Group Interventions.
- The opportunity to deliver group sessions was viewed positively by the majority of staff.

- There were mixed views as to whether the Group Interventions should be delivered on a more permanent basis post-recession. Therefore, it is recommended that further investigation is conducted and, where possible, this should include the views and experiences of a range of customers groups to determine their levels of satisfaction.
- There was little evidence available about the 26 Week Review Group Sessions and Group Orientation Sessions.

7 Externally Conducted Interventions

7.1 Introduction

The downturn measures in this category include:

- Conducting First Work Focused Interviews in Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas at Provider Premises (Primary);
- Shorter First Work Focused Interviews in Provider-led Pathways to Work Areas (Primary);
- Increases in Outreach Activities (Optional).

These measures are designed to help manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices by delivering some services in suitable alternative venues.

The Pathways to Work¹ programme is delivered by Jobcentre Plus in 18 districts. In the remaining Jobcentre Plus districts, it is delivered by 'providers', organisations from the private and voluntary sectors, and these are known as Provider-led Pathways to Work (PLP) areas. Prior to the introduction of the measures, Jobcentre Plus advisers carried out the first Work Focused Interview (WFI) in PLP areas, with local providers conducting the remaining five mandatory WFIs and providing support to enable the customers to move back into employment. After the initial WFI, customers were 'handed over', with the remaining WFIs being conducted at the provider's premises. Where Conducting First WFIs in PLP Areas at Provider Premises is in operation, the first WFIs are now conducted by a Jobcentre Plus adviser based in provider premises, if suitable equipment is available and Health and Safety requirements have been met. As part of the Shorter First WFI in PLP Areas, the Better Off Calculation (BOC) is now undertaken by a member of staff

¹ Pathways to Work is a programme run by Jobcentre Plus to help people find employment who are claiming Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or incapacity benefits, because of a health condition or disability. The assistance provided is tailored specifically for each person taking part in the programme.

employed by the providers rather than a Jobcentre Plus adviser, resulting in a reduction in duration.

A further result of the significant increase in customer volumes has been that some Jobcentre Plus offices have faced difficulties in accommodating the number of customers claiming, JSA. To relieve this pressure, the Increase in Outreach Activities measure allows a range of Jobcentre Plus services, for example Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR), to be delivered off-site. Alternative suitable premises, such as local community centres, provider premises and other government departments, can be utilised provided that the necessary equipment is available and Health and Safety requirements are met.

It should be noted that the Externally Conducted Interventions measures were being operated only in a small number of the offices included in the research. Additionally, it was found that some offices included in the sample were still in the process of setting up arrangements for the Externally Conducted Interventions, as risk assessments needed to be conducted and IT issues resolved.

7.2 Impact on customer volumes and staff workloads

The general view among respondents was that the Conducting First WFIs in PLP Areas at Provider Premises measure has assisted to a limited degree with managing the increase in customer volumes. It was noted that the Externally Conducted Interventions increased capacity within the office as they freed up desk space which, in many offices, was at a premium. Some respondents suggested Conducting First WFIs in PLP Areas at Provider Premises had a positive impact on staff workloads as the non-attendance rate of customers was lower at the provider premises than at Jobcentre Plus offices, which reduced the necessity to rebook interviews. However, while it was generally recognised that there was an overall improvement in attendance rates when first WFIs in PLP areas were conducted at provider premises, many customers still Failed to Attend (FTA). A disadvantage arising from FTAs at provider premises identified by respondents was that it was not always possible for staff to undertake other administrative duties in the time made available, as would have been the case if they were based at the Jobcentre Plus office.

At the time the fieldwork was undertaken, it was also reported that, due to IT problems in provider premises, some offices have temporarily stopped basing advisers in off-site locations. When IT problems occurred, advisers had to record interview information manually. This not only presented an unprofessional image to customers but also increased staff workloads as the manually recorded information would need inputting when advisers returned to a Jobcentre Plus office.

There was very little evidence about whether the Shorter First WFI in PLP Areas had any impact on customer volumes and staff workloads. Where information was available, it was thought that the Increase in Outreach Activities may have marginally assisted in managing customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices. However, staff workloads were considered to be largely unchanged.

7.3 Impact on customers

The main benefit reported by respondents involved in Conducting First WFI in PLP Areas at Provider Premises was the efficient transition for the customer between Jobcentre Plus and the provider as a 'warm' handover could be effected. Advisers also perceived customers as being more at ease and comfortable in provider premises, which reportedly increased customer satisfaction, as illustrated below:

'I think from my own experience, it has helped quite a bit because the customers are out of the Jobcentre Plus environment so they're a bit more relaxed and you do get a lot more participation from them as well.'

(ESA Adviser)

Some advisers and office managers speculated that Externally Conducted Interventions do increase job outcomes. However, the extent to which this can be attributed to the introduction of the downturn measures is debatable. It would appear, from the following statement, that this may be a result of the approach adopted by provider staff:

'...with the provider they are purely focused on getting these people back to work and, looking at the way these advisers do it, they are very good. I mean they are doing what we used to in a sense but it's...I just feel that they've got it a bit more together in a sense because it is about getting back into work and focusing the customer that way and engaging them through that as well. I think what I found was, I think we tend to get a bit...we have certain protocols that we get tied down with.'

(ESA Adviser)

Where information was available, it was thought that the Increase in Outreach Activities measure improved customer service as the premises used were often conveniently located. In addition, where outreach was based in children's centres this provided a more user-friendly environment for customers with children. It was noted that an outreach facility based in council premises was well attended, mainly by customers requiring general benefits advice or jobsearch service. Another successful outreach service had been established in a Citizens Advice Bureau and, as the local Jobcentre Plus office had closed, this was well attended by customers on a voluntary basis.

7.4 Impact on staff

The Conducting First WFI in PLP Areas at Provider Premises measure was positively received by respondents as it gave advisers the opportunity to develop stronger relationships with providers. Being based in provider premises was also considered to be good for morale as it enabled staff to maintain contact with customers and monitor their progress after the first WFI, something they had often been unable to do when located in Jobcentre Plus offices. Nevertheless, it was reported that being in provider premises could be disadvantageous for advisers as this could

impact on their ability to act in accordance with the adviser Assessment Tool (AAT). When advisers are based off-site and have downtime due to FTAs, they are unable to increase their customer contact time. On the other hand, when advisers are based in Jobcentre Plus offices, they can improve contact time by assisting with taxi-ranking and undertaking additional interviews or administrative duties. Further, some respondents involved in the delivery of the Externally Conducted Interventions off-site reported feeling distanced from the Jobcentre Plus team based at their local office.

7.5 Future use

While it must be noted that the evidence available is based on a limited number of interviews, it suggests that the Externally Conducted Interventions measures have so far generated positive outcomes for customers, Jobcentre Plus and providers. However, the research has identified some minor issues relating to IT problems and AAT which could be resolved relatively straightforwardly. The future use of the measures should also be dependent on the relative cost of conducting the interventions in question externally.

Limited evidence was available in relation to the Shorter First WFI in PLP Areas and the Increase in Outreach Activities measures and further investigation would be necessary before the extent of their future use can be determined.

7.6 Summary of findings

- The Externally Conducted Interventions measures are considered to have resulted in improved support for customers. Their impact in terms of reducing customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices or helping manage staff workloads was considered to be a secondary issue by respondents.
- A smoother transition between Jobcentre Plus and providers, convenience of location and an off-site environment are the key benefits identified as being beneficial to the customer as a result of the Externally Conducted Interventions.
- Staff were largely positive about the impact of the externally conducted WFIs indicating that they enable them to develop stronger relationships with providers and maintain contact with customers and monitor their progress after the initial WFI. The main drawback of this measure for staff has been that, as a result of their external location, staff are unable to make productive use of downtime caused by FTAs which are out of their control.
- Limited evidence was available in relation to the Shorter First WFI in PLP Areas and Increase in Outreach Activities measures.

8 Optimising Customer Flows

8.1 Introduction

The downturn measures in this category include:

- Optimising Customer Flows for New Jobseeker Interviews (Primary);
- Optimising Customer Flows for Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews (Optional);
- Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 26 Week Reviews (Optional);
- Adviser Response Teams (Optional).

The Optimising Customer Flows downturn measures are designed to help assist with the increase in customer volumes and associated staff workloads. For these measures, rather than customers seeing staff members by appointment they instead see the next one available. This system is also referred to as 'taxi-ranking'. Adviser Response Teams can be deployed at various locations across districts or regions to ensure that front of house desk space is utilised effectively and customers do not face long delays in the busiest Jobcentre Plus offices.

It should be noted that evidence was limited in relation to Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 26 Week Reviews and Adviser Response Teams.

8.2 Impact on customer volumes and staff workloads

On the whole, the introduction of the Optimising Customer Flows for New Jobseeker Interview (NJIs) and Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews (FJR) was reported as being very successful in assisting with managing customer volumes by helping the customer flows in offices. Previously, when staff held their own diary or schedule and were running behind, all of their subsequent appointments were affected. Through taxi-ranking, customers see the next available staff member and this has created greater flexibility and reduced waiting times for customers. It was recognised that these measures have also had a positive impact on staff

workloads, specifically because they result in more effective use of adviser time and there is less downtime due to Failed To Attend (FTAs) since the next available customer can be seen, as highlighted below:

'[The] taxi-ranking system, again that's very successful...it helps us to alleviate Failed To Attend because it doesn't impact on adviser time if someone doesn't turn up, so that was quite good. Also, for the customers coming in, they know that once they're there they will see someone, so that's been very good for both staff and customers.'

(‘Other’ respondent role)

It was reported that the introduction of Optimising Customer Flows for NJIs in conjunction with the 35 Minute NJI, has enabled offices to reduce the average length of time that customers are waiting before obtaining an appointment, which has assisted offices in achieving their Date To Claim target.

The operation of the Optimising Customer Flows for FJR has been further enhanced by the use of time banding, whereby customers are given a window of time to attend, rather than a fixed appointment:

'The Optimising Customer Flows...is an exceptionally good measure because it really optimises the available time, the available resources and ensures people are not sitting there with their own discrete diaries, allows more customers to be seen, optimises the times so when somebody is finished they just take the next available one...so it has definitely made quite a positive difference.'

(District level respondent)

However, while most offices reported that the Optimising Customer Flows for NJIs and FJR has had a positive impact, it was noted in some instances that taxi-ranking has had a detrimental effect on the management of both customer volumes and staff workloads. This was particularly the case with the NJI measure, as it was suggested that when staff held their own diaries they managed their time more effectively and were more rigorous in keeping to a schedule. With the introduction of taxi-ranking it was assumed by some advisers that if their appointment overran there would be more capacity available to accommodate this, which in some instances led to lengthy waiting times for some customers.

This was further exacerbated by the incorrect use of Optimising Customer Flows where the use of ‘ghost diaries’ was reportedly on the increase. Where ‘ghost’ diaries were in use, offices were over-booking appointments for Personal Advisers (PAs) to overcome the issue of FTAs, which creates downtime for advisers. This is linked to the introduction of the 35 Minute NJI (see Chapter 3), which specifies that while the average NJI should be 35 minutes, the NJI diary times must remain at 40 minutes, with the delivery of the reduced time being achieved through taxi-ranking. Therefore, offices were booking more ‘ghost’ appointments and although to some extent this has always occurred, as it is accepted that a certain percentage of customers will not attend appointments, the taxi-ranking system

has increased the volume of this type of appointment. It was particularly noted that on days when very few FTAs occurred this had had a significant impact on waiting times for customers and increased pressure on advisers. As a result of this, one office had stopped using taxi-ranking for NJIs and had returned to individual adviser diaries, as highlighted below:

'Taxi-ranking was a bit of a disaster some days, not every day obviously, but you know the odd day it was unusual you would have everyone turning up for every single time slot and there just wasn't the people [staff] to cope with it. And therefore you get into the middle of the afternoon people were getting pushed back an hour or so.'

(Personal Adviser)

8.3 Impact on customers

Optimising Customer Flows for NJIs was perceived as having had a positive impact on customer satisfaction in those offices where it was operating effectively. The primary benefits were that it enabled customers to access earlier appointments, reduced waiting times and helped to alleviate long queues in offices, as described below:

'I think Optimising Customer Flows is definitely better because rather than waiting for the customer, you're seeing the next customer, which means that there are less queues forming.'

(Jobcentre Manager)

However, some staff reported that there was little or no time available to prepare in advance for the next customer or read their case notes, which was perceived as potentially having a negative impact on customer service. Additionally, PAs and Financial Assessor (FAs) were unable to discuss complex cases in advance because it was not known which PA would be conducting the NJI following the FA meeting. Further, if a customer had additional requirements, for example, assistance with language issues, then the PA may not be aware of this in advance.

Many respondents stated that customers were more satisfied with the Optimising Customer Flows, particularly for FJR, as taxi-ranking offered staff a greater degree of flexibility to accommodate customers who were delayed for genuine reasons. For example, if a customer arrived a few minutes late it was often unnecessary to rebook appointments or report them as FTAs, which could result in sanctioning for customers, as detailed below:

'...you have got a degree more flexibility and you can cope with people being late and things like that. In the old days when somebody used to come in and they were five minutes late for their appointment, it [being late] was a shocking crime. Especially if you had somebody there that didn't have any flexibility at all, somebody who stringently stuck to the times and they are sat there and you thought "oh well he's only five minutes late"...at the end of the day it cost us more in time to actually send that person away and rebook them. We are shooting ourselves in the foot...its pretty ludicrous to be honest as well...we don't give them any leeway but at the same time, we expect leeway from the customer if we keep them waiting.'

(Personal Adviser)

This corroborates findings from previous research into customer satisfaction (Nunn *et al.* 2009) whereby customers reported dissatisfaction with what they viewed as unnecessarily harsh consequences if they were genuinely late; for example being made to wait long periods before being able to sign, being expected to come back on a different day or, in extreme circumstances, sanctions being taken against them. This was contrasted with customers' experiences whereby, if FJR staff were running late, customers were simply expected to wait, often without any explanation, which understandably caused further dissatisfaction.

Concerns were reported about the lack of continuity resulting from the introduction of the taxi-ranking system and the impact this had on customer service and satisfaction, particularly for Optimising Customer Flows for FJR. Previously, staff had been able to develop ongoing relationships with customers and build knowledge of their circumstances. Under taxi-ranking, as customers see the first available staff member, the reduction in regular contact necessitated staff spending additional time asking questions to ascertain customers' circumstances. This reflects results from previous customer satisfaction research (Nunn *et al.* 2009) which found that staff continuity at FJR over a period of time appeared to have a positive effect on customers' perceptions of the service and in such cases led to an increase in satisfaction. One respondent took a different view and suggested that it is beneficial for customers to see different members of staff, because if advisers see the same customer continuously, the customer can become too comfortable resulting in not being as driven in their Jobsearch activities.

Some respondents expressed concerns about how the Optimising Customer Flows measures could compromise the assessment of the extent to which customers were meeting conditionality, as they are no longer seeing the same member of staff on a regular basis. Nevertheless, it was suggested that there were sufficient measures in place to counter any potentially adverse customer behaviour, for example, the introduction of More Frequent Attendance (MFAs), the use of weekly signing and Back to Work Sessions on non-signing days, plus informal staff communication and placing markers and notes on the Labour Market System (LMS) records.

8.4 Impact on staff

The Optimising Customer Flows measures were identified as initially receiving a negative reaction from staff. Respondents that had worked within the organisation for longer were particularly sceptical as they considered it to be a return to the former system, where customers did not see a designated adviser, and this was perceived as reducing continuity and service to the customer. However, it was recognised that in many Jobcentre Plus offices the number of customers was increasing substantially and that action needed to be taken to assist with controlling customer flows. Indeed, following implementation, most offices have reported that the Optimising Customer Flows measures have now had a positive impact on staff and that even those who were initially most critical of the measures have changed their views and accepted the benefits, as highlighted below:

'...we had people queuing out of the door. It didn't look like there was an end in sight. The Restart team had so many appointments booked and they were booked six weeks in advance. With the introduction of all these [Optimising Customer Flows measures] they [customers] are able to book [an appointment] in say a week's time.'

(Adviser Service Manager)

In addition, the Optimising Customer Flows measures are perceived as being fairer in terms of staff's division of work, with no individual being positively or negatively affected by the number of FTAs. Likewise, respondents reported that by introducing the Optimising Customer Flows measures it was far easier for advisers to achieve their Adviser Assessment Tool (AAT) requirement in relation to customer contact time.

A key concern expressed by respondents was the lack of preparation time between appointments to read notes and familiarise themselves with the customers' circumstances. In addition, the Optimising Customer Flows measures were stated as having initially driven (or having the potential to drive) perverse behaviours among staff. These behaviours included staff 'cherry picking' customers prior to their arrival and stretching out interviews to either avoid the next person in the queue or to ensure another colleague received the last person in the queue. Other perverse behaviours reported by respondents at a few offices involved advisers trying to overachieve and rush through as many customers as possible so they could feel more productive and compete with their colleagues. These behaviours were recognised as having the potential to impact negatively on both customer service and staff morale. Likewise, other staff members were considered to be contributing less than the average, but in general these issues were addressed within the team, as described below:

'The thing that Optimising Customer Flows potentially can do is allow those advisers who like to race through their work and be complete heroes; it allows them to do seventeen interviews a day and bleat about how busy they've been. It allows the shirkers to do far fewer interviews and potentially 'cherry pick' the ones they want to do. That did happen a bit to begin with, but as soon as enough members of the team realised what's going on they tend to sort it out between themselves.'

(District level respondent)

Furthermore, because managers were aware of these practices, they needed to spend more time 'policing' staff and supervising appointment boxes to ensure that the process was fair and effective. This then had an impact on their workload as highlighted below:

'The taxi-ranking definitely had staff up in arms...I felt like I couldn't get my job [done] because I was constantly checking these boxes and constantly queue busting and things like that. I mean I am there to do emergency interviews...but with taxi-ranking I was only able to do 2 or 3 interviews a day.'

(Personal Adviser)

Importantly, it was recognised that the perverse behaviours were more prevalent when the Optimising Customer Flows measures were first introduced and implemented. It was suggested that as awareness among staff of these behaviours has increased, it has become much less of an issue.

8.5 Future use

The Optimising Customer Flows measures, in particular those for the NJI and FJR, were generally considered to have had a positive impact on customer volumes, staff workloads and customer satisfaction, particularly when used in combination with the Focused Interventions. However, the positive view of the Optimising Customer Flows measures was not universal, with at least one office terminating the use of the measure for NJI customers due to a reported lack of continuity in customer service. Similarly, some smaller offices indicated that the Optimising Customer Flows measures were not as effective given the lower number of advisers available to operate the system.

In light of the evidence, it may be more appropriate for the future use of the Optimising Customer Flows measures to be restricted to FJRs and NJIs. Additionally, consideration should be given as to whether the future use of the measures should be optional, given that they are not deemed effective for all offices. In addition, some staff questioned the appropriateness of using the Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 26 Week Reviews; this was particularly relevant to the introduction of Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND), which stipulates the need for continuity between customers and advisers. However, limited evidence was available in relation to Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 26 Week Reviews

and Adviser Response Teams, therefore further investigation would be necessary before the extent of their future use can be determined.

8.6 Summary of findings

- The introduction of the Optimising Customer Flows measures, particularly for NJI and FJR when used in combination with the Focused Interventions, was perceived to have had a positive overall impact on customer volumes and staff workloads.
- However, Optimising Customer Flows for NJIs was not universally welcomed. A number of potential issues with this measure were identified including an increased likelihood of NJIs overrunning, because of the expectation that waiting customers would be accommodated by other advisers, and the significant volume of customers waiting to be seen on days when there were only a small number of FTAs.
- Optimising Customer Flows for NJIs was reported as impacting positively on customer satisfaction as a result of earlier access to appointments, reduced waiting times, and greater flexibility to accommodate late-running customers.
- Lack of staff preparation time for interviews, a reduction of continuity in the relationship between adviser and customer, and the potential to influence staff behaviour adversely were identified as the negative outcomes of Optimising Customer Flows measures.
- As with the Focused Interventions, staff morale was initially perceived to have declined in response to the introduction of Optimising Customer Flows measures. However, these problems are felt to have reduced over time as understanding of the measures has grown.
- It should be noted that there was limited evidence in relation to Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 26 Week Reviews and Adviser Response Teams.

9 Summary and conclusions

9.1 Introduction

The research has explored staff perceptions of the Jobcentre Plus downturn measures and provides detailed findings concerning their impact on: managing customer volumes and staff workloads; customer service levels; customer satisfaction; and Jobcentre Plus staff. The findings suggest that experiences of the implementation and effects of the measures have been mixed and that staff clearly value some interventions more than others. For clarity, the reported advantages and disadvantages of each measure are summarised in the table below.

Table 9.1 Perceived advantages/disadvantages of the downturn measures

Downturn measure	Advantages	Disadvantages
Focused Interventions		
35 Minute NJIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More focused NJIs increase the number of appointments available for customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces time to cover aspects of additional support available to jobseekers • Reduces time for adviser preparation
4/7 Minute FJRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More focused FJRs increase the number of appointments available for customers • 4 Minute FJRs are better targeted to some customers' needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces average amount of time spent with customers which has a potential impact on customer service • Reduces time for adviser preparation
Less Frequent Interventions		
13 and 26 Week Reviews Combined with FJRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps manage customer volumes • Positive effect on customer satisfaction as customer is required to make fewer visits to the Jobcentre Plus office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not always possible to co-ordinate the timing of the two interventions • Not possible to implement this measure if 13 Week Reviews are being delivered in group sessions

Continued

Table 9.1 Continued

Downturn measure	Advantages	Disadvantages
Relaxation of Weekly Signing in Weeks 13–19 and Excused Signing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps manage customer footfall into Jobcentre Plus offices • Effective as a 'last resort' measure where a Jobcentre Plus office may need to temporarily close due to unforeseen circumstances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential increased risk of fraud if customers are not required to attend the office as regularly
JRFND Back to Work Group Sessions Combined with 13 Week Review Group Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive impact on customer satisfaction 	No disadvantages were identified by respondents in this research study
Telephone and Postal Interventions		
Flexible Financial Assessor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If successful contact is made with the customer prior to the WFI: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – allows time for staff to prepare and resolve any issues outstanding prior to the WFI – customer service is enhanced as only required to see one adviser at Jobcentre Plus, reducing waiting times and time spent at the office – stronger focus on advisory role possible at WFI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative impact on staff workloads and morale due to the time taken to make successful contact with customers by telephone • Negative impact on customer satisfaction because: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – call requires repetition of information – authenticity of caller can be in question
Postal Signing	This measure has been withdrawn and was excluded from the research	This measure has been withdrawn and was excluded from the research
Telephone Signing	This measure has been withdrawn and was excluded from the research	This measure has been withdrawn and was excluded from the research

Continued

Table 9.1 Continued

Downturn measure	Advantages	Disadvantages
Group Interventions		
13 Week Review Group Sessions and 26 Week Review Group Sessions and Group Orientation Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces staff workloads as the intervention is delivered to a group • Enables follow-up one-to-one sessions to be more focused on the customers' individual needs • Customers can network and meet others in similar situations • Some customers are perceived as being more receptive to the support available when in a group setting • Positive impact on staff morale and viewed as a development opportunity to acquire new skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all customers are comfortable in a group setting • Potential to infringe on customer privacy and confidentiality • The impact on staff workloads is dependent on customers' attendance, otherwise the administrative costs outweigh the benefits • One-to-one meetings may be more effective as some customers are not comfortable in a group setting and would rather focus on their individual issues
Lone Parent 'Trigger' Interview Group Sessions and Initial Lone Parent WFI Group Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces staff workloads as the intervention is delivered to a group • Some customers are perceived as being more receptive to the support available when in a group setting • There is evidence to suggest increased take-up of work trials and Better Off Calculations • Positive impact on staff morale and viewed as a development opportunity to acquire new skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all customers are comfortable in a group setting • The impact on staff workloads is dependent on customers attendance, otherwise the administrative costs can outweigh the benefits • One-to-one meetings may be more effective as some customers are not comfortable in a group setting and would rather focus on their individual issues
Externally Conducted Interventions		
Shorter First WFIs in PLP Areas and Conducting First WFIs in PLP Areas at Provider Premises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive impact on customers who feel more at ease at provider premises • Helps manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices • Positive impact on staff morale as advisers are able to develop stronger relationships with providers • Improved attendance rates at provider premises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT problems at provider premises has led to advisers recording information manually which is later updated on the relevant systems • Negative effect on ability of advisers to achieve their AAT target as they cannot increase customer contact time when FTAs occur

Continued

Table 9.1 Continued

Downturn measure	Advantages	Disadvantages
Increase in Outreach Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helps manage customer volumes in Jobcentre Plus offices Provides a service for hard-to-reach customers in convenient locations and in customer-appropriate environments (e.g. children's centres for customers with young families) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IT problems at provider premises has led to advisers recording information manually which is later updated on the relevant systems
Optimising Customer Flows		
Optimising Customer Flows for NJIs and Optimising Customer Flows for FJRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adviser downtime associated with FTAs is reduced Generally positive impact on customer satisfaction as the measures have reduced waiting times and alleviated long queues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential for perverse adviser behaviour (e.g. 'cherry picking' customers, rushing interviews to see as many customers as possible) Continuity of relationship between adviser and customer interrupted Initial short-term negative impact on staff morale Impractical to implement in Jobcentre Plus offices with a low number of advisers
Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 26 Week Reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Downtime reduced between interviews and FTAs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuity of relationship between adviser and customer interrupted
Adviser Response Teams	No advantages were identified by respondents in this research study	No disadvantages were identified by respondents in this research study

9.2 Impacts on customer volumes and staff workloads

The general view among respondents was that the majority of downturn measures, particularly the Focused Interventions and Optimising Customer Flows measures, have been successful in assisting with managing the large volumes of customers, which was their primary objective. Respondents also suggested that Jobcentre Plus would not have been able to cope during the recession without the downturn measures and agreed that, in general, they have collectively assisted in:

- managing customer volumes in offices and reducing overcrowding;
- maintaining a professional office environment;
- increasing the number of appointments available for customers;
- creating more flexibility for customers; and
- reducing delays in serving customers.

However, it should also be recognised that some of the measures, most notably the Flexible Financial Assessor (FFA), were perceived by some respondents to have increased staff workloads.

9.3 Impact on customers

Overall, the impact that the downturn measures have had on customer service and customer satisfaction was perceived by staff as broadly positive. This focused on a reduction in waiting times for customers and increased flexibility, which enabled staff to tailor interventions to customers' needs. Despite this, there was some concern about the impact that some of the measures have had on customer service levels. For example, staff questioned how much support they could offer a customer in a four minute FJR and provided examples of where they had hurried through the intervention to ensure that the next customer was seen on time. Therefore, it was perceived that the Focused Interventions, Optimising Customer Flows, Group Sessions and FFA measures could potentially have had a negative impact on customer satisfaction. However, it was suggested that any reductions in customer service resulting from the measures are likely to have been offset by the introduction of additional support available to customers during the recession.

The majority of respondents agreed that the downturn measures had very little impact on customer conditionality. Similarly, respondents perceived the downturn measures as having no discernible impact on customers' labour market outcomes. The majority of senior managers stated that at this stage it is impossible to correlate any of the downturn measures with JSA off-flow figures as there are significant changes in other factors; specifically in the local labour market and the availability of additional support for customers during the recession.

9.4 Impact on staff

Initially some staff viewed the introduction of the downturn measures quite negatively. The measures, in particular the Optimising Customer Flows, were felt by some to be a return to previous working practices and, as such, had been expected to have an adverse effect on customer service and staff morale. However, staff did recognise that Jobcentre Plus was becoming overstretched due to the rising numbers of customers and that change was necessary. Most staff have adapted positively to the introduction of the measures and the new ways of working; this transition was made easier by the appointment of many new staff across the business.

Respondents based in offices where the downturn measures were introduced prior to the formal introduction in April 2009 were generally more positive about the measures. Many reported that they had resulted in greater local autonomy and this was particularly evident at those offices which had been involved in the initial development, implementation and piloting of the measures.

One of the major issues faced by staff at all levels was trying to keep up to date with all the changes and developments that occurred in this period. In addition to the implementation of the measures, a wide range of additional support for jobseekers was also introduced and many respondents reported that they found it increasingly difficult to absorb all of the information that was regularly published or circulated.

It was noted that some of the downturn measures, specifically the Optimising Customer Flows measures, had initially generated some perverse staff behaviours, for example 'cherry picking' customers. However, it was commonly felt that these issues had been addressed either within teams or by managers.

9.5 Future use

Many respondents agreed that some of the downturn measures could and should become a feature of the Jobcentre Plus business model, particularly the Optimising Customer Flows and Focused Intervention measures. However, managers in particular expressed a preference for the measures to be optional, so they have the choice of when to implement them depending on local economic circumstances. Many respondents had reservations as to whether the measures should become a permanent feature or just remain operational while the volumes were so high. While front-line staff and managers broadly embraced and accepted the measures through necessity, it is questionable whether the measures would remain as acceptable when the economic climate moves into recovery and customer volumes decrease because some staff perceive certain measures to have had a detrimental effect on customer service.

Consideration also needs to be given to the effectiveness of the measures in the event that the current customer base, which includes a higher proportion of qualified, experienced and highly motivated jobseekers, reverts back to the more traditional Jobcentre Plus customer profile. It is possible that the success of some of the measures, for example the Focused Interventions and Group Interventions, is the result of having a customer base that is more capable of independent job search and that if these measures remained in place in the longer term they may not be suitable for customers who require more support.

9.6 Considerations for further research

The findings from this research have helped to identify whether the downturn measures have been effective in managing the increase in customer volumes and staff workloads, while maintaining existing levels of customer service. However, it should be recognised that although a great deal of information and data was gathered, in some instances the evidence was limited and the study did not cover all of the measures. Therefore, there are still some gaps in knowledge and the research has also identified other areas where further investigation would be beneficial. For example, further research on downturn measures could include:

- an assessment of customers' views of the downturn measures;
- a comprehensive quantitative study covering all of the measures; and
- a quantitative evaluation to establish whether or not the measures have affected JSA off-flow rates.

Appendix A

Full details of downturn measures (by category)

Focused Interventions

35 Minute New Jobseeker Interviews (NJIs)

The average length of the NJI is reduced from 40 to 35 minutes by conducting the Better Off Calculation (BOC) and certain Decision Making and Appeals actions outside the NJI.

4/7 Minute Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews (FJR)

Customers who are able to self-manage their jobsearch activities are moved onto a shortened 'conditionality review' FJR (lasting a minimum of four minutes) for the first 13 weeks of their claim. Those who need more help move onto a 'supported jobsearch' FJR lasting seven minutes. After 13 weeks all customers move onto the 'supported jobsearch' FJR.

Less Frequent interventions

13 and 26 Week Reviews Combined with FJR

13 and 26 Week Reviews are booked on the same day (and, where possible, at the same time) as the FJR.

Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) Back to Work Group Sessions (BtWGS) Combined with 13 Week Review Group Session

BtWGS moved to later in the JRFND process, with the option to combine this with the 13 Week Review Group Session if this is being implemented.

Relaxation of Weekly Signing in Weeks 13–19*

The Weekly Signing requirement is relaxed but fortnightly signing is retained.

Excused Signing*

Excusing signing is only available as a 'last resort' where all other avenues have been exhausted.

Continued

Telephone and Postal Interventions

Flexible Financial Assessor (FFA)

Customers are contacted by telephone to complete Financial Assessor (FA) activities prior to attending Jobcentre Plus offices, meaning that they are no longer seen face-to-face by the FA.

(Postal Signing)

Optional Postal Signing is allowed for appropriate customers who are already on provision or claiming credits only.

(Telephone Signing)

Optional Telephone Signing is allowed for appropriate customers who are already on provision or claiming credits only.

Group Interventions

13 Week Review Group Sessions

13 Week Review Group Sessions are conducted to provide general information and guidance simultaneously to groups of jobseekers. Where this measure is implemented, the customer must still have a shorter one-to-one session to reconsider and where appropriate revise the Jobseeker's Agreement; and make any agreed referrals to programme provision.

26 Week Review Group Sessions

26 Week Review Group Sessions are conducted as part of the 6 Month Offer (6MO) to provide general information and guidance about the Personal Adviser (PA) support being provided and the range of opportunities available to jobseekers. This does not replace or undermine the one-to-one PA support and action planning that is at the heart of the 6MO.

Group Orientation Sessions

Group Orientation Sessions are conducted where Jobcentre Plus staff deliver services off-site in response to large scale redundancies.

Lone Parent 'Trigger' Interview Group Sessions

Lone Parent Trigger Interviews are conducted in group sessions, rather than on a one-to-one basis. Customers that do not sign up for the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) at the end of the session are then seen for a short one-to-one interview. Group sessions can be undertaken off-site or outside core hours to ease pressure on estates.

Initial Lone Parent Work Focused Interview (WFI) Group Sessions

Initial Lone Parent WFIs are conducted in group sessions, rather than on a one-to-one basis. Customers that do not sign up for NDLP at the end of the session are then seen for a short one-to-one interview. Group sessions can be undertaken off-site or outside core hours to ease pressure on estates.

Externally Conducted Interventions

Conducting Shorter First WFIs in Provider-led Pathways to Work (PLP) Areas

The first WFI for Incapacity Benefit (IB)/Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) customers in PLP areas is shortened by conducting the BOC in provider premises.

Conducting First WFIs in PLP areas at Provider Premises

The first WFI for IB/ESA customers in PLP areas is conducted at provider premises, where equipment is available and health and safety requirements are met.

Increase in Outreach Activities

FJRs and other interventions are conducted in local community centres, provider premises or other Government departments' premises, where equipment is available and health and safety requirements are met.

Continued

Optimising Customer Flows

Optimising Customer Flows (taxi-ranking) for NJIs

Customers see the first available PA for NJIs, maximising throughput and smoothing flow while allowing for variations in average interview times as dictated by customer need.

Optimising Customer Flows for FJRs

Customers sees the first available PA for FJRs, maximising throughput and smoothing flow while allowing for variations in average interview times as dictated by customer need.

Optimising Customer Flows for 13 and 26 Week Review

Customers see the first available PA for 13 and 26 Week Reviews, maximising throughput and smoothing flow while allowing for variations in average interview times as dictated by customer need.

Adviser Response Teams

Adviser Response Teams are deployed at various locations across Districts/Regions to ensure that 'front of house' desk space is utilised effectively and that customers don't have long delays in the busiest offices.

Key:

Bold = Primary measure

Bold and italic = Optional measure

* = Requires prior approval from the Director of the Customer Service Directorate

() = Measure withdrawn prior to fieldwork and not included in the research

Appendix B

Jobcentre Plus staff perception of downturn measures: topic guide for managers

Checks

- Categories information sheet to interviewee?
- Permission slip?
- Recorder on?
- Introductory statement.

Introductory statement (to be read only after recorder started)

We are undertaking research on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions to examine Staff Perceptions of the Downturn Measures on the Jobcentre Plus business. The project aims to establish which of the measures are being used, what, if any, effect the measures have had on customer satisfaction and which measures are most effective in helping staff to manage increased workloads.

The interview should last about thirty to forty minutes. We will not reveal the identity of anyone involved in the research and all findings will be published in such a way as to ensure the anonymity of respondents.

Clarification of measures being used

- According to Management Information, your office is currently operating the following mandatory Downturn Measures (name measures from list supplied), is that correct?

If no, record additional mandatory measures

- In addition, you are also operating these (this) optional measure (name measures from list supplied), is that correct?

If no, record additional optional measures

Impact of specific measures

- Have the measures helped with dealing with customer volumes at this office? How?
- Specifically, can you tell me how each category of measures has helped staff members to manage their workloads?

Ask as appropriate:

Firstly the 'Focused Interventions'

'Less frequent interventions'

'Telephone Interventions'

'Group interventions'

'Externally conducted interventions'

'Optimising Customer Flows'

How successful are the measures at this?

- Which measure(s) have had the most impact in helping staff manage workloads?

Probe re the separate measures

Impact on Labour Market Outcomes

- How do the measures affect customers' labour market outcomes? E.g. in terms of JSA off-flows to employment.

Have submissions increased/decreased?

- Specifically, can you tell me what impact you think each category of measures has had on customer's labour markets outcomes?

Ask as appropriate:

Firstly the 'Focused Interventions'

'Less frequent interventions'

'Telephone Interventions'

'Group interventions'

'Externally conducted interventions'

'Optimising Customer Flows'

- Are there unhelpful or perverse customer behaviours being driven by the measures? Probe re separate measures

Operation

- To what extent are the measures consistent with SOM (Standard Operating Model)?

I'd just like to us now to talk about the measures in the wider context of the extra support being introduced and delivered by Jobcentre Plus, so for example the Six Month Offer, Flexible New Deal, Young Persons Guarantee and Support for Newly unemployed...In what ways has the introduction of the downturn measures impacted on (affecting the launch of) other initiatives including the 6MO, SNU and JRFND.

- Do the downturn measures fit well with the other initiatives? (In what ways is the introduction of the downturn measures being affected by the launch of other initiatives including the 6MO, SNU and JRFND).
- Are there any benefits being brought in as a result of introducing **both** extra support **and** downturn measures?
- How easy/difficult is it for staff (managerial and front-line) to keep up to date on all of the additional support and downturn measures being brought in?
- What internal checks are in place to ensure the measures are being implemented (operated) correctly?
- Do you think any of the measures have the potential to increase fraud and the failure to report changes of circumstances? How?

Probe re individual measures

- Are the measures consistent with the policy on conditionality / rights and responsibilities? (Focused Interventions, less frequent interventions, conducting interventions by post or telephone appear inconsistent with policy?)

Impact on customer satisfaction

- Has the introduction of the measures affected the average standard of customer service provided?

If so, how? Also, how has the measure affected the volume of customer service?

- How do the measures affect perceived customer satisfaction? What, if any, evidence is there of this?

Probe re separate groups of measures

- Which, if any, of the measures have had a particularly positive impact on customer satisfaction? How and Why?

Probe re separate groups of measures

- Which, if any, of the measures have had a particularly negative impact on customer satisfaction? How and Why?

Probe re separate groups of measures

Impact on Staff

- Has the introduction of the measures influenced staff behaviour?

Probe re separate measures

- Why and how has it influenced behaviour in that way?

- Has the introduction of the measure influenced staff morale/motivation?

Probe re separate measures

Why and how has it influenced morale/motivation in that way?

- Are there unhelpful or perverse staff behaviours being driven by the measures?

Probe re separate measures

- Do staff understand what the measures are intended to achieve? (why/why not?)

Implementation and Future Use

- When were the Mandatory Measures first introduced at your office?

Probe – were they all introduced together? If not, can you explain why?

- When were the Optional Measure(s) first introduced at your office?

Probe – were they all introduced together? If not, why not?

Why were these options selected

Did they start using a measure and stop? If so why?

- How were the measures implemented?

Probe – Has it varied depending on the measure?

Are some more easy to implement than others?

Were there any issues?

How was it communicated to staff – any training given etc?

Could anything have been improved?

- If not operating all seven mandatory measures (or five for non PLP areas) ask, Why weren't all of the mandatory measures implemented?

Probe: Did they start using measure but discontinue it? Why?

- Have you considered operating any of the other optional measures? If yes, which and why? If no, why not?
- Could any of the measures have been improved? How? Probe re individual measures
- Do you think the measures should remain as a permanent feature of the Jobcentre Plus Business Model? Probe re individual measures
- Do you think other offices would benefit from using the (name) optional measures?

Probe re individual measures

Would you recommend tweaking/improving any of the measures?

Other

- Is there anything else that you would like to add about the downturn measures?

References

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The recent economic downturn and subsequent increase in the number of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants resulted in a rising demand for Jobcentre Plus services. In order to meet this demand, Jobcentre Plus recruited additional staff and introduced a range of initiatives offering greater support for jobseekers, including the Six Month Offer and the Young Person's Guarantee. At the same time, a package of temporary 'downturn measures' was developed for use in Jobcentre Plus offices as a short-term solution to help manage increasing customer volumes and staff workloads, whilst maintaining levels of customer service.

This report presents findings from qualitative research which explored Jobcentre Plus staff's perceptions of the downturn measures in order to gain an insight into their effectiveness.

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