

Research report

Support for Newly Unemployed and Six Month Offer evaluations: A report on qualitative research findings

by Sandra Vegeris, Kim Vowden, Christine Bertram, Rosemary Davidson, Fatima Husain, Karen Mackinnon and Deborah Smeaton

Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations

6MO	Six Month Offer
ADF	Adviser Discretion Fund
ASM	Advisory Services Manager
BIS	Business, Innovation and Skills (Department for)
BOC	Better Off Calculation
BtWS	Back to Work Session
BYB	Backing Young Britain
CETL	Customer Engagement Team Leader
DASO	Diary Administrative Support Officer
DM	District Manager
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
ESF	European Social Fund
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FJR	Fortnightly Jobsearch Review
FND	Flexible New Deal
FTA	Fail to attend
JRFND	Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
LEP	Local Employment Partnership
LMRA	Labour Market Recruitment Adviser
LMS	Labour Market System
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NDYP	New Deal for Young People
NJI	New Jobseeker Interview
PA	Personal Adviser
PRaP	Provider Referral and Payment (system)
PSI	Policy Studies Institute

RDA	Regional Development Agency
REC	Recruitment and Employment Confederation
RS	Recruitment subsidy
SEC	Self-Employment Credit
SFA	Skills Funding Agency
SNU	Support for Newly Unemployed
TPPM	Third Party Provision Manager
YPG	Young Person's Guarantee

Glossary of terms

Third sector	Collective term for charity, voluntary, non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations.
Caseloading	A jobcentre process for establishing greater continuity of advisory support where customers are assigned to a dedicated adviser whom they will meet on a regular basis.
SL2 system	A paper-based clerical system for referring Jobcentre Plus customers to a contracted service. This is being replaced by the electronic Provider Referral and Payment (PRaP) system introduced nationally in December 2009.
Taxi ranking	A system used in Jobcentre Plus offices to coordinate and maximise the flow of customer-staff meetings where the customer sees the first available Adviser or Fortnightly Review Officer.
Fast-tracked	Customers could access the Six Month Offer (6MO) before being unemployed six months. This was dependent on whether they fell into certain disadvantaged groups and an adviser had decided that this was the most appropriate form of help.

Summary

This evaluation reports qualitative process study findings on Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU) and the Six Month Offer (6MO), extra help to claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) during the economic recession. The evidence was gathered in Jobcentre Plus offices throughout the first year of implementation. Separate studies were undertaken with service providers, employers and customer customers in SNU and 6MO support.

Background and aims

The additional support under SNU and 6MO is delivered jointly by Jobcentre Plus and specialist partner agencies. Both support packages are available to customers at the adviser's discretion and take-up by the customer is voluntary.

SNU provides supplementary job preparation and job search services from day one of a JSA claim. The package of support is designed for people who have recently become unemployed and have little or no experience of modern job search techniques. Support delivered by Jobcentre Plus can either take the form of a group session or one-to-one job search coaching. Separate contracted providers supply job search support for non-professionals and professional/ executive customers.

Eligibility for the 6MO package of support generally starts from 26 weeks of a claim and continues to 52 weeks. There are four voluntary strands to the 6MO, which are supplemented by extra advisory support. A recruitment subsidy to the value of £1,000 is paid to employers in exchange for hiring an applicant who has been claiming JSA continuously for six months. Work focused training offers college-based courses to customers who would benefit from upskilling or reskilling to expand their employment opportunities. Volunteer placements arranged through third sector brokers can provide work-related experience. Finally, self-employment support is available from specialist providers and a Self-Employment Credit (SEC) offers financial assistance for those customers who become self-employed.

The overall aims of the study were to:

- assess the delivery of 6MO/SNU by Jobcentre Plus and contracted providers;
- examine the customer experience of 6MO/SNU and to determine what elements of 6MO/SNU appear to help customers;
- contribute to future policy development.

Evaluation results

General implementation findings

Generally staff found the period between the January 2009 announcement and the April 2009 roll-out of the SNU and 6MO initiatives to be a challenging timescale to meet. The tight schedule contributed to many of the issues related to difficulties over the first few months of roll out, e.g. evolving systems and limited resources (time, staffing and space). These were exacerbated by the high volumes of JSA customers who were seeking work during an economic recession. Early implementation problems abated and were mostly resolved by the end of 2009, as office premises were adapted and staff became familiar with the new services (Knight *et al.*, 2010). Staff welcomed the introduction of the additional voluntary services available to customers and felt they expanded the opportunities available to jobseekers during a weak labour market economy.

Support for Newly Unemployed

SNU services were introduced at different rates across the country and, at the end of the first year of implementation, variations remained at district and office level in what was being offered to newly unemployed customers. In some locations, the Jobcentre Plus delivered SNU group and one-to-one sessions were restricted or were not being offered at all. The introduction of the Support Contract and the Provider Referral and Payment system (PRaP) in December 2009 caused disruption in SNU support for non-professionals, due to technical problems with the referral system and some confusion among advisers about the new modular format of support. In contrast, support for professionals/executives was being offered in all the study offices. Advisers tended to base their decision for an SNU referral on the information collected during the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) and generally felt confident about matching customers to appropriate services, despite the lack of guidance on how to do so. Many offices encouraged staff to remind customers about the SNU services later in a claim, in the belief that newly unemployed customers were sometimes unreceptive to extra help.

Jobcentre Plus delivered SNU services

SNU group sessions tended to follow a national script. Observations revealed that the quality of presentations was uneven but, overall, had improved over the fieldwork period. Separate sessions tended to be run for different age groups and there was wide variation between offices in the frequency of the sessions. However, attendance rates were disappointing and staff in some offices felt that the content was too basic for most customers. A principal finding from the research suggests that SNU one-to-one sessions served different purposes across the offices. In some offices they were marketed as a 'short job search coaching session' as per the policy intent. But in other offices the sessions were considered useful for providing additional advisory time, as an extension of the NJI or to arrange a referral. In addition, one-to-one sessions were offered primarily to customers who had attended an SNU group session.

Most customers understood that the support was voluntary and that their benefits would not be affected if they did not take it up. Customers who had attended an SNU group session reported that they most appreciated the information that was given about Jobcentre Plus services, but the job search advice was said by some to be too simplistic.

Contracted SNU services

Among the contracted SNU services, reports were generally more positive about the support for professionals/executives compared to the support for non-professionals. Jobcentre Plus staff and customers expressed mixed views about SNU support for non-professionals in the first months of its operation, while it was being delivered by Programme Centre providers. This varied by the accessibility of the provider or the perceived quality of a local provider. Customers in the study who had attended one of these sessions were mainly positive about the standard of support they received but criticised the content of the sessions as being too basic. The evaluation cannot comment on the SNU services for non-professionals delivered through the new Support Contract as much of the evidence predates its roll-out in December 2009.

SNU support for professionals/executives was popular among staff and customers. Take-up was reported to be far higher than anticipated during the first year. Customers described the presenters and advisers as knowledgeable and professional and some indicated that the support they received had a direct influence on their job search technique. Jobcentre Plus staff tended to work with a select group of providers as a way of managing the vast array of local and national suppliers. Questions were raised about the usefulness of the supplier database and the direct marketing strategies of the providers. There was also evidence to suggest that the services may not have been

targeted appropriately as customers from a range of occupational backgrounds and work histories were referred for the support. Providers were enthusiastic about their products, and the degree to which they were able to attract Jobcentre Plus customers largely related to the level of marketing they had carried out.

The Six Month Offer

Throughout the first year of implementation, systemic factors had restricted the availability of the full range of 6MO options in some areas of Great Britain. Work focused training and volunteering had been particularly affected. The introduction of the options to customers was also influenced by the degree of experience an adviser had with the advisory process, their familiarity with providers and knowledge of provision, as well as adviser personal preferences and strategies.

Procedures mainly reflected the policy design. The general practice was for all six month customers to receive information about the recruitment subsidy, while the remaining options were offered at the adviser's discretion. In areas where there were appropriate courses available, work focused training was the next most popular offer among advisers. Volunteering tended to be associated with customers who were more proactive in community activities, or it was considered appropriate for people who needed work experience and upskilling. Finally, advisers tended to selectively offer self-employment to customers with saleable skills and the confidence to market them.

Recruitment subsidy

The widespread view among all those involved with the recruitment subsidy was that it was a valuable initiative. Jobcentre Plus staff were very positive about the subsidy overall but had mixed views about its success in getting people back to work. Staff reported low interest among certain groups of customers, stating that professionals and higher earners did not view the voucher to be worthwhile. Customer views were largely favourable. They had promoted the subsidy to varying degrees during the job search, reflecting their level of comfort with marketing their skills alongside a cash incentive.

Overall, employers were attracted by the extra financial support; they found the value of subsidy worthwhile and the payments efficiently administered. Employers in smaller businesses were the most enthusiastic and used the extra funding primarily to cover wages and the start-up costs of recruitment. Most employers stated they were not influenced by the subsidy when hiring staff; they stressed the importance of choosing the best person for the job. There was some evidence to suggest the subsidy played a role in job sustainability among small businesses that had used the money to increase working hours or to extend the lengths and types of contracts. Several employers also recognised that the subsidy could 'tip the balance' when choosing between two equally qualified candidates and some customers in the sample believed the subsidy had played an important role in their hiring decision.

Work focused training

Over a protracted implementation period, work focused training was operational in most of the study districts by the time of the March 2010 fieldwork. Slower to be introduced in Wales, funding for the option was more recently released by the Welsh Government. In Scotland, existing provision has been rebranded as work focused training and is being offered from 13 weeks of a claim, or earlier in some special cases.

Despite the implementation challenges, work focused training was a popular option among staff and customers. Training customers reported mixed reviews based on their experience. Those who found the training to be helpful intended to put it to use: noting it on a CV, applying for related

jobs or using the training to pursue self-employment. Negative feedback related to course start delays and the perception that course content was too basic for higher skilled individuals. As a consequence, some advisers had resorted to referring customers to training offered by non-contracted local providers and local authority led services.

In study districts where providers were offering a range of training options, Jobcentre Plus staff generally felt the option was useful for a large part of the caseload and noted that most customers were receptive to the offer. The location of learning providers, particularly in rural areas, and transport costs were cited as key barriers to accessing training.

Volunteering

Overall, Jobcentre Plus staff and brokers felt that, after initial teething problems, the provision and processes of the volunteering option had bedded in. Jobcentre Plus staff were generally positive about the benefits of volunteering and considered the option as an excellent tool to help a customer to improve their employability, particularly for those who lacked recent work experience. The volunteering experiences of customers in the study varied greatly, with some indicating gains in self-confidence and skills, while others reported few tangible benefits from the experience. Some customers reported feeling pressured or compelled into volunteering under the threat of losing their benefits, counter to policy. People with substantial barriers to work and those from a professional background were less satisfied with their placements, citing that their needs or interests were not catered for. These experiences reflected negatively in their views about the usefulness of the 6MO option for enhancing their employability.

The study revealed a mismatch of understanding between the volunteering brokers and Jobcentre Plus advisers about the purpose and scope of volunteering. Customers whom brokers regarded as unsuitable for volunteering (those with low or no skills, those with multiple barriers to work, and those lacking motivation) were viewed by Jobcentre Plus staff as a prime target group for the volunteering option. A concern among broker organisations was the resource invested in setting up placements for inappropriate referrals.

Self-employment support

The nature of self-employment support varied by prime contractors in England, Scotland and Wales and customer experiences reflected the diversity of services tailored to different needs. The policy intent was mostly confirmed by the study, although a key issue identified by providers and customers was the limited awareness among Jobcentre Plus advisers about the provider services. As a consequence, providers viewed a substantial proportion of the 6MO client referrals as inappropriate.

The SEC was regarded by customers, providers and Jobcentre Plus staff as a beneficial support during the transition from JSA to self-employment, particularly given that it can take some time to establish a business and become profitable. Customers did not view the extra money as an incentive to become self-employed, but some said it helped them to remain in work (and off benefit) when business was slow.

Conclusions

After a period of transition and time for services to become established, the SNU and 6MO initiatives were broadly implemented as the policy intended. The evaluation results hold implications for future design and delivery of like services. These relate to:

- the need to further develop and support advisory skills for matching customers to services; relieving advisers from administrative tasks to free up time with customers;
- the need for standardised systems for collecting and disseminating feedback on services;
- the feasibility of Jobcentre Plus offices directly delivering SNU services;
- a need to better understand how referrals between Jobcentre Plus and providers occur within the different service commissioning models;
- a lack of flexibility in the JSA customer regime to accommodate fuller participation in work-related services;
- the recognition that a wider diversity of employment support needs exists during an economic recession.

1 Introduction

This report presents evaluation findings from qualitative research on two labour market initiatives that were introduced nationally in April 2009, the Six Month Offer (6MO) and Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU). The research is part of a wider evaluation of the two initiatives commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that is being carried out by a research consortium led by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI). The reader should also refer to companion reports on early implementation findings (Knight *et al.*, 2010) and on findings from a survey of 6MO customers (Adams *et al.*, forthcoming).

This chapter introduces the two policy initiatives and sets up the different customer delivery structures into which the new services were delivered. It then explains how the current studies fit within the overall evaluation plan and outlines the remainder of the report.

1.1 The policy initiatives

In response to the economic downturn, additional support for jobseekers was announced at the Jobs Summit in January 2009. From the start of a claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), customers would be given access to additional job preparation and job search services. After six months, the customer would be eligible for extra advisory support plus volunteering opportunities to improve employability, a recruitment subsidy, help to become self-employed and enhanced access to training. These new services were rolled out nationally in April 2009.

The additional support under SNU and the 6MO is delivered jointly by Jobcentre Plus and specialist partner agencies. Both support options are available to customers at the adviser's discretion and take-up by the customer is voluntary.

1.1.1 Support for Newly Unemployed

SNU provides supplementary job preparation and job search services from day one of a claim. The package of support is designed for people who have recently become unemployed and have little or no experience of modern job search tools such as Jobcentre Plus job points, recruitment agencies and internet recruitment. Specialist help is also available for professional/executive customers. Take-up of the provision is voluntary. At the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI), an adviser assesses customer needs and, where appropriate, can offer extra support through SNU via:

- a one hour group session delivered by Jobcentre Plus designed to introduce and enhance knowledge of modern job search techniques and information about the local labour market;
- a one-to-one coaching session with a Jobcentre Plus adviser to provide personal help with modern job search techniques and information about the local labour market;
- referral to an external agency for a one day session offering advice and coaching on work preparation and job search techniques;
- possible referral of professionals/executives to an external agency for specialist work preparation and job search support.

1.1.2 The Six Month Offer

Individuals generally become eligible for opportunities under the 6MO after they have been claiming JSA for 26 weeks and they remain eligible until 52 weeks into a claim. There are four voluntary strands to the 6MO: (1) recruitment subsidy; (2) work focused training; (3) volunteering; and (4) self-employment.

Recruitment subsidy

A recruitment subsidy to the value of £1,000 is paid to employers in exchange for hiring an applicant who has been claiming JSA continuously for six months. To qualify, the job must be for at least 16 hours per week and be expected to last at least 26 weeks. The subsidy is delivered in two ways:

- **via self-marketing:** a 'voucher' (revised to a 'claim form' in December 2009) given to individual customers when they reach six months of unemployment to present to employers at interviews. If recruitment takes place, the employer submits the voucher/claim form to Jobcentre Plus and receives a £500 payment. If the individual does not return to claim benefit within 26 weeks, the employer receives a further £500 payment;
- **via bulk billing:** the voucher/claim form is given to customers as above, but employers who are account managed nationally or have agreed to recruit 12 or more people over a 12 month period receive a £1,000 subsidy for every eligible job applicant they recruit.

In December 2009, the recruitment subsidy voucher and information materials presented to customers assumed a new format. Previously, a single form was used to explain the payment to customers and employers, and served as an application to be completed and returned to Jobcentre Plus. In the new format the different functions were split into three separate components: a) information for the customer; b) a letter for employers about the subsidy that customers can include in their job applications, and c) the claim form for the employer to submit once they have recruited. At the same time a new marketing and awareness raising campaign was launched to promote the subsidy to employers.

The recruitment subsidy was due to end in March 2011. In May 2010 the Government announced the early closure of the recruitment subsidy as part of the public sector spending cuts.

Work focused training

The work focused training strand of the 6MO offers college-based training courses to JSA customers who would benefit from upskilling or reskilling in order to re-enter the local job market. The training is intended to be short-term, full- or part-time, and is focused to meet the individual's work aspirations and local employer demand.

There are some differences in the arrangements in England, Scotland and Wales. In England, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has contracted the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) (formerly the Learning and Skills Council) to arrange provision through local colleges. In Scotland, training is provided through the Training for Work programme and can be accessed by jobseekers who have been claiming JSA for three months or more. In Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government initiative, Skill Build, offers occupational skills learning to jobseekers. However, eligibility is open to all JSA customers, regardless of the duration of the claim.

Volunteering

Customers with an interest in volunteering to practise their existing skills, learn new skills, develop work habits or build confidence are directed to a third sector broker who has been contracted to arrange a suitable placement. Volunteer placements are intended to match the individual's job-related interests and skills.

Self-employment

Customers who are interested in moving into self-employment may also receive information, advice and practical support on becoming self-employed from specialist providers. These comprise Business Link (in England), Business Gateway/Training for Work (in Scotland) and Flexible Support for Business (in Wales). In addition, customers moving into self-employment can also receive a Self-Employment Credit (SEC) worth £50 per week for the first 16 weeks of trading. Eligibility for SEC is not contingent on engagement with a specialist provider.

Extra advice and guidance

All customers aged 25 and over who reach six months' unemployment on or after 6 April 2009 are assigned a personal adviser who, through a series of interviews, will help the customer draw up and follow an action plan for an effective job search. Customers aged 18-24 who reached six months' unemployment continued to access help through New Deal for Young People (NDYP), Gateway and Options, except for in areas where Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) was in operation (see Section 1.1.3).

1.1.3 Different service delivery contexts – JRFND

The new measures were introduced concurrently with the JRFND in 28 of the Jobcentre Plus districts, referred to as Phase 1 districts. In the remaining 22 Jobcentre Plus districts, (Phase 2 districts), the new initiatives were introduced within the existing JSA regime and New Deals.¹

JRFND offers additional services and advisory support to jobseekers, paired with increased obligations to perform work-related activities. It is intended to shift more responsibility for the job search to the jobseeker as a claim progresses. A customer journey, while individualised, progresses through four stages. The first three stages are delivered by Jobcentre Plus, and last up to 12 months. If a person is still claiming JSA after 12 months, they are then referred to a Flexible New Deal provider for further work preparation support. More details on the JRFND are supplied in Knight *et al.* (2010).

Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that Phase 1 and Phase 2 districts engendered different contexts for the introduction of SNU and 6MO services into the customer journey.

1.2 Changes to service structures

During the course of the evaluation, new systems and programmes were introduced into the Jobcentre Plus delivery network: the Provider Referral and Payment (PRaP) system, the Support Contract, and the Backing Young Britain (BYB) and Young Person's Guarantee (YPG) initiatives. Although the evaluation did not directly study these, they were part of the overall delivery environment for 6MO and SNU.

1.2.1 Provider Referral and Payment system

PRaP was introduced nationally in December 2009 to enable automated transactions between Jobcentre Plus and contracted providers. It will eventually replace clerical submissions (i.e., the SL2 process) for recording and processing service referrals but at the time of fieldwork, both systems were in operation as not all contracted provision had been added to PRaP. At the Jobcentre Plus office, PRaP operates through the Labour Market System (LMS) while on the service delivery side, providers access PRaP data via the Government Gateway.

¹ At the time of the research several New Deal programmes were running: New Deal 25 plus, the NDYP, Employment Zones, New Deal 50 plus, and the New Deal for Musicians.

PRaP is intended to enhance the communication of information between Jobcentre Plus offices and providers. Features include a repository of all Jobcentre Plus contracted provision; electronic referrals, invoicing and payment; records of customer starts and completions; and time savings.

1.2.2 Support Contract

A new Support Contract was launched in December 2009. It amalgamated into a single contract a range of existing funding streams, including support through Programme Centres which previously delivered SNU one day coaching and work preparation sessions. Support Contract services consist of a range of modules intended for different customer needs. SNU is one module intended for non-professional customers. It consists of a focused and intensive single day of support for those who have recently become unemployed (principally through redundancy) and have no recent experience of current job search channels.

1.2.3 Backing Young Britain and the Young Person's Guarantee

The BYB campaign is an appeal to businesses, charities and government bodies to create more opportunities for young people. They are being asked to commit to at least one of the following initiatives:

- to become a volunteer mentor for school or university leavers to help them find their feet in the jobs market;
- to provide work experience places, volunteering places or a work trial to help young people learn about work, make contacts and fill their CV;
- to offer an internship for a graduate;
- to create a new internship for 18-year-olds and non-graduates to give them a chance to prove themselves;
- to provide an apprenticeship for 16-24 year olds;
- joining a Local Employment Partnership to make sure job vacancies are advertised to local unemployed people;
- to bid for one of the 100,000 jobs for young people in the Government's Future Jobs Fund.

These initiatives were set out in the White Paper, *Building Britain's Recovery: Achieving Full Employment* (DWP, 2009).

The YPG was announced in April 2009 and changes in the delivery of Jobcentre Plus services to 18-24 year olds were introduced in January 2010. These entail more enhanced advisory support during the first 26 weeks of a claim and signposting to additional services. After 26 weeks, 18-24 year old customers become eligible for additional opportunities: an offer of a job, training or work experience for up to 26 weeks on a full-time basis. Eligibility includes those customers who have been fast-tracked/granted early access to JRFND Stage 3 or NDYP.

1.3 The evaluation plan

Findings presented in the current report contribute to an evaluation process study which aims to address the following objectives:

- to assess the delivery of 6MO/SNU by Jobcentre Plus and contracted providers;
- to examine the customer experience of 6MO/SNU and to determine what elements of 6MO/SNU appear to help customers;
- to contribute to future policy development.

The process study also consists of quantitative surveys of customers. The surveys will provide a representative picture of service experiences for different JSA customer groups. The process study is complemented by an impact study of the 6MO which will combine survey and management information data on customer activity to derive estimates of the overall impact and the net benefits of the individual strands.

1.4 Report outline

Chapter 2 describes the research methods and data sources used in the evaluation studies.

Chapter 3 provides an update on general implementation issues, changes to services and delivery structures.

Chapter 4 describes how the SNU services were introduced to customers, from staff and customer perspectives.

Chapters 5 and 6 report findings on the SNU, separately on Jobcentre Plus and external provider services.

Chapters 7 describes, from staff and customer perspectives, how the 6MO options were introduced to customers. It also reports staff views and practices on the extra advisory support available to customers after 26 weeks.

Chapters 8 through 11 report findings on the 6MO options: the recruitment subsidy, work focused training, volunteering and self-employment support.

Chapter 12 discusses the key research findings and offers recommendations for further policy development.

2 Methodology

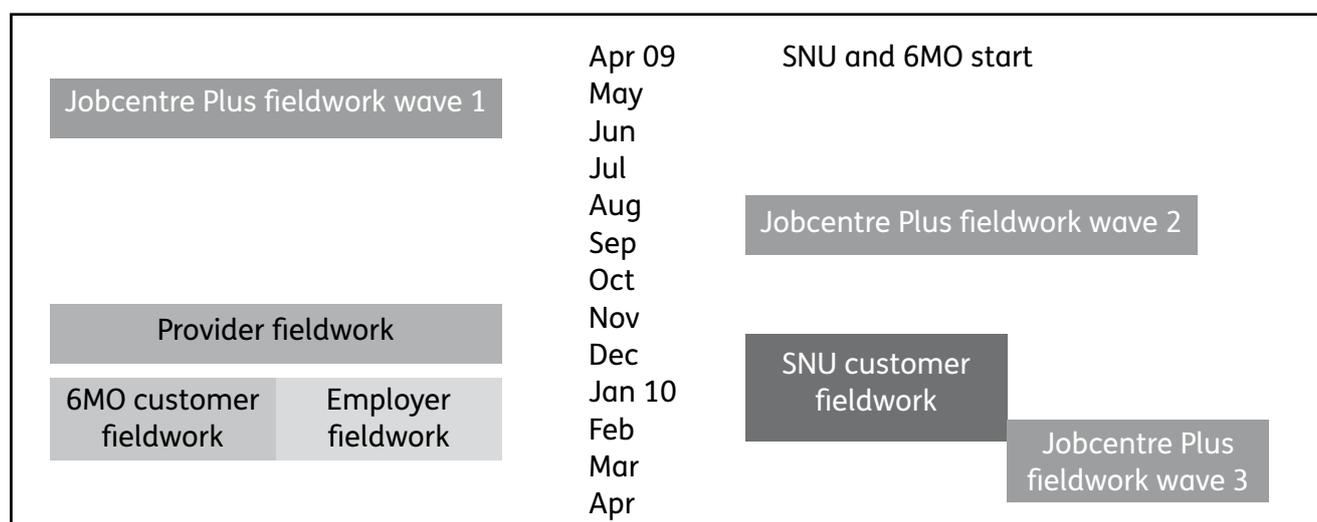
2.1 Introduction

The study used qualitative research techniques to record information on service delivery processes and accounts of stakeholder experiences. Qualitative evaluation is distinguished not only by the methodologies used in the inquiry (i.e. data collected through observational techniques, direct questioning, written documentation) but also for providing detailed descriptions, individual perspectives, and possible explanations for observed quantitative outcomes. The qualitative evaluation design combined a selection of data collection approaches, incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives. Primary data collection took place with:

- Jobcentre Plus staff (district and office levels);
- Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers;
- service providers;²
- employers.

Informed consent was obtained from all research subjects. The research spanned the first year of SNU and 6MO service operation, between May 2009 and March 2010 but was concentrated in the latter half of the year in order to allow time for services to bed in. The timeline for the various strands of the research is displayed in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 Qualitative fieldwork timeline



This chapter provides details on each strand of the qualitative fieldwork. Research materials are supplied in the Technical Appendices.

² The evaluation reports findings from fieldwork with providers of Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU) contracted provision (support for non-professionals and support for professionals/executives), Six Month Offer (6MO) volunteering brokers and suppliers of 6MO self-employment support. The experiences of providers of 6MO work focused training are included in a separate evaluation (LSC, 2009; LSC, 2010).

2.2 Site research in Jobcentre Plus districts

Three waves of fieldwork were carried out during the first year of SNU and 6MO implementation in order to observe the development of services over time, during: May-June 2009, August-September 2009 and February-March 2010. The site research was timed to optimise the bedding in of procedures at an early stage in delivery to provide formative feedback for programme decision making.

Data collection took place in seven Jobcentre Plus districts in England, Scotland and Wales, and covered 14 Jobcentre Plus offices (two offices in each district). Four of the districts were operating the JRFND structure of services. The remaining three districts were operating the existing JSA and New Deals. The selection of offices ensured variation in:

- geographical location (England, Scotland and Wales);
- levels of unemployment and deprivation;
- urban and rural areas;
- ethnic mix; and
- office size (based on customer volumes).

Data collection included telephone or face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus national, district and office level staff. Acknowledging the demands on staff time, the research was designed to be as unobtrusive as possible. First visits to Jobcentre Plus offices entailed face-to-face interviews with management and advisory staff in order to establish rapport between the research and delivery teams. To reduce disruption and to economise on time, visits were coordinated around staff schedules and booking diaries. Telephone interviews were conducted with district management and DWP programme operations staff. Likewise, for subsequent office based fieldwork, interviews with management staff were conducted by telephone in order to limit disruption.

During the office visits, the interview data was supplemented by observations of Jobcentre Plus delivered SNU group sessions and adviser meetings where SNU or 6MO services were discussed with customers. Table 2.1 outlines the typical fieldwork activity for waves 1, 2 and 3. This strand of SNU and 6MO research was conducted in tandem with Jobcentre Plus based research for the evaluation of Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) and Table 2.1 shows slight variations in the data collection for JRFND Phase 1 and 2 districts.

Table 2.1 Three waves of Jobcentre Plus fieldwork activity per office

Stakeholder	Number of observations		
	Wave 1 (May-Jun 09)	Wave 2 (Aug-Sep 09)	Wave 3 (Feb-Mar 10)
District Manager interview*	1	1	-
Third Party Provision Manager interview*	-	1	1
Contract Managers interview~	-	-	2
Advisory Services Manager interview	1-2	1-2	1-2
Customer Engagement Team Leader or Diary Admin Support Officer interview	1-2	1-2	1-2
NJI Adviser interview	3	3✧	3✧
26-week review/Stage 3 Adviser interview	3	3	3
SNU Group facilitator interview	-	1	-
NJI observations	3	3◊	3✧
26-week review/Stage 3 observation	3	3	3✧
SNU Group observation	-	1	1
Informal customers chat	varied according to permission		

Notes: * District level only; ~ National level only; ✧ In JRFND Phase 2 districts only.

2.2.1 Research topics

A standardised pro-forma was used for recording observations and a semi-structured approach was used for collecting the interview data. The topic emphasis varied slightly over the three waves of site visits, and covered:

- implementation issues: staffing, service accommodation, training;
- communications at district and office levels;
- staff awareness of provider services;
- customer introduction to services: flexibilities and adviser discretion;
- service delivery;
- service feedback mechanisms;
- staff views;
- customer initial reactions and receptivity;
- suggestions for improvement.

Results from the first two waves of Jobcentre Plus fieldwork are reported in Knight *et al.* (2010). This report provides an overview of these findings but focuses mainly on the third wave of data collection.

2.3 Research with customers

Depth, face-to-face interviews were carried out with individuals who took up one of the service options provided under SNU or 6MO. Interviews were arranged so that customers were either established in or had completed the option. Customers were identified from the Department for

Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative records and participation in the fieldwork followed a postal opt-out exercise. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted in private homes or in a public location that was convenient to the respondent. Customers received a £20 shopping voucher to thank them for their time.

The research with customers took place in four of the Jobcentre Plus study districts, in England, Scotland and Wales. Two of the districts were operating JRFND. In addition to geographical location, respondents were purposively sampled to achieve variation by gender, age and ethnicity. The characteristics of the SNU and 6MO customer achieved samples are presented in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 SNU and 6MO customer sample characteristics

Characteristic	SNU customers	6MO customers
Location		
England	15	22
Scotland	6	5
Wales	5	7
Gender		
Male	14	20
Female	12	12
Age		
18-24 years	7	4
25-49 years	13	20
50+ years	6	8
Ethnicity		
White	21	25
Other ethnic group	5	7
Total	26	32

2.3.1 Fieldwork with SNU customers

After a two-week opt-out period, customers were contacted by telephone and invited for interview. A quota sample of 26 customers comprised:

- five customers who had taken up the Jobcentre Plus delivered group session;
- five customers who had taken up Jobcentre Plus delivered one-to-one sessions;
- eight customers who had taken up the externally-delivered provision for non-professionals;
- eight customers who had taken up the externally-delivered professional/executive provision.

Interviews took place between December 2009 and February 2010.

2.3.2 Fieldwork with 6MO customers

Following a two-week research opt-out exercise, a quota sample of 32 customers was drawn from DWP records. Equal numbers (eight) were interviewed in each of the four 6MO groups:

- employment using the recruitment subsidy;
- work focused training;
- volunteering support;
- self-employment support (n=4) and Self-Employment Credit (SEC) (n=4).

Those who had taken up self-employment support or employment through the recruitment subsidy were contacted by telephone and invited for an interview. Recruitment for customers who had engaged in the training or the volunteering options necessitated telephone screening because only data on referrals were available. For the work focused training option, recruitment for customers only took place in England, due to limited availability of information at the time of the fieldwork about training referrals in the other countries.

Interviews were conducted between January and March 2010.

Research topics

For both studies, the research emphasis was on collecting customer views and experiences on the roles of Jobcentre Plus and service providers in the delivery of specific support. Research topics included:

- experiences of Jobcentre Plus processes: introduction and promotion of the services;
- reasons and motivations for service take-up;
- referral processes;
- service delivery;
- customer destinations;
- perceived usefulness of the service;
- additional service needs;
- suggestions for improvement.

2.4 Research with service providers

Telephone interviews were conducted with 71 service providers in November and December 2009. The fieldwork was designed to allow time for services to bed in and for the support agencies to have had sufficient dealings with customers to be able to reflect on their experiences and feed back. Provider contact details were supplied by DWP. Providers were first introduced to the study by letter and were given the opportunity to opt out of the research.³ The telephone interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. The achieved sample comprised:

³ Interviews were arranged and conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers International Survey Unit.

- two providers of SNU provision for non-professionals;⁴
- 27 providers of SNU professional/executive provision;
- 26 providers of 6MO self-employment support (national, regional and local levels);
- 16 brokers of 6MO volunteering services (national, regional and local levels).

In order to enable analytical comparisons the provider sample was clustered by the same Jobcentre Plus districts accessed for the site visits and customer studies, across England, Scotland and Wales (with the exception of SNU support for non-professionals). However, the achieved sample was not balanced across these districts.

2.4.1 Research topics

Research with providers was guided by a semi-structured topic guide. Discussion topics included:

- details on service provision: service networks (contracted and non-contracted services in partnership) and the customer journey;
- referral processes;
- communications with Jobcentre Plus, DWP and other providers;
- experiences with JSA customers;
- views on the appropriateness of referrals;
- suggestions for improvement.

2.5 Research with employers

Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 40 employers who had registered for the 6MO recruitment subsidy, ten of whom were identified to have signed the recruitment subsidy terms and conditions for the bulk billing payment method. Fieldwork took place between January and March 2010. Interviews were approximately 30 minutes in duration.

Potential respondents were identified through DWP contacts and were posted a letter of introduction to the study, with the opportunity to decline. After a one-week opt-out period, employers were contacted by telephone and invited to take part in the study. The achieved sample included employers in four of the study districts across the three countries, two districts in England and one each in Scotland and Wales. The achieved sample included variation in employer size and sector.

2.5.1 Research topics

Research with employers covered the following topics:

- awareness of the recruitment subsidy scheme;
- influence of the subsidy on hiring decisions;
- experience of the subsidised employee;
- views on the payment amount and payment process;
- suggestions for improvement.

⁴ This research was carried out before the Support Contract started in December 2009.

2.6 Data analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded (with respondent permission) and transcribed verbatim. The analysis of transcriptions and researcher observation notes used a thematic approach in which the analyst reviews the data; compares and contrasts the perceptions, accounts for experiences; searches for repeated patterns of response, emerging themes and seeks explanations across the data set.

For the Jobcentre Plus fieldwork, this process was facilitated by the Nvivo⁵ (version 8) qualitative analysis software package. A coding framework was devised to catalogue interview discussions by topic and sub-themes within topics. The Nvivo 'sets' function was used to organise the data into different sets of respondents which maximised the ability to compare and contrast the different research groups.

For the customer, provider and employer interview data, the analysis was facilitated by the 'Framework' charting technique⁶. This uses a series of spreadsheets created in Microsoft Excel to devise a data matrix of research topics by research cases, with themes comprising the columns and respondents comprising the rows. Case information on sub-topics was entered into the matrix cells. This arrangement allowed for systematic comparisons between respondents and amongst groups.

Data analysis was supplemented by researcher field notes and district level summaries on key observations taken from each wave of the Jobcentre Plus fieldwork.

⁵ Registered by QSR International.

⁶ Developed by the National Centre for Social Research.

3 Overview and update on implementation issues

A number of implementation issues were reported in a previously published evaluation report (Knight *et al.*, 2010) covering Jobcentre Plus fieldwork during the first six months of service operations. Generally staff found the period between the January 2009 announcement and the April 2009 roll-out of the Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU) and Six Month Offer (6MO) initiatives to be a challenging timescale to meet. The tight schedule contributed to many of the issues related to difficulties over the first few months of roll out, e.g. evolving systems and limited resources (time, staffing and space). These were exacerbated by the high volumes of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers who were seeking work during an economic recession.

This chapter provides an update on the issues as reported by Jobcentre Plus staff in the study districts. The new fieldwork took place during February and March 2010, approximately 11 months after the labour market initiatives were introduced. These findings are supplemented by the accounts of service providers on their experiences with the delivery network.⁷

3.1 General findings

Staff generally welcomed the introduction of the additional voluntary services available to customers at the start of a JSA claim (SNU) and after a claim of 26 weeks (6MO). The SNU was viewed as filling a gap in the services available for new customers. Job search support targeted at professionals/executives, a customer group that burgeoned during the recession, was particularly valued. Likewise, the addition of the 6MO was considered to expand the opportunities available to jobseekers, especially in some areas of Great Britain where these opportunities were not well coordinated.

Earlier research relayed the difficulties staff had encountered with the amount of new service suppliers and the pace of change associated with the implementation of the SNU and 6MO initiatives (Knight *et al.*, 2010). Over time, the issues receded as systems were set in place and staff acquired experience. Jobcentre Plus staff reported increased familiarity with the services and confidence with the service products, as one manager noted:

'Staff have become more experienced. It's become a lot easier as we've gone on as there was a lot of information at the beginning to take in. You've got to remember, it was just so much information...so it's definitely got easier as we've gone through it.'

(Manager, District code 4)

Pressures on office space had also eased as several offices reported the completion of building work. This reduced the need for staff hot-desking and created dedicated room space for the delivery of customer group sessions.

⁷ Note that the fieldwork with service providers (SNU for non-professionals, SNU for professionals/executives, brokers of 6MO volunteering and providers of 6MO self-employment support) was conducted three to four months prior to the last wave of research with Jobcentre Plus staff, and prior to the launch of the Support Contract and Provider Referral and Payment (PRaP) system. Refer to Figure 2.1 for the fieldwork schedule.

The remainder of this chapter discusses specific issues encountered with the delivery of the new services. These relate to staffing, communications, monitoring and feedback mechanisms, and the new delivery systems that were introduced.

3.2 Staffing

Due to the increase in JSA customers, new Jobcentre Plus advisory and signing staff were needed. Recruitment activity was concentrated during the first six months of implementation, in the summer and autumn of 2009, but one office team manager reported they had hired eight advisers since December 2009. By March 2010, most managers reported that staffing levels had reached their full complement, yet they were faced with the challenge of supporting a relatively high level of inexperienced advisers. Some new staff had completed their training but they were not fully operational. High staff turnover was also observed, such that in one office it was noted that the most experienced advisory staff were those who were recruited in summer 2009. Restructuring within Jobcentre Plus also meant that a relatively large number of management staff were new in post. These changes no doubt posed a strain on the collective organisational capacity to deliver the SNU and 6MO initiatives.

A second, related, issue was that many of the recruits had been hired on one year, fixed-term contracts. One manager estimated that half his advisory team was on a temporary contract. Managers raised concerns that budget cuts would threaten the balance of operations, for example:

'Staffing is probably still an issue, but I think that's an issue that's not going to go away. The big fear at the moment is that we're going to lose resource...the current fixed-term appointees are due to finish, and everybody seems, top down, to be saying, "Well, they are going to finish and we're going to have to cope within the resource we've got then".'

(Manager, District code 3)

3.3 Communications and service awareness

A key issue raised by Jobcentre Plus managers that was echoed throughout the research was the difficulty for advisers to keep up to date on a large, constantly changing, menu of provision available for customers. Systems were developed and set in place to help disseminate news on provision. Advisers had access to an intranet based **District Provision Tool** (also referred to as the 'Tree of Knowledge'), a database of locally available providers with information on their services. Also, via email, the Third Party Provision team issued 'gatekeeper notices' to streamline communications about services via office managers who then filtered these notices to the advisers. Although staff felt that these systems were efficient, they did not always have the time to consult the provider database or to read all the email communications.

Specific to SNU for professionals/executives is the database of services which contains over 350 suppliers. Several staff commented they found the tool difficult to use and the quantity of providers was overwhelming. Although advisers noted improvements to the system that enabled them to filter by specific criteria, time for this process was not always manageable during a customer meeting. As a result, advisers tended to refer to a limited number of these SNU contractors.

3.3.1 Jobcentre Plus and provider relationships

All providers of SNU and 6MO provision commented on the short lead-in time between notification of the contract and the supply of services. This led to delays in service availability and mirrors the experience reported by Jobcentre Plus staff. In particular, 6MO volunteering and self-employment

support was delayed in some areas of the country because of the unique nature of the funding structure. The time pressure was particularly acute for suppliers of volunteer broking, as the central funding structure required that prime contractors at the national level did not have sufficient time to set up their supply chains.

Local volunteer brokers and providers of self-employment support tended to deal directly with the Jobcentre Plus offices while regional and national contractors communicated with Jobcentre Plus at a district or national level. Generally, good working links were reported. Some local providers had already established service relationships with jobcentre staff due to previous or existing New Deal delivery contracts.

Providers noted that a referral system in which the Jobcentre Plus adviser is expected to 'sell' the service to the customer places some distance between the client and the provider of services. Providers therefore recognised the need to market their services to Jobcentre Plus advisers, partly to promote business and also to address the perception that some advisers possessed a limited awareness, comprising limited and or inaccurate knowledge, of their services. It was felt that a broadened understanding of the contracted support would help to manage customer expectations. This was noted by contractors in both the 6MO volunteering and self-employment support chains, for example:

'Jobcentre Plus advisers really do need to have some sort of grasp of what volunteering is and the sorts of thing it can offer so that they know what they're talking about when they are dealing with their customers. Now that's not a negative comment about those people, I'm just saying that it is a really important skill which some of them have and some of them don't, partly because they have the staff changes and all that sort of thing...'

(Volunteering broker)

'My partners are still reporting that they feel that advisers don't really understand the programme, they don't know what it is, that it's more of a tick box on their LMS systems to get a referral...that advisers really don't know what is available and what it means to be self-employed.'

(Self-employment support contractor)

Some providers addressed these issues by conducting site visits and information sessions for Jobcentre Plus staff, and disseminating literature and guidance. One volunteer broker, for example, distributed a regular newsletter which included 'good news' stories. Providers were also keen to disseminate literature to potential customers to inform about the support process. Providers noted that in areas where they had carried out awareness raising with staff, this had translated into appropriate referrals.

Not all providers had the resources to undertake these activities and some efforts to raise awareness were reported to be curtailed by Jobcentre Plus at the national level. For example, some volunteering brokers wished to provide service leaflets so that advisers could pass on consistent information to customers about the local volunteering services. Yet these brokers reported they had been requested not to disseminate information about local services as this might emphasise one 6MO option over another. Instead, they were told that Jobcentre Plus would collate information into a general leaflet on the 6MO that would be handed out to customers during the 26-week meeting. However, according to Jobcentre Plus site research, this did not occur consistently in practice and many of the customers who participated in research interviews did not recall receiving printed materials.

The marketing of SNU services for professionals/executives was more controversial. Many of these suppliers confirmed that they had been instructed by DWP not to contact Jobcentre Plus offices directly, or that they were prevented from doing so by the terms of their contract. Some had followed this rule and as a result had had virtually no contact with individual offices. Invariably, these providers had received few referrals. A second group said that marketing themselves to Jobcentre Plus offices was more of a 'grey area' and some of these providers had developed substantial marketing operations: they sent leaflets and 'adviser packs' to Jobcentre Plus offices, telephoned office staff directly and offered to give presentations to staff and customers. All of the SNU providers with high numbers of referrals had marketed themselves in this way to some extent.

Reactions of Jobcentre Plus staff to the marketing of SNU professional/ executive services were not consistent across study districts. Responses to the more direct approaches to marketing were largely negative. (Refer to Chapter 6.) Yet some offices had invited providers in to explain their services to advisers and to establish working links. In a minority of instances, providers of professional/executive support were invited to present at SNU voluntary group sessions and directly recruit customers to their specialist services.

3.4 Performance feedback mechanisms

As observed in earlier Jobcentre Plus fieldwork, customer feedback about SNU and 6MO contracted services was primarily collected through informal means. Individual advisers were expected to be the main channel for receiving reports from customers about contracted services. However, this was more likely to occur for the 6MO options because adviser follow-up was part of the process which included extra advisory support. One exception applied to feedback on SNU services for professionals/executives. In several offices, management reported that contractors regularly supplied them with copies of customer satisfaction questionnaires, most of which were non-standardised and designed by the provider. This customer feedback tended to be almost entirely positive.

Information received about services was incorporated into office-based knowledge about the content and quality of a local provider and was shared mainly through informal means. It was reported that the Third Party Provision team in each district was responsible for addressing service complaints but general feedback was not collated at the district level. One manager stated that feedback on the customer experience was 'down to the adviser level', and:

'The rule of thumb unfortunately for our customers is if it's positive, they don't normally feed it back to us, only if it's negative.'

(Manager, District code 7)

Staff also raised the issue that the SNU and 6MO 'packages' of services were in fact products of different funding arrangements and this encumbered the coordination of service feedback. Some services were managed nationally through prime contractors while others were managed by separate Government departments or agencies. Data protection protocols also hampered the sharing of information among the different agencies.

To address the apparent gap in service knowledge, the Third Party team in one study district had appointed a dedicated person to telephone customers to follow up on referrals. In another district there were plans to develop a customer satisfaction questionnaire to monitor Support Contract provision.

Providers generally reported that they already had, or were in the process of developing, systems for monitoring customer feedback. The client experience was described as highly positive. This was seen to be part of their quality assurance processes. Feedback was sometimes collated by the prime contractor or at the regional level, usually in the form of customer satisfaction questionnaires that were filled in at a service venue. One prime contractor had commissioned an ongoing telephone survey as a follow-up to all their clients, but information specific to 6MO customers could not be disaggregated from general service users.

3.5 New delivery systems and services

Between the second and third waves of Jobcentre Plus site fieldwork (September 2009 and March 2010), several changes were introduced at the national level which either directly or indirectly impacted on the SNU and 6MO services: the new Support Contract and the PRaP were introduced in December 2009 and additional supports connected to the **Young Person's Guarantee** (YPG) were launched in January 2010. A review of these delivery structures was not a focus of the current evaluation research but it is important to note their role in SNU and 6MO processes. During the March 2010 Jobcentre Plus site fieldwork, these systemic changes featured in discussions with staff.

The Support Contract replaced Programme Centre provision for SNU services for non-professionals and, in most districts, required staff to become familiar with new providers and a re-engineered package of services. At the same time, technical difficulties with the Provider Referral and Payment (PRaP) system, which was used for communicating referrals and service starts between Jobcentre Plus and contracted providers, created delays to this service. In addition, during this transition phase, a hybrid system of paper and electronic referrals was in operation, which added to the confusion. Staff identified the need for user training, both among advisers and contractors, to get the new system fully operational.

As a consequence of these changes, disruptions were reported for SNU contracted services for non-professionals. Some customers were experiencing delays of up to six weeks between referral and service start and, in one of the study offices, no referrals to the service had been made since the launch of the Support Contract. Some advisers felt that an electronic referral system reduced their control over the referral process. They preferred direct communication with providers (by telephone) with the assurance that a referral had been received.

A more significant change was the **Backing Young Britain** (BYB) initiative and the new services for young people, aged 18 to 24 that were introduced under the **Young Person's Guarantee**. The latter led to the reorganisation of staff in many of the offices so that a dedicated team of advisers and Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) staff worked exclusively with the younger customers. This added to the strain on staff resources as advisers with experience of SNU and 6MO delivery were assigned to different roles. Established teams of New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) and 26-week advisers were therefore disrupted. Some staff remarked that, given the policy, priority placed on young people detracted from services to people aged 25 and over.

3.6 Summary

Jobcentre Plus and contracted providers struggled to get the SNU and 6MO services fully operational within the short timescale between the January 2009 announcement and the April 2009 roll-out of the new support measures. Early implementation problems abated and were mostly resolved by the end of 2009, as office premises were adapted and staff became familiar with the new services. Still, nearly one year after the roll-out, some challenges remained and changes to delivery systems created new difficulties.

Previous research (Knight *et al.*, 2010) reported that Jobcentre Plus staff generally welcomed the introduction of SNU and 6MO, and Jobcentre Plus site visits in February-March 2010 confirmed that the initiatives continue to be backed with staff commitment. Most Jobcentre Plus managers reported in March 2010 that offices were fully staffed, but advisers were often inexperienced, staff turnover was high in some cases, and many new recruits were on one-year, fixed-term contracts, which caused concerns among managers about how they would cope when the contracts expired.

The District Provision Tool and 'gatekeeper notices' issued by Third Party Provision teams helped advisers to keep abreast of changes to the array of provision available to customers. These were regarded as efficient, but the database holding details on the myriad of providers of SNU support for professionals/executives was described as difficult to use and insufficiently detailed for advisers to be able to give customers useful information about the services.

Relationships between Jobcentre Plus staff and providers of volunteering and self-employment support were generally good, although providers believed that advisers needed a better understanding of their services. Relationships with providers of SNU professional/executive providers were more problematic. Some providers had followed the rule against initiating contact with Jobcentre Plus offices; others had developed substantial marketing operations and were receiving far more referrals as a result. Most Jobcentre Plus offices were trying to prevent providers from making direct contact while, in a minority of offices, certain providers were invited to pitch their services to customers at voluntary group sessions.

Customer feedback about SNU and 6MO contracted services was collected informally, mainly through advisers. This was more likely to occur for 6MO services, because of the greater contact afforded to advisers and customers at that stage. But management staff reported they regularly received client feedback forms from providers of SNU support for professionals/executives. Most of the informal feedback received at jobcentre offices was not passed up to district level, except for customer complaints which were dealt with by Third Party Provision teams.

The introduction of the Support Contract and PRaP in December 2009 caused disruption in SNU support for non-professionals, due to technical problems with the referral system and some confusion among advisers about the new modular format of support. The new services which were brought in as part of the YPG in January 2010 also caused disruption as advisers with experience of SNU and 6MO were reassigned to specialist teams dealing solely with 18-24 year old customers. Some staff felt that the emphasis on the younger age group meant that customers aged 25 and over were receiving less attention.

4 Offering Support for Newly Unemployed services

Customers access the services under Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU) via their Jobcentre Plus personal adviser. As noted in Chapter 1, at the time of the fieldwork, Jobcentre Plus was operating two different delivery structures, or customer journeys, into which these initiatives were introduced. The evaluation covered eight offices that were operating the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Flexible New Deal (FND) regime (Phase 1 offices) and six which were operating under the previous JSA regime (Phase 2 offices). This chapter presents findings on these processes from staff and customer perspectives.

Generally, practices for introducing the SNU initiatives were similar in Phase 1 and Phase 2 areas. Only rarely were these found to differ and these instances are identified in discussions.

More detailed findings on the different stakeholder experiences of the individual SNU services are presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.1 Jobcentre Plus processes

SNU includes four formats of help, targeted to different job search needs, all of which are voluntary on the part of the customer:

- Jobcentre Plus delivered group sessions;
- Jobcentre Plus delivered one-to-one coaching sessions;
- contracted one-day advice and coaching sessions for non-professionals;
- contracted specialist support for professionals/executives.

Interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff revealed that not all of the four SNU services were available in every office, or even every district. Support for professionals was being offered at all offices but, as noted in Chapter 3, delays associated with the introduction of the Support Contract in December 2009 had reduced referrals to support for non-professionals.

There was more variation in the availability of the two Jobcentre Plus delivered SNU services. The voluntary group sessions were more widely practiced, though with limited frequency. However, one of the Phase 1 study districts had taken the decision not to run any voluntary group sessions, because it was felt that they were too similar to mandatory Back to Work Sessions (BtWS)⁸; they were suspended in one other office due to poor attendance; while another office (Phase 2) only offered the sessions to 18-24 year olds. The availability of SNU one-to-one sessions was more limited. Many offices restricted the offer of one-to-one sessions to customers who had attended a voluntary group session. In one office, a one-to-one session was said to be offered to every new customer while in others, one-to-one sessions were rarely or never offered.

⁸ In the Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND), customers are mandated to attend a BtWS between weeks six and nine of a JSA claim. At the session they receive information about job search techniques, details on the local labour market and are reminded of their obligations.

The policy guidance envisages that advisers will make the offer of support at the NJI, but interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff and customers showed that the offer was frequently introduced later in a claim. Some offices encouraged Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) staff to inform customers about SNU services throughout the first 13 weeks of their claim. Advisers in some offices were informing customers about SNU services at the 13-week review meeting or at follow-up appointments. Advisers and managers noted the importance of reinforcing the offer after the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) because new customers were sometimes unreceptive to it, for various reasons: they might still be in shock about having been made unemployed, they might be worried about money and focused entirely on securing their benefits, or they might be over-confident about their chances of finding work quickly, for example:

'I think the first thing people are interested in is getting signed on and getting their money and sometimes they're not interested in what you're telling them or offering them. They just want to get that interview sorted.'

(Adviser, District code 8)

New claims advisers reported that they based their decision about which SNU service to offer customers on the information they collected during the NJI. They indicated that they decided what to offer based on customers' responses to their questions during the interview – for instance, regarding the sort of work the customer was seeking (which might indicate that support for professionals/executives was appropriate), how they were looking for work (which might suggest the need for guidance on modern job search techniques), and how willing they were to travel to a provider outside the local area. Job search questionnaires were used in some offices. Even where questionnaires were used, advisers reported they relied more on what customers said during the interview itself. Some managers were concerned that advisers were not targeting offers appropriately – one referred to advisers taking a 'blanket' approach.

Advisers generally indicated that they were confident about matching a customer to an SNU service if this was necessary. It was mainly the new NJI advisers who expressed uncertainty. It took time for advisers to learn about the wide range of services available to newly unemployed customers, and to become proficient at making a referral during the limited time allowed for the NJI.

Advisers appeared to have had considerable freedom over the SNU services they offered to customers but at the same time reported they had little or no guidance on matching customers to appropriate services. As a result, decisions on which services to offer customers varied between advisers as well as between offices and districts. Customer interviews showed that people with similar backgrounds were attending different kinds of provision, for instance; new graduates found on all types of provision without any obvious differences in needs.

4.1.1 Voluntary group sessions

Among the offices where voluntary group sessions were being offered, there was considerable variation in the degree to which advisers offer the service and the types of customers to whom they offered it.

In general, advisers felt that voluntary group sessions were appropriate for customers who had little recent experience of unemployment and needed some guidance on how to look for a job. The advantage of the voluntary session was that it provided a short, one hour, guidance on work preparation.

Some advisers, however, were offering the sessions to all new customers even if they appeared to have some knowledge of modern job search techniques, because attending the session *'doesn't really harm them'*. In contrast, in another office, voluntary group sessions were offered far less often, because staff there felt that the session was aimed at such a low level that few of their customers would benefit from it.

4.1.2 One-to-one sessions

As noted in Section 4.1.1, one-to-one sessions were not being offered in some offices. However, some staff noted that customers could still receive one-to-one support from an adviser if they specifically asked for it, although the support might not be logged on the computer system as SNU one-to-one support.

In many offices, the offer of a one-to-one session was contingent on attending a voluntary group session. In these cases the SNU facilitator would invite attendees to remain behind immediately after the session to discuss which of the additional services mentioned in the session might suit them and, if appropriate, to arrange a referral, or to arrange extra help from Jobcentre Plus, such as advice on searching for jobs or a Better Off Calculation.

In offices where the decision to offer one-to-one sessions to new customers was at the discretion of the NJI adviser, there was substantial variation between, and within, offices in the frequency with which this offer was made. Some advisers said that they had never offered one-to-one sessions, indicating that this was because they did not know what the sessions were for, or because they did not have enough time to deliver them. On the other hand, some said that they mentioned the service but left it to customers to contact them if they wanted the help:

'I'm very aware in my interviews that it's like [we] throw information at these people and if they're not used to it they find it quite hard to take in. So they go away with my phone number and if they rang and said they wanted to see me then I would make another one-to-one appointment.'

(Adviser, District code 8)

Other advisers took a more proactive approach and arranged a follow-up meeting whenever they felt that the customer needed more help than they were able to give during the 40-minute NJI. Often this was to discuss or arrange a referral to another SNU service, such as support for professionals, or another type of service altogether, such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision. As a result, advisers were seeing a wide range of customers at these follow-up one-to-one sessions – not only those who needed a brief coaching session in modern job search techniques.

4.1.3 Support for non-professionals

When SNU was introduced, advisers in most districts were familiar with the providers of support for non-professionals because they were already delivering support to customers through the Programme Centre. Advisers had established named contacts; they were familiar with service content and were confident with the quality of services received.

As noted in Chapter 3, providers of SNU for non-professionals changed in many districts with the launch of the new Support Contract in December 2009 and this caused a disruption in service availability. It also took time for staff to become familiar with the modular system of services. Less disruption was noted in districts where the Support Contract was delivered by the same agency that had provided services under the Programme Centre.

In offices where both voluntary group sessions and support for non-professionals were being offered, it was not clear how advisers were identifying a customer as suitable for one service rather than the other, or the extent to which they were introducing both options and allowing the customer to choose between them. Some advisers felt the support for non-professionals was better suited to customers who needed more intense help than the brief voluntary group session could give them, while others were unsure about the differences between the two services.

4.1.4 Support for professionals/executives

Many advisers said that they routinely offered the support for professionals/executives to any eligible customer. There was, however, some confusion among staff about the meaning of the 'professional/executive' terminology. Some staff (managers and advisers) understood the service was intended strictly for 'professionals' and this excluded other categories of customer such as 'blue-collar workers'. One manager described certain characteristics to be noted when assessing a customer:

'[The adviser] would look back at their career history. Maybe there would be qualifications involved – occupation as well – and they will then make a judgement call if the professional [support] is the right service for them.'

(Manager, District code 3)

Advisers did indeed look at customers' qualifications and work experience when deciding whether to offer this service. However, no advisers or managers mentioned any guidance on the subject and several said that there was none. As a result, some advisers were applying somewhat idiosyncratic criteria when assessing whether a customer was a 'professional' and staff were encouraged in some offices to broaden the criteria. For instance, one adviser used the duration of employment as a criterion:

'Well, a professional really, as far as I'm concerned, is anyone who's been doing a particular job for a long time, even if it's admin. It doesn't matter even if it's been a particular type of factory work if they've been doing it for a long time...On the other side, you've got obviously mainly qualified lawyers or medics or what you would call 'the professions'.'

(Adviser, District code 9)

Advisers and managers sometimes said that the lack of guidance was not a problem because many SNU professional providers were willing to take on 'anybody'. In at least one district this practice was discouraged and staff were instructed that only 'proper professional executives...someone at management level at least' should be offered the service.

Choice of provider

The database of providers to which advisers could refer customers included over 350 organisations. According to a senior manager, it was intended that 'customer choice' should underpin advisers' use of the database. This would entail the adviser and customer consulting the database together to choose a provider which suited the customer in terms of location, specialism and mode of delivery.

In practice, there was very little customer choice. In nearly all cases, advisers did not share the database with customers. Instead they referred to providers with whom they were familiar – often ones they found easy to deal with, and on whom they had received good feedback:

'As an adviser you establish your relationship with one of them [provider]. You build a rapport with them. And then you kind of stick to the same one unless there's something in particular that another one comes along and provides...I mean there's some people here that use providers that I've never used.'

(Adviser, District code 7)

'Yes, we all have our favourite ones, basically. They all offer the same thing, just slightly different, so each adviser will refer to their one. So we have a cross-section of people going but I think each adviser has their favourite one they refer to.'

(Manager, District code 5)

One reason why advisers may have been reluctant to refer to the database was that, according to some members of staff, it was difficult to navigate, even though the current version was said to be an improvement on the original (see Chapter 6). In response to this perceived problem, some office staff had drawn up a list of recommended providers for advisers to refer to.

4.2 Customer views and experiences of the offer of SNU support

Customers who were interviewed about their experiences of the different SNU services had found out about the support at different points in their claims: at the NJI, from FJR staff, at a 13-week review meeting and at a BtWS. One customer had heard about SNU support for professionals directly from a provider and had gone back to Jobcentre Plus to request a referral.

Most customers understood that their participation in SNU was voluntary. Only in a few cases did the person believe that their attendance was 'expected' or that their benefits would be affected if they did not show up. For the voluntary group session and the support for non-professionals, customers reported that they were told the services were intended to help with their job search or to support CV development.

Customers who attended support for professionals/executives noted they received very limited information on what to expect. One reported the support was described by the adviser as a '*newly unemployed professional's kind of training day*'. Several expected that the service would offer help with CVs and/or job search techniques. Only one of the customers had been given a choice of provider. This customer had been shown a list of providers on screen during his NJI, which he and the adviser had gone through together. He commented that the adviser had not given him any more detail than a list of names and locations.

Due to research data limitations, there was no information available on the views of customers in the SNU one-to-one sessions.

4.3 Summary

SNU services were introduced at different rates across the country and, at the end of the first year of implementation, variations remained at district and office level in what was being offered to newly unemployed customers. In some locations, certain services were restricted or were not being offered at all. This was especially true of the two Jobcentre Plus delivered SNU services. In contrast, support for professionals/executives was being offered in all offices.

Advisers tended to base their decision on which service to offer customers on the information collected during the NJI and generally felt confident about matching customers to appropriate services, despite the lack of guidance on how to do this. As a result, decisions on which services to offer customers varied between advisers as well as between study offices. This was a key issue in relation to support for professionals/executives, as was the limited extent to which customers were given a choice of the provider to which they were referred. Interviews with staff and customers revealed that the offer of support was often introduced after the NJI. Many offices encouraged staff to remind customers about SNU services after that point, in the belief that newly unemployed customers were sometimes unreceptive early in a claim.

Customers who were interviewed about their experiences of the different SNU services had found out about the support at different points in their claim. Those who had been referred to a voluntary group session or support for non-professionals had been told that the support would involve a workshop on job searching or CV development; those who had been referred to support for professionals/executives said that their advisers had not been able to tell them much about what the provision would involve. Most customers understood that the support was voluntary and that their benefits would not be affected if they did not take it up.

5 Support for Newly Unemployed: Jobcentre Plus services

Of the four services which make up the Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU), two are delivered by Jobcentre Plus: voluntary group sessions and one-to-one sessions. This chapter describes how these two services were being delivered, and what Jobcentre Plus staff and customers thought about them. The section on voluntary group sessions also contains findings drawn from researchers' observations of the sessions.

5.1 Voluntary group sessions

5.1.1 Delivery structures

Most of the offices which were delivering voluntary group sessions (sometimes referred to as 'group information sessions') had been doing so since the introduction of SNU in April 2009 or soon afterwards. Two offices had started delivering sessions more recently, following building work to provide a suitable space.

In many offices there were separate sessions for different age groups, although offices varied in how they split the age groups. This became more prevalent after new measures were announced for 18-24 year olds in January 2010. There were sessions for 18 year olds (usually run in conjunction with Connexions and held at Connexions offices), for customers aged 19 and over, for 18-24 year olds, and for customers aged 25 plus. One office was running sessions for 18-24 year olds only. Mixed age sessions were held in only one of the study districts.

Nearly all offices were holding the group sessions on their own premises, apart from the Connexions sessions for 18 year olds. In Phase 1 districts these tended to be held in the same room as Back to Work Sessions (BtWS). One office was delivering the sessions at a neighbouring office, pending completion of building work at their office. Sessions tend to be presented by one or two staff members, often from the Labour Market Recruitment Adviser (LMRA) team. Some offices also invited providers (and in one case, a major employer) to give presentations during the sessions.

The frequency of the group sessions varied greatly. A session was being held every day in one office, while another office was running them less than once a month. In most offices, sessions were taking place between twice a week and once a fortnight.

Session attendance was reported to range from a minimum of one to a maximum of 15 (dependent on room capacity). Staff in every office except one reported high fail to attend (FTA) rates. This was especially the case at the sessions for younger customers. In the main, it was not unusual for up to half of the invited customers to fail to attend after having volunteered for the session. This was verified by the research observations of group sessions where attendees numbered as few as one to five.

There were various views about why attendance was poor. Several respondents noted that attendance at all forms of voluntary provision tended to be low and some felt that attendance at the sessions should be made mandatory for this reason. A manager at the office which was not holding sessions on its own premises thought that customers may have been reluctant to travel into the city centre office to attend the session.

In the office that reported good attendance, sessions were offered daily. Staff reasoned this was because the frequency of sessions allowed customers to attend on a signing day. Efforts made by other offices to boost attendance rates included: calling customers beforehand to remind them about the session; holding the sessions later in the day; and not emphasising to customers the fact that attendance was voluntary.

5.1.2 Jobcentre Plus staff perspectives

Jobcentre Plus staff were mostly positive about the voluntary group sessions. Facilitators reported that they enjoyed delivering the sessions, and managers felt that the presenters had become more confident and proficient as they had gained experience of delivery.

In Phase 1 districts, the sessions compared favourably to BtWS. Reasons that were given for this varied:

- It was felt that by virtue of being voluntary, the sessions were more likely to be attended by people who wished to be there.
- The voluntary sessions tended to be smaller, which made it easier for facilitators to engage with customers.
- In most Phase 1 offices the content of the group session did not cover conditionality and was therefore less threatening.
- The format of the voluntary group sessions was more flexible and could be adapted by presenters to make it livelier, more interactive and better suited to the local audience.

Some staff were less positive. One manager thought that the group sessions should be scrapped, because the content was too basic for almost all customers, and that those who did need such basic advice would be better served by a one-to-one session or the contracted support for non-professionals. As already noted, one Phase 1 district had decided not to run any group sessions, partly because they were seen to be too similar to the mandatory BtWS. A manager in that district thought that inviting customers to attend a voluntary group session and then insisting that they attend a BtWS shortly afterwards would *'just alienate our customers'*.

Observational findings on delivery

SNU group sessions tended to be delivered by two facilitators via a PowerPoint presentation in a classroom setting. Observed sessions lasted between 25 and 100 minutes. In most sessions, customers were generally attentive and often contributed by asking and answering questions. No customers challenged the presenters' authority or walked out of the sessions. In most cases the presentation consisted of two topics: job search advice (on ways of finding work, CVs, application forms and job interviews) followed by a short summary of the help available through Jobcentre Plus (such as one-to-one sessions, debt advice and help with job interview costs).

Across the study districts, the standard of the presentations observed over two time periods (September 2009 and March 2010) noticeably improved. Sessions became more rehearsed and interactive and the content was adapted to reflect the labour market locality, and sometimes according to the Labour Market System (LMS) profiles of customers.

In three cases the session content deviated from the script to allow for outside speakers. The job search advice was followed by presentations by providers and, in one case, by a major employer. In one session, representatives from contracted and non-contracted providers introduced their services and solicited interest in referrals to their services.

5.1.3 Customer experiences

Feedback from customers immediately after attending a SNU group session was largely positive. Customers reported that it had been useful to hear about the services available through Jobcentre Plus and some were keen to find out more or arrange a referral. Most had liked the way the sessions were presented. There were fewer comments about the advice element of the session, and these tended to be lukewarm. While some customers found the whole session useful or interesting, others said that the job search advice was too basic. It was not clear how advisers had introduced the offer of group sessions to these customers, most of whom indicated that they had had little idea of what to expect.

Interviews were conducted with five customers who attended a voluntary group session. Reactions were mixed. Some respondents said that the format and tone of the session compared favourably with the usual Jobcentre Plus experience. One felt that the session was ‘personalised’ and that the staff seemed to understand the difficulties they faced in finding work. Another appreciated the informal environment that was created by the presenter and felt the session was *‘like a laugh as well. They didn’t make you feel they were taking themselves too seriously’*. Other respondents were less positive: One described the presenter as ‘monotonous’ and said that there was no audience interaction; another had found it difficult to understand the presenter and felt that questions and contributions were discouraged.

Most of the interview respondents thought that the job search element of the session was too basic, and some said that it repeated what they had already been told at the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) – and in some cases the BtWS. For example, one respondent (an office manager) described the session, *‘for me personally it was like asking Wayne Rooney to play in an under-11s match on a Sunday morning’*, and another (a recent graduate) found much of the session irrelevant because it focused on basic internet use. These and other comments suggest that advisers making referrals to group sessions may sometimes underestimate customers’ job search skills, or overestimate the level at which the sessions are pitched.

It should be noted that the in-depth interviews were conducted with customers who had attended sessions soon after the introduction of SNU. Their Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) start dates ranged from April to September 2009. As noted above, the standard of presentations observed generally improved over time. The timing of the fieldwork may partly explain inconsistencies between the different groups of customers included in the evaluation.

5.2 One-to-one sessions

5.2.1 Delivery structures

There were two main referral routes to one-to-one sessions. In some offices, a customer might be offered a one-to-one session at the NJI. More often, one-to-one sessions were offered to customers who attended a voluntary group session. Occasionally, a one-to-one session was offered to a customer asking for help at another point in the claims process – for instance at a Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) meeting. One-to-one sessions were typically booked for a 20-minute slot although this did vary in practice and ranged up to one hour. Staff in several offices said that they would not necessarily keep to the prescribed time limit if a customer needed extra help, and one adviser was not aware of any time limit.

Take-up of one-to-one support following a voluntary group session varied between offices and ranged from zero to nearly 100 per cent of those attending the group session. Staff in most offices reported that take-up was low. This was sometimes considered to be an indication that customers had gained all the information they needed from the group session. One member of staff thought that the reason why so few one-to-one sessions were being taken up was that they were designed for people who had not understood the group session, which was itself very basic:

'[One-to-one sessions] are for people who attend the group session...and don't understand it and need someone to sit down and go through it with them one-to-one, and it's so basic those people don't really exist...To be honest those people would probably be claiming a different benefit.'

(Manager, District code 4)

Differences in take-up rates partly reflected variations in what staff saw the purpose of the one-to-one session to be and how they presented it to group session customers. In the offices with low take-up rates it would appear that the one-to-one session was seen by staff and presented to customers as a job search coaching session for those who needed help beyond that provided in the group session. In the offices with higher take-up rates, the one-to-one session was presented as an opportunity to discuss each customer's needs and, if appropriate, to make a referral to a provider.

As a result of these differences, the content of one-to-one sessions varied greatly. Where one-to-one sessions were offered at the NJI, advisers often said that a key purpose of the support was to discuss or arrange a referral if they had not had time to do this in the NJI itself, or as a follow-up to give the customer time to consider what had been discussed in the NJI. In these cases, the one-to-one session was usually delivered by the adviser who had conducted the customer's NJI, and the content of the session appeared to be determined largely by the adviser.

Where one-to-one sessions followed voluntary group sessions or were being used for job search coaching, staff described the content as *'customer-led'*. Examples of the content of a coaching session included advice on how to use Jobcentre Plus job points or how to search for jobs on the internet. These sessions were not necessarily delivered by the adviser who had conducted the customer's NJI.

5.2.2 Jobcentre Plus staff perspectives

Many advisers reported they had no experience of delivering a one-to-one session, and, for this reason, there was confusion in some offices about the nature and purpose of the sessions. For instance, one adviser thought that the term *'one-to-one session'* referred to a CV consultation service delivered by an external provider.

Advisers who had conducted one-to-one sessions were generally positive about them. In offices where the sessions were being offered at the NJI, some advisers essentially used the extra time with the customer as either a continuation of the NJI to cover material they were unable to cover during the initial 40-minute interview or as a follow-up meeting:

'Because we now have the flexibility to bring them back in if we need to, with the voluntary support, it's taken some of the pressure off, certainly some of the time pressure off the new claim. You don't have to feel like you have to fit everything in. You can get them back in and discuss other things and that's been the main thing I would say, is just the flexibility to bring the customer back in.'

(Adviser, District code 9)

A similar view was expressed by a manager who suggested that one-to-one sessions were particularly useful for inexperienced NJI advisers who might find it harder to make a referral in the NJI. For these reasons, it was suggested that the NJI should be shortened and that every new customer should have a follow-up one-to-one session. It was also felt that customers benefited during the early weeks of a claim from the consistency of meeting the same adviser again, and that it was satisfying for advisers to be able to give ongoing support to customers.

Although advisers with experience of delivering one-to-one sessions (in their varying forms) said they felt confident doing so, some managers noted that other advisers lacked the training and skills needed to coach customers in certain aspects of job searching – in particular regarding CV design.

5.2.3 Customer experiences

There is very little to report on customers' experiences and views of one-to-one sessions. This was due to problems with recall among the customer interview respondents and inaccurate sample data records. Furthermore, fieldwork observations were not conducted on these sessions.

Jobcentre Plus managers had no formal feedback from customers on one-to-one sessions. Advisers who had conducted them believed that customers who took up one-to-one sessions generally welcomed the extra support.

5.3 Summary

In the study offices where the provision was available, staff were generally positive about the Jobcentre Plus delivered SNU group sessions and one-to-one sessions. The group sessions tended to follow a national script while the one-to-one sessions were more tailored and sometimes did not reflect the policy intent.

Facilitators reported that they enjoyed delivering the SNU group sessions, and managers felt that the presenters had become more confident and proficient as they had gained experience of delivery. Observations revealed that the quality of presentations was uneven but, overall, had improved over the fieldwork period. Separate sessions tended to be run for different age groups and there was wide variation between offices in the frequency of the sessions – from every day to less than once a month. Staff in Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) Phase 1 districts generally felt that the voluntary sessions were more effective than BtWS, not only because attendance was voluntary, but also because audiences were smaller, the format was more flexible and the presentation did not include a list of jobseeker obligations. However, attendance rates were disappointing and staff in some offices felt that the content was too basic for most customers. Customers in the study reported that they most appreciated the information that was given about Jobcentre Plus services, but the job search advice was said by some customers to be too simplistic.

The offer of SNU one-to-one sessions varied across the study offices. In some locations, customers were being offered one-to-one sessions at the NJI but, more often, the sessions were offered only to customers who had attended an SNU group session. A principal finding from the research suggests that one-to-one sessions served different purposes across the offices. In some offices they were marketed as a 'short job search coaching session' as per the policy intent. But in other offices the sessions were considered useful for providing additional advisory time, as an extension of the NJI or to arrange a referral. Customer take-up rates were reported to be higher within those offices that offered the latter one-to-one service model.

6 Support for Newly Unemployed: Contracted services

This chapter examines the two contracted Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU) services: support for non-professionals and support for professionals/executives. In each case it describes how the service was delivered, the referral process, Jobcentre Plus staff views of the provision, and the views and experiences of SNU providers and customers.

6.1 Support for non-professionals

6.1.1 Delivery structures

Support for non-professionals underwent a change in delivery model during the first year of operation. Initially it was a separate component under the Jobcentre Plus Programme Centre contract. Then, in December 2009, a new Support Contract took effect which consisted of an amalgam of different Jobcentre Plus contracted services with a module for SNU non-professional support. (See Chapter 1 for more details.) The support usually took the form of a single one-day job search advice and coaching session which was held at the provider's offices. Group sessions typically included two presenters and 12 customers. The sessions covered topics such as job search methods, job applications and CVs.

The Provider Referral and Payment (PRaP) system, a new automated, online referral system, was introduced at a similar time to the Support Contract, replacing the previous paper-based referral system. As outlined in Chapter 3, the new referral system took time to bed in and this caused delays. Some staff reported that customers were experiencing delays of up to six weeks between referral and receiving the support.

Referrals to the support for non-professionals decreased while systems associated with PRaP were established. But the fall in volumes was also due to adviser reluctance to use an unknown entity. In addition, lower customer volumes were attributed to the remoteness, i.e. located in towns/cities, of the new provision as some customers in rural areas were unwilling to travel. The same issue was raised by advisers in urban offices where transport was less of a problem. They felt that customers were unwilling to leave their 'comfort zone' by travelling to an unfamiliar area.

6.1.2 Jobcentre Plus staff perspectives

Before the introduction of the Support Contract, this option was popular with Jobcentre Plus staff, who saw it as a gateway for customers to the rest of the Programme Centre provision. Staff feedback on the provision itself was mixed and discrepancies within districts were noted: the provision could be popular in one office but not in another in the same district. In many cases this was connected with the accessibility of the provider, while in some offices it was felt that advisers were uncertain about how to sell the provision because they knew too little about it. Staff found that customers who were offered the provision were generally receptive to the idea, and believed that this was partly because it involved attending a one-off session, as opposed to regular attendance at a Programme Centre.

Among those who were familiar, Jobcentre Plus staff generally felt that the support for non-professionals did not change substantially with the introduction of the Support Contract module. But many had little understanding of what the sessions involved and few offered an opinion. The most common criticism was an apparent lack of content on CV preparation in the support for non-professionals module. However, the problem was resolved by referral to an alternative Support Contract module.

6.1.3 Provider views and experiences

Data to report on the provider perspective are limited. The evaluation included only two interviews with providers of SNU non-professional support and these took place in November 2009, before the Support Contract was introduced. Findings in this section should therefore be treated with caution.

One of the providers reported that the content of the session was tightly prescribed by DWP; another said there was little guidance as to what the provision should cover. Both providers appeared to offer similar sessions, dealing with subjects such as CVs, application forms and interviews. One of the providers gave customers a pen drive to take away, containing a variety of job search resources. The number of referrals was reported to fluctuate from week to week: between two and 11 at one provider, and between six and ten referrals at the other.

Both providers in the sample reported they had received fewer referrals than expected. They also felt that customers had been poorly briefed by Jobcentre Plus because some implied they did not wish to be there and others arrived without knowing the purpose of the session. One provider noted that customers sometimes opted out when they realised that they were at a job search course rather than a basic skills or computer course.

6.1.4 Customer experiences

As with the information from providers, feedback from customers was collected prior to the introduction of the Support Contract. Therefore some of the views may no longer be relevant. Eight customers were interviewed. Customers fell into two main groups: office workers, which included several recent graduates; and unskilled workers, most of whom had been made redundant from retail or factory jobs.

Customers' experiences varied. Respondents were generally disappointed with the content of the session, which they said was too basic. Some objected to being told to '*dress smartly*' or '*wash their hair*' for interviews. Two respondents, however, were very positive. One had attended a course that was geared to the needs of older jobseekers, and the other had effectively had a one-to-one session because the other customers had failed to attend.

On the whole, presenters were described as '*friendly*', '*good*' and '*doing their best*', and customers were encouraged to ask questions and interact with each other. A minority said that the facilities were substandard or their sessions had been poorly delivered – i.e., no visual aids were used and the presenters had engaged poorly with the audience.

Suggestions for improvement included: offering separate sessions for specific client groups – such as recent graduates or people from particular industries – as opposed to a 'one-size-fits-all' session; better information from Jobcentre Plus about what to expect from the session; and more active help in the session regarding interviews and CVs.

6.2 Support for professionals/executives

6.2.1 Delivery structures

Over 350 organisations were reported to be registered on the database of suppliers of the support for professionals/executives. Most were members of the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC). They included recruitment and headhunting agencies, outplacement consultants, HR consultants, and training and career coaching businesses. Some providers focused on particular industries or occupations, such as engineering, accountancy and HR. The others dealt with professionals of all types. The providers ranged from large, well established organisations with offices across the UK, to small businesses with a handful of staff operating out of a single office.

The total number of referrals was said to be far higher than anticipated. Across Great Britain, Jobcentre Plus had expected approximately 20,000 customers to take up the support during the first year of operation, but it was reported that 70,000 had already done so by March 2010.

Providers were given considerable freedom over how they delivered the support, in order to facilitate greater 'customer choice'. Interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff, customers and providers showed that the support was being delivered in a variety of ways: group sessions, one-to-one meetings, one-to-one remote support (usually a telephone consultation followed by email correspondence) and automated, internet-only advice. Customers were often given little or no choice of provider at the offer stage, as discussed in Chapter 4, but some providers did offer customers a choice of delivery methods – between a one-to-one meeting and remote support, for instance.

Group sessions were mostly whole-day workshops for between five and ten customers. They covered similar topics, such as job searching, CVs, covering letters and interviews. Providers held group sessions in their own offices, in hired rooms or in Jobcentre Plus offices, and gave customers printed materials to take away. Some also supplemented the support with online resources. Sessions were generally delivered by one presenter, who often told customers that they would be willing to give follow-up advice by email to individuals who needed more help.

One-to-one support tended to involve a single, two-hour, face-to-face meeting at the provider's office, although some providers said that if necessary they would travel to meet customers. Providers said that they tailored the support to customers' needs and circumstances, and they often asked customers to email their CV in advance for this reason. The meeting would often begin with an evaluation of the customer's career to date, strengths, weaknesses and goals, before moving on to a discussion about how to find and secure a job. Telephone consultations followed a similar pattern. The initial consultation would generally be followed by email contact between the customer and the adviser, and some providers gave customers access to online resources. A provider of internet-only support aimed to tailor provision to the individual's requirements by way of 'intelligent software'. Customers could also call a helpline for technical support.

Providers offering internet-only and remote support operated nationwide. Some providers of group sessions and face-to-face meetings had national coverage; others operated only in certain regions. Some of the smaller providers focused on a particular geographic area and received nearly all of their referrals from a handful of neighbouring Jobcentre Plus offices.

Unlike referrals to support for non-professionals which transferred to PRaP in December 2009, referrals to support for professionals/ executives operated with a paper-based procedure. Advisers typically contacted a provider by telephone, often with the customer present. A representative of the provider would have a brief conversation with the adviser and take down the customer's details so that they could contact the customer directly. No delays or other problems were reported with the

process by either staff or customers. According to Jobcentre Plus staff and providers, the referral-to-start conversion rate was high: most customers who accepted the offer of support went on to take it up.

6.2.2 Jobcentre Plus staff perspectives

Advisers and managers generally thought that quality of the provision was good, based on their own observations and what customers reported. For example, one manager reported:

'I think they're excellent. They really are good. I've been to a few sessions myself just to see what it's like and the feedback we've had from customers, I've had loads of letters saying "thank you very much" and "this was really good and motivating" and they appreciate all the help they were able to get because it's quite good.'

(Manager, District code 7)

There was some scepticism expressed about the quality of telephone and online advice and whether these modes of delivery were offering equal value for money.

Staff generally held the view that there were far too many providers to choose from, even when accessed through the provider database and filtered by specific area and industry. The selection of suppliers was described as *'abundant'* and *'overwhelming'* for advisers to deal with. In addition, the database provided little information about the service offered by each provider, making it difficult for advisers or customers to make an informed decision about which one to use, as noted by one member of staff:

'It's quite easy to find the opportunities from the database, but I think it's the notes part of it – the descriptions aren't very clear.'

(Manager, District code 9)

By far the largest complaint about the professional/executive provision gathered during the Jobcentre Plus fieldwork related to the providers' strategic marketing tactics. Many managers and some advisers were annoyed by phone calls and requests for meetings to discuss services for customers. Managers responded by limiting provider access to Jobcentre Plus staff and by limiting office referrals to a few trusted suppliers.

6.2.3 Provider views and experiences

This section reports on interviews with 27 suppliers of SNU professional/executive services.

There was huge variation in the number of referrals received by individual providers, ranging from fewer than ten to approaching 4,000. Most were generally satisfied with the referral process, noting only a few administrative glitches, and the vast majority of providers considered the referrals to be appropriate. Several pointed out that there was no agreed definition of the type of person, for whom the service was intended, as one person noted:

'Nobody really knows how to define what a professional is or what a newly unemployed one is – all jobcentres seem to have their own ideas of what it is.'

(SNU for professionals/executives supplier)

This lack of clarity was not seen as a serious problem, as most providers felt that their services were relevant to a wide range of jobseekers. One provider who supplied services across a range of areas noted that the backgrounds of the customers varied between districts: in affluent parts of London they tended to be senior professionals and managers, whereas in some other parts of the country they included teachers and new graduates.

Providers in the study reported that the feedback they received from customers was overwhelmingly positive and several said that customers had contacted them to say that the support had helped them to find a job. However, providers were less certain about their performance from the perspective of Jobcentre Plus because they had received no formal feedback on their services. Providers who had built relationships with Jobcentre Plus office staff said that they sometimes received informal feedback, which was almost always positive. One provider felt that it would be useful to have a monthly meeting with Jobcentre Plus representatives so that they could both give and receive feedback.

Best practices

As might be expected, providers tended to hold out their own service as a model of best practice and criticised those who offered a different mode of delivery. For instance, providers delivering face-to-face support thought that it was important to personally meet customers to build a rapport with them. Also, it was felt that some customers needed emotional support which could not be delivered remotely. Similarly, providers offering one-to-one support believed that this mode of delivery was superior to group sessions because people were less likely to reveal their personal circumstances in a group setting. In contrast, group session providers felt that the format was useful to bring people together, share and realise they are not alone.

Finally, some providers felt that adviser awareness of the support for professionals/ executives should be increased. As one provider stated:

'The level of knowledge of this programme amongst individual advisers in the jobcentres is highly variable and I think in all probability the majority simply don't know about it.'

(SNU for executives/professionals supplier)

Several said that they wanted the freedom to market their services directly to advisers in order to improve understanding.

6.2.4 Customer experiences

Interviews were conducted with eight customers about their experiences of support for professionals/executives. The group had diverse occupational backgrounds including recent graduates, as well as experienced private- and public-sector managers. None had previous experience of claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

Respondents had received support through a variety of modes and were mostly positive about their experiences. The SNU presenters and advisers were described as 'authoritative' and 'knowledgeable', and the content was seen as useful, especially the advice about interviews and CVs.

For example, one-to-one advice delivered by telephone had been appreciated by one respondent who described the consultation as interactive and of high quality. He was less impressed by the subsequent email exchange – he had to chase the adviser for feedback on his amended CV, and when this eventually arrived it consisted of one line. In another instance, a respondent who had received online job search support abandoned the service after a few weeks. He found that the profile that was produced, *'didn't tell me anything new...I already knew what type of person I was'*.

Two respondents, both new graduates, said that the support they had received had helped them to secure jobs. One noted that the workshop he attended taught him about competency-based interviews, and that some of the questions discussed had come up in an interview which led to his job offer.

Respondents made several suggestions for improving the service. Ongoing support following the initial consultation or a workshop would have been appreciated, as would services for specialist occupations. One respondent suggested that Jobcentre Plus introduce more initiatives for professionals, such as newsletters, and hosting open days where large employers can recruit senior staff.

6.3 Summary

Among the contracted SNU services, reports were generally more positive about the support for professionals/executives compared to the support for non-professionals.

Jobcentre Plus staff and customers expressed mixed views about SNU support for non-professionals in the first months of its operation, while it was being delivered by Programme Centre providers. At the Jobcentre Plus office level, this varied by the accessibility of the provider or the perceived quality of a local provider. Customers in the study were mainly positive about the professional standard of support they received but criticised the content of the sessions as being too basic.

In December 2009, the new Support Contract and PRaP introduced changes and a level of uncertainty to the SNU support for non-professionals. It was generally acknowledged that professional ties needed to be established with new suppliers. By the time of the March 2010 fieldwork there was still a lack of awareness among some advisers about the content of the SNU module. Of those who were familiar, staff generally felt that the support for non-professionals did not change substantially with the introduction of the Support Contract module.

SNU support for professionals/executives was popular among staff and customers. Take-up was reported to be far higher than anticipated – with three to four times the predicted volume of referrals achieved in the first year. Customers described the presenters and advisers as knowledgeable and professional. Some of the interviewed customers indicated that the support they received had a direct influence on their job search technique. Jobcentre Plus staff tended to work with a select group of providers as a way of managing the vast array of local and national suppliers. Questions were raised about the usefulness of the supplier database and the direct marketing strategies of the providers. There was also evidence to suggest that the services may not have been targeted appropriately as customers from a range of occupational backgrounds and work histories were referred for the support. The many providers were delivering the service in different ways: group sessions, one-to-one meetings, one-to-one remote support and automated, internet-only support. Providers were enthusiastic about their products, and the degree to which they were able to attract Jobcentre Plus customers largely related to the level of marketing they had carried out.

7 Offering Six Month Offer support

Customers access the support under the Six Month Offer (6MO) via their Jobcentre Plus personal adviser. As noted in Chapter 1, at the time of the fieldwork Jobcentre Plus was operating two different delivery structures, or customer journeys, into which these initiatives were introduced. The evaluation covered eight offices that were operating the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Flexible New Deal (FND) regime (Phase 1 offices) and six which were operating under the previous JSA regime (Phase 2 offices). This chapter presents findings on these processes from staff and customer perspectives.

Generally, practices for introducing 6MO to customers were similar in Phase 1 and Phase 2 areas. Only rarely were these found to differ and these instances are identified in discussions.

More detailed findings on the different stakeholder experiences of the individual 6MO options are presented in Chapters 8 to 11.

7.1 Jobcentre Plus practices

Available after a JSA claim of 26 weeks, the 6MO consists of four opportunities, all of which are voluntary on the part of the customer:

- an employer recruitment subsidy;
- work focused training;⁹
- volunteering;
- self-employment support and a Self-Employment Credit (SEC) for those who set up trading.

In Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) Phase 1 districts, the 6MO was introduced alongside extra advisory support for individuals reaching six months of a claim, plus increased expectations for job search and work related activities. This was not in place in Phase 2 districts where the 6MO was introduced into the existing JSA regime and New Deals.

As reported in Knight, *et al.* (2010), some of the 6MO options were slow to become established and there was variation in availability across the countries. Access to training and voluntary placements was particularly affected.

Introduction to the 6MO occurred during a mandatory advisory meeting. The policy design intended that advisers would use their discretion over how and when to market the various supports. Consequently, in practice, there was considerable variation in the extent to which and the detail in which the offers were divulged to the customer. In observations of these meetings, advisers tended not to refer to a package of support or 'the Six Month Offer', rather they introduced an option (or options) as extra support the customer was eligible for, because they had been on JSA for 26 weeks.

A sizeable proportion of the advisory meeting was devoted to administrative procedures and some advisers felt the time allotted was not sufficient for explaining about the different 6MO

⁹ Similar training support is available from the start of a claim in Wales and from 13 weeks of a claim in Scotland.

options. With experience, however, advisers became more adept at either selectively discussing the different offers or following up discussions at a subsequent interview. Group sessions, practiced as recession mitigation, were also used to streamline the process. In these cases customers were given information about all of the options and this would be followed a few weeks later, usually at the next signing date, with a one-to-one discussion to gauge customer interest. Variations in service availability (including earlier access to the training or self-employment support in some areas) also meant that discussions of 6MO opportunities could be streamlined at the 26-week meeting. Towards the end of the first year of implementation, the introduction of the **Young Person's Guarantee** (YPG) led to further variations for young customers. In one office (Phase 1 district) the practice was to inform 18-24 year old customers about the 6MO options during Stage 2, due to anticipated time pressures at the Stage 3 initial interview. In another office (Phase 2 district) the 6MO was not being systematically mentioned as discussions of the young people initiatives were given priority.

Over the course of the Jobcentre Plus research it was apparent that individual advisers became more confident at diagnosing customer needs and matching these to the offers, as was relayed by one adviser during the March 2010 Jobcentre Plus fieldwork:

'If you don't have good communication skills in here, you know, all you're going to do is reel off the information to these people and they're going to leave oblivious. When somebody sits in front of me, as I talk to them, I make decisions as to how I'm going to tell, what I'm going to tell them, what I think would be a good path or potential good path to take.'

(Adviser, District code 5)

Advisers were also influenced by prior experiences with a provider and the quality of their service relationship. They tended to make repeat referrals to providers they trusted to supply a good service.

7.1.1 Judging suitability for the customer

In terms of introducing the individual options, it was general practice that all customers received hard copies of the recruitment subsidy (or 'recruitment voucher'). Usually the subsidy was described as a 'marketing tool' or as an extra incentive for employers. Sometimes advisers would recommend customers refer to it on their CVs or at a job interview. In some cases, the subsidy was presented as most effective when used in conjunction with a Work Trial.¹⁰

Then, for the most part, advisers' individual styles and adopted strategies determined which of the remaining three offers were presented. Some advisers ran through the remaining options briefly, allowing customers to establish an interest, and then followed this up in a subsequent interview:

'I emphasise as much as I possibly can at the start that there's an awful lot of information being thrown at them in one short interview, and I want them to come back and ask me about it. [...] I don't know if that's necessarily the right approach but I try and get through it fairly quickly so that they're not just bored right at the start of the interview...'

(Adviser, District code 5)

¹⁰ The 6MO recruitment subsidy was also promoted to employers. A marketing campaign followed the release of the new voucher format in December 2009. In one study district the subsidy was promoted at employers' breakfasts.

Alternatively, the offer of other opportunities was more discretionary, based on the profile of the customer, as one manager explained:

'[Advisers] take a lead sometimes from the customer...It's just like if you were selling something, you would perhaps use a different phraseology or manner of explaining it...If you were talking to a university graduate you would be doing it totally different than you would somebody who had perhaps some learning difficulty...advisers are definitely selling it but there isn't a prescribed fashion...If something they feel is not appropriate then they will not raise it.'

(Manager, District code 6)

After the recruitment subsidy, work focused training was the next most popular offer among advisers and this was reinforced by customers' positive reactions. However, the practice of offering training was contingent on the availability of courses. Delays and waiting lists on over-subscribed courses were reported throughout the fieldwork period. Perceived gaps in the range of training subjects, particularly in basic skills training and advanced courses suited to more qualified customers, was also a factor. As described by one manager:

'I really feel there should be more training available...when you go in and look at the training opportunities from LMS¹¹ that are available, they're not very exciting. They're not very dynamic. It's an area that we really should be doing better in...'

(Manager, District code 6)

There was more variation in the offer of volunteering. Some advisers said they rarely discussed the option, partly because of the poor reputation of a local broker and partly due to criticisms that equated volunteering to 'working for nothing'. Two dominant views emerged amongst Jobcentre Plus staff over which customers were most suited. One was that customers who considered volunteering were more proactive and were already taking steps to secure a placement or required little effort on the part of the adviser to sell the option. Others targeted volunteering at customers with no skills or low qualifications or limited work experience, who it was believed would benefit from the experience. The latter view was expressed by one adviser:

'I don't talk about volunteering...very rarely. I mean you might get somebody with learning difficulties...or somebody that is, without being discriminatory, somebody that isn't as smart as the average person. Then yes, maybe they should do that. They should go and do a bit of volunteering to get their experience up.'

(Adviser, District code 5)

Furthermore, some staff felt the volunteering option was more appropriate for customers aged 25 plus because recent opportunities for young people had been significantly broadened through the YPG.

Concerning self-employment, the uncertain economic climate was either viewed as a catalyst for customers to consider other options in a precarious job market, or as too risky a time to 'go it alone'. Therefore, the 6MO self-employment was not considered viable for everyone. Perspectives seemed to be influenced by the level of affluence in an area, with running a business more suited to customers living in prosperous areas. Advisers considered marketable skills (and trades experience) plus previous self-employment experience for gauging suitability of the offer. The demeanour of a customer was also important as someone who was reserved or 'shy' was not judged likely to be successful at selling their skills.

¹¹ Labour Market System.

7.2 Customer views and experiences of the offer of 6MO support

In the interviews with customers (n=32) who had taken-up one of the 6MO options, people were asked to recall how they were introduced to the offer(s) and, on reflection, which of the other options they would have been interested to learn more about.¹² Not all customers had been informed about the option they took up during an adviser interview. For instance, a few who entered employment or self-employment said they only found out about the recruitment subsidy or the SEC when they went into the Jobcentre Plus office to sign off their JSA claim. These individuals are not included in the following discussion.

Most customers reported they were not aware of and did not recall being informed about all four of the 6MO opportunities. Alternatively, it was rare for customers to have been presented with just the one option that they pursued. This scenario tended to occur in cases where the individual initiated discussions, for example, people who explicitly requested training or volunteering opportunities. Therefore, there seemed to be an element of 'choice' or at least awareness of one or two other options.

More significant were the numbers of people who stated they would have liked to have been told about other 6MO options, and, in retrospect, they speculated that another opportunity would have been useful in their job search. Interest in training was mentioned most frequently. The training option, for example, would have been preferred, and more valued, by two individuals who took up volunteer placements. Similarly, training in a relevant occupational field was considered complementary to self-employment. A respondent who was trading from home and receiving SEC reflected that her business would benefit if she had more skills:

'I still would like to do training...something that might help me with my business.'

(Customer, District code 7)

Of the 6MO options, customers were least likely to be aware of self-employment support (confirming evidence from Jobcentre Plus advisers) and most showed no interest when the opportunity was raised during the research interview. One exception was an individual who was employed through the recruitment subsidy but who would have appreciated self-employment support, having previously operated his own business for a number of years.

7.3 Extra advisory support after 26 weeks

In JRFND Phase 1 districts, providing additional advisory support from 26 weeks was balanced with extra customer responsibilities to engage in work preparation activities. Regular contact was intended to enable advisers to apply their diagnostic skills to their full advantage when discussing the take up of services (including the 6MO). In Phase 2 districts, extra advisory time was introduced in tandem with the 6MO so that all JSA customers could benefit from regular contact and coaching from an adviser.¹³

Extra meeting time with the same adviser from 26 weeks of a JSA claim was, therefore, a new practice to Jobcentre Plus staff when the 6MO options were introduced. The intention was that information relayed about the 6MO in an initial interview could be followed up and progress

¹² It should be noted that customers in the study were introduced to the 6MO in 2009 and therefore do not necessarily reflect the more recent practices reported by staff in the Jobcentre Plus fieldwork.

¹³ Prior to the introduction of the 6MO in April 2009, only JSA customers aged 18-24 years received extra advisory support from 26 weeks.

monitored at subsequent customer meetings. But practices took some time to bed in as staff familiarised themselves with procedures and addressed high caseloads, staff shortages, and training needs (Knight *et al.*, 2010).

Over the course of the fieldwork, experienced advisers were generally satisfied that they were able to balance their time between initial and subsequent interviews, and across their caseload. Advisers used this time to make referrals to provision, process expense claims, inspect CVs and for general advice and coaching. There was variation in practices among advisers and across study offices but notably, more advisers developed the confidence to apply support time flexibly, according to customers' needs, for example:

'Three hours I think was the advisory support that people get. But also, depending on what's relevant to the person, how often you see them, so yes...I feel I've got quite a lot of flexibility deciding when I should see the person back again basically.'

(Adviser, District code 6)

Second meetings were booked to follow up customers after they had been informed about the 6MO. These typically took place between two and four weeks after the initial meeting and tended to be more systematic. For example, in one office where the initial interview was conducted as a group session, all customers were booked into a second meeting at their next fortnightly signing date. Yet customers' circumstances were taken into account. For instance, if a customer had been referred to provision during the 26-week meeting, one practice was to arrange a follow-up appointment relatively sooner than if they had not received a referral. Alternatively, if a person was scheduled to start a six-week training course, the adviser may not arrange to see them again until the course was completed.

Scheduling of third and subsequent meetings tended to depend more on the customers' circumstances. But there were exceptions to this as some advisers preferred regular meetings, either monthly or fortnightly, in order to monitor progress. Extra time with customers who had more needs was balanced out with devoting less time to those who were judged to be more independent. Some advisers reported that they were in regular contact with only a proportion of the named customers on their caseload.

Another approach to manage a busy appointment diary was to use different modes of communication to reach customers, such as telephone contact, for example:

'I see all of my clients once a month at least, and then some I try to see fortnightly if need be. Some of them, I have to be honest, especially at busy times, I vary the type of contact. I haven't necessarily always done a face-to-face interview...I've tried to vary the type of communication at times, just because of the sheer volume.'

(Adviser, District code 3)

Staff resource was an endemic and fluctuating issue for offices. Managers in all districts reported that continuity of support was disrupted by changing staff levels due to turnover, illness, holidays and training. Furthermore, during the most recent Jobcentre Plus fieldwork, approximately 11 months after the new services were introduced; one Phase 2 office had reported ongoing staff shortages that meant advisers were unable to conduct subsequent customer meetings after a 26-week review.

7.4 Summary

Throughout the first year of implementation, systemic factors had restricted the availability of the full range of 6MO options in some areas of Great Britain. Work focused training and volunteering had been particularly affected. The introduction of the options to customers was also influenced by the degree of experience an adviser had with the interview process, their familiarity with providers and knowledge of provision, as well as adviser personal preferences and strategies.

Procedures mainly reflected the policy design. The general practice was for all six month customers to receive information about the recruitment subsidy, while the remaining options were offered at the adviser's discretion. In areas where there were appropriate courses available, work focused training was the next most popular offer among advisers. Volunteering tended to be associated with customers who were more proactive in community activities, or it was considered appropriate for people who needed work experience and upskilling. Finally, advisers tended to selectively offer self-employment to customers with saleable skills and the confidence to market them.

Customer experiences with the introduction of the 6MO confirm that not all options were raised by their advisers. Yet most were aware of more than one of the opportunities, suggesting they had information on alternatives. It was not uncommon for customers to express an interest or preference for some of the options they were not informed about. Training was most often cited as potentially useful. These findings suggest that the diagnostic approaches applied by advisers to match customers to 6MO options were not necessarily validated as the most effective supports from the customers' perspectives.

8 Employer recruitment subsidy

Through the recruitment subsidy, up to £1,000, is available to employers who recruit individuals who have been claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) for at six or more months¹⁴ into jobs of 16 plus hours that are expected to last for at least 26 weeks. There is a twin track payment system:

a) an individual self-marketing system; and b) bulk billing for employers who are account managed, nationally or in districts, where they are expected to recruit 12 or more people over a 12 month period.¹⁵

This chapter presents findings on Jobcentre Plus staff impressions of the recruitment subsidy and the views and experiences of employers and employees who have used it.¹⁶

8.1 Jobcentre Plus staff views

Generally, advisers were enthusiastic about the recruitment subsidy. The most commonly held view was that the recruitment subsidy offered a ‘good incentive’ to employers and gave job seekers an advantage over other job applicants.

‘We knew it would be an incentive, it’s a very, very big carrot to dangle isn’t it?’

(Adviser, District code 3)

The recruitment subsidy was considered to be most useful for small businesses where the extra cash was more likely to make a difference. Larger organisations were viewed to be less interested in the subsidy. Relative to the turnover in these businesses, the money was thought to have less of an influence and the subsidy would be difficult to incorporate into fair recruitment processes. While most advisers believed that the value of the subsidy plays a positive role in influencing hiring decisions, one manager felt that the money on offer was ‘too small’ to act as an incentive to create a job opening, independent of other hiring criteria.

There were, however, mixed views from staff about the success of the recruitment subsidy. While most thought the subsidy had a good take-up among employers in their area, some staff reported a low take-up or demand had tailed off, and a few said they had received little feedback.

Changes were made in December 2009 to the materials given to customers when they are told about the recruitment subsidy. The new documentation was viewed as an improvement and more straightforward than the previous format. One adviser explained how customers were recommended to attach the new ‘marketing’ letter to their job applications and CVs. In this office the new materials were thought to have improved the use of the subsidy among jobseekers.

¹⁴ In Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) districts, ‘fast-tracked’ customers become eligible for the subsidy earlier in the claim.

¹⁵ The recruitment subsidy was due to end in March 2011. In May 2010 the Government announced the early closure of the recruitment subsidy, for jobs starting after 30 June 2010, as part of the public sector spending cuts.

¹⁶ Employees were not matched to employers so their accounts are independent of one another.

On the whole advisers found that the recruitment subsidy was initially well received by customers. First reactions were reported to be ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘pleased with it’ and ‘quite interested’. But, although most customers at 26 weeks received information about the subsidy, staff were largely unaware of its use or sometimes reported that customers were failing to use it. They suggested that customers may not have understood how to apply the voucher or, more likely, customers were very uncomfortable with the idea of a subsidy and suggested there was a stigma attached to being eligible for one. Advisers commented that several customers expressed concern that the voucher highlighted to potential employers the length of time they had been out of work; others viewed the voucher as a ‘bribe’ and were embarrassed to use it. It was the practice in one office to sell the recruitment subsidy together with Work Trials so that the decision to hire would also be based on the merits of the job applicant. In addition, it was suggested that positive statistics on successful job outcomes associated with the recruitment subsidy would encourage its use among jobseekers.

The recruitment subsidy was seen to work best for customers applying for lower skilled jobs and lower paid work. Several advisers pointed out that it was not being used by professionals and higher earning customers who reasoned that the value of subsidy was too low to be factored into hiring decisions among the employers they were seeking work with.

8.2 Employer views and experiences

Representatives from 40 employers who received the recruitment subsidy were interviewed. All respondents were directly involved with company recruitment; they either owned the business or worked in the company’s human resources or finance departments.¹⁷

The employer sample consisted primarily of smaller businesses with fewer than 50 staff, some of which had fewer than ten staff. But there was also representation from larger companies of 250 or more employees. The sample covered a broad range of business activity: from local and family run small businesses, to charities, public sector services and large, national franchises. Respondents from five of the larger establishments reported membership in a Local Employment Partnership (LEP).

The majority of employers were extremely positive about the recruitment subsidy; claiming they were very happy with the scheme, i.e., ‘no downsides’. Furthermore, most would recommend the subsidy to other businesses and several noted that the money would be especially helpful to smaller firms. A service sector employer with a staff of four was keen to recommend the scheme:

‘I’d definitely tell people about it, it does help, I think, specifically small businesses and things that are struggling.’

(Employer, District code 4)

Employers were usually happy to recruit those who had been out of work for six months or more and claimed they did not view the subsidy as stigmatising, given the weak economy. Moreover, several employers pointed out that the recession had increased the number of high calibre applicants looking for work.

In a few cases, employers declined to recommend the scheme. A couple viewed the subsidy as morally wrong or unfair, describing the extra money as a ‘bribe’ or a ‘sensitive issue’. One large employer reported concern from workplace unions that the subsidy gives an unfair advantage to eligible candidates. Similarly, one small business employer thought the scheme raised a moral issue because the subsidy could cause discrimination against those who are more recently unemployed.

¹⁷ Interviews predated the changes that were made to the materials in December 2009, and so there is no feedback from employers on the reformatted version of the recruitment subsidy.

8.2.1 Marketing and administration

Most employers in the sample had no prior knowledge of the subsidy until they were introduced to it by the employee they hired. In practice, the ‘voucher’ was presented at various stages of the recruitment process, in some cases presented up front attached to the application form or presented during an interview or, in other cases, not mentioned until the candidate had been hired. Some employers received information about the subsidy when they registered a job vacancy with the local jobcentre. Others received information about the scheme in response to a request for information on help available to employers.

The research sample included a small group of employers that had signed the recruitment subsidy terms and conditions for bulk billing, which stipulated they would receive a £1,000 payment for each new hire. This was either via the LEP or directly with Jobcentre Plus. These employers had a named Jobcentre Plus contact who explained the subsidy in detail, for example, ‘[they] *told me everything I needed to know*’. Other forms of marketing included the local press and a Jobcentre Plus jobs fair.

In most cases, employers found the information supplied by Jobcentre Plus to be clear and sufficient. This included the literature attached to the voucher as well as leaflets, brochures and electronic communications. However, a few employers reported confusion over the amount of funding available, the customer groups covered and how to process the subsidy payments. Some employers suggested improvements to marketing. In most cases they wanted more publicity and promotional literature. Elsewhere, respondents asked for clearer differentiation and up-to-date information on the Government initiatives available to support employers.

8.2.2 Supported training

The existence of Government supported training for employees was not well known among the sample. Those who had signed the recruitment subsidy bulk billing terms and conditions were aware, but the majority were not. Of those who were aware, none had pursued it further. However, employers were generally interested to hear more about the funding available for training. Respondents from some of the larger companies pointed out that they already had in-house training facilities and good links with external learning providers, so the additional training information was not relevant. It was also common for smaller businesses to supply in-house training on business practices, as one small business owner explained,

‘...things are just done my way and when they come in, they have to learn how I want things done, so it’s not something I could outsource.’

(Employer, District code 4)

8.2.3 Payment process

Most employers reported no problems or delays with the payment process and found the paperwork straightforward and uncomplicated. Furthermore, employers took a favourable view of the payment structure, regardless of whether they received one initial payment of £1,000 or two staggered payments of £500. The one-off payment received by some of the larger employers was very popular, as one employer commented, ‘*less hassle, you get the payment and that’s it*’. It was also suggested by employers who received two payments that a lump sum would be more preferable.

Some employers reported they had contacted Jobcentre Plus for advice about processing the claim. Some larger employers, who had hired substantial numbers of employees nationally, requested that Jobcentre Plus improve the customer service and administration of the payments. In one extreme case, a public sector employer stopped participating in the scheme after concluding there was too little money on offer, too few eligible applicants and too much paperwork.

8.2.4 Nature of employment

Overall, employers had recruited relatively small numbers of staff via the recruitment subsidy. Most had recruited one employee under the scheme but two of the larger employers reported they had hired significant volumes nationally, 300 to 400 new recruits. In nearly all cases, positions offered were full-time and permanent with only a few jobs offered on a part-time, fixed-term, or temporary basis.

Job vacancies were typically advertised through Jobcentre Plus or in the media. Some were made known through less formal means like word-of-mouth. In one case a volunteer was taken on as a permanent member of staff. Jobs with employers who had signed the bulk billing terms and conditions were advertised, usually with Jobcentre Plus.

Generally employers were very satisfied with their new staff and expected them to remain in the workforce for the foreseeable future. However, in nine cases the subsidised staff had left their new posts. Sometimes this was due to the worker *'not being able to do the job'* but mainly the job loss was due to unsustainable positions. For example, one company had lost a contract and had to impose redundancies even though they were satisfied with the subsidised employee.

8.2.5 Motivation and decision making

The majority of employers in the sample stated that the recruitment subsidy did not influence their hiring decisions, nor did it create a job vacancy. Instead, employees were offered jobs on merit. However, some of this evidence was presented retrospectively as not all employers were aware of the subsidy until they had already offered the applicant a job. Larger employers said they were constrained either by unions or equality and diversity policies which required specific recruitment practices to ensure hiring *'the best person for the job'*. For some employers, specific skills and qualifications were essential, while for others the right experience and character (e.g. ability to work in a team) were a priority, as one small property company director stated:

'I would rather have the best employee than the thousand pounds.'

(Employer, District code 5)

Several employers described the financial support received through the recruitment subsidy as an 'added bonus' rather than an incentive precisely because they would have recruited the staff anyway, or that they only found out about the subsidy after they had hired the 'best candidate'. Larger employers who had signed the bulk billing terms and conditions were attracted by the reliable funding offered by the subsidy. Such employers viewed it as worthwhile to claim funds for employing people they would hire anyway:

'It would be something that we would be able to draw funds for, so it was a straightforward, commercial decision as far as I was concerned.'

(Employer, District code 3)

One larger employer commented that signing up for the subsidy had helped the company meet their social responsibilities towards the long-term unemployed and that this had proved useful when tendering for large recruitment contracts.

Although the subsidy did not play a large part in recruitment, a few employers reported that they were influenced, or would be influenced in the future, by the extra money when hiring. These tended to be small, local and family run businesses. For example, the manager of a family run speciality foods company reported that the subsidy swayed his decision to hire a trainee. In another case, an employer chose to fill a vacancy for a labourer after learning a particular job candidate could be subsidised. Similarly, another employer took on a volunteer worker after learning they qualified for

the recruitment subsidy. Some employers said that if they were presented with two equally qualified candidates then they would hire the candidate eligible for the subsidy, saying *'it would play a part'* or *'it would tip the balance'*.

One group of employers felt that the recruitment subsidy posed potential risks, both to the employer and the employee. If the subsidy encouraged employers to recruit a less than perfect candidate, the main risk to firms would be that start-up costs would not be covered by the value of the subsidy, making it more expensive for the business in the long run. As one employer who ran a small flooring company explained:

'...the hassle involved in having the wrong person far outweighs that, you know, so I think for me personally it [the subsidy] would need to be substantially higher.'

(Employer, District code 6)

Another risk identified for employers related to the investment in specialised training and the concern that an employee with a history of long-term unemployment might not be retained. A few of the respondents suggested that a subsidised trial period of employment to cover the first months' wages would be preferable because it would reduce the risk to the employer. This was seen as particularly attractive to smaller businesses.

A few employers were concerned that the recruitment subsidy could be abused by employers who might create a short-term job vacancy in exchange for the extra money, with no intention of keeping the employee after six months. However, there was no evidence of this sort of activity among the sample.

Value and use of the subsidy

The majority of employers were satisfied with the value of the recruitment subsidy, viewing it as a reasonable amount of money. Views ranged from *'delighted'* and *'worthwhile at any level'* to *'ok'*, *'quite pleased'* and *'adequate'*.

Most felt the amount of money on offer to be the right amount and considered anything less than £1,000 as no longer worthwhile. For example, the owner of a small delivery franchise commented that a lesser amount would not be worth the extra paperwork. The remaining views on the value of money were mixed; the minimum amount that would make the subsidy worthwhile ranged from a maximum of £300 to as little as £100, although a few employers reported that the subsidy was worthwhile at any value. A few larger employers suggested that the subsidy should be raised to over £2,000 *'to make it worthwhile'*.

The larger employers tended to view the money as an additional income stream, with the funds paid into general training and recruitment budgets. But most employers used the additional money to cover wages, recruitment start-up costs or other direct expenses of hiring, such as: uniforms, equipment, holiday pay, National Insurance and taxes. For the smaller businesses, wages were the employers' principal cost, as the director of a small property management firm explained:

'Well it's just given us a cushion, you know, towards paying like I say the employee's tax and National Insurance.'

(Employer, District code 5)

Several employers had earmarked the subsidy to cover the costs of specific training needs which for one tree surgery business were a significant investment for the company. In one case the subsidy allowed a very small business to offer full-time employment to a volunteer and in two other cases the money enabled the employer to either extend the length of the work contract or the weekly hours offered.

8.3 Customer views and experiences

Eight interviews were conducted with working individuals who had been hired with the help of the recruitment subsidy. All were in work at the time of the interview and had been employed for less than six months. All but one respondent had recent employment experience; and most had become unemployed as a direct result of the recession through redundancy, bankruptcy or business failure. Respondents' subsidised posts (part-time or full-time) were in a wide range of occupational fields; in manual, retail, service and technical sectors. Respondents were notified of the job openings either on the internet (Jobcentre Plus or other website) or they were not formally advertised. The latter were found either via personal contacts, making a direct speculative enquiry or in one case, rejoining a family business.

On the whole, customers' views of the scheme were favourable. Most viewed the subsidy as good for employers and several thought it had played a role in securing them employment. A customer who had rejoined the family landscaping business said:

'Well, like I said, it's given me employment, it's given me a wage and I feel like it is a good incentive for employers.'

(Customer, District code 3)

Respondents understood that the subsidy was voluntary and optional and that they were under no obligation to use it. Most respondents recalled how the subsidy had been clearly explained to them and were aware of the different approaches of presenting it to employers. A few said the subsidy had been described as a 'bargaining tool' by their Jobcentre Plus adviser.

Despite a general understanding of how to market the subsidy to employers, not all respondents in the sample had broached the topic to their employer during the recruitment process. Although one person had forgotten about the subsidy until they signed off at the Jobcentre Plus office, the remaining individuals either applied the subsidy to their job search to varying degrees or they used a more cautious approach. Of the first group, a few customers reported they had mentioned the voucher on job applications or introduced it at the job interview. One jobseeker was extremely proactive in establishing contact with prospective employers, and used multiple copies of the voucher when visiting local employers. She eventually found work at a local bar and felt that the recruitment subsidy helped to convince the manager to take her on:

'The only chance I'm ever gonna get of getting this job is if I get my foot in the door before anyone else.'

(Customer, District code 8)

In other cases, jobseekers were more reluctant to inform the employer about the subsidy. For example, one person who was looking for work in construction chose not to mention the subsidy because he wished to be hired on his own merits. He was also concerned that the recruitment subsidy labelled him as long-term unemployed and that prospective employers would question his fitness for work. He eventually found a position in telemarketing and first arranged a Work Trial. He felt it was important to build familiarity before mentioning the recruitment subsidy.

In another case, a respondent who was seeking work as a lab technician stated he 'casually' introduced the subsidy towards the end of the job interview:

'It was done quite casually actually I think. They just asked what my background was, what I'd been doing, etc. and I said that I'd been unemployed for a, a period of time and I said one of the perks of that was the fact that there is a [subsidy]...it was taken sort of amusingly and light heartedly.'

(Respondent, District code 8)

This respondent said he used this approach because he was uncertain how the employer would react to the subsidy and felt that other criteria would be more important in the hiring decision:

'Again I think if I was a prospective employer, I think I would be more concerned about the abilities and attitude really...rather than a sort of a cash up front incentive...a thousand pounds is a lot of money, but it's not a lot of money in the great scheme of things.'

(Respondent, District code 8)

Those jobseekers who approached employers with the subsidy reported the employers were mainly enthusiastic and had no previous information about the scheme. The majority of customers were hired by small businesses and the additional funding was viewed very favourably. Respondents were split on their views about whether the subsidy had played a role in securing work. Among those where it was felt the subsidy did make a difference, it was reported that the money was used to subsidise wages in a family business and, as reported above, created a job.

Customers' feelings about their current work were evenly split between those who felt *'happy'* and *'settled'* and those who considered their new job as a *'stop-gap'* before gaining more suitable employment. The majority of customers received some training in their new jobs, usually described as *'on-the-job'* or *'induction'* training.

8.4 Summary

The widespread view among all those involved with the recruitment subsidy was that it was a valuable initiative. Employers were the most enthusiastic and smaller businesses in particular were pleased with the extra funding which was used primarily to cover wages and the start-up costs of recruitment. Jobcentre Plus staff were also very positive about the subsidy but had mixed views about its success in getting people back to work. Staff reported low interest among certain groups of customers stating that professionals and higher earners were generally embarrassed to use the voucher and dismissed the amount of money as providing little incentive to the employers they were targeting. Customers in the study had mixed views on the subsidy but on balance their opinions were largely favourable. They had promoted the subsidy to varying degrees during the job search, reflecting their level of comfort with marketing their skills alongside a cash incentive.

Despite the recruitment subsidy being presented as a bargaining tool to customers, most employers stated they were not influenced by the subsidy when hiring staff. Employers stressed the importance of choosing the best person for the job. There was some evidence to suggest the subsidy played a role in job sustainability among small businesses that had used the money to increase working hours or to extend the lengths and types of contracts. Several employers also recognised that the subsidy could *'tip the balance'* when choosing between two equally qualified candidates and some customers in the sample believed the subsidy had played an important role in being hired.

Promotion of the recruitment subsidy to smaller businesses could have been improved. While the majority of the large employers had been contacted directly by Jobcentre Plus, the majority of smaller businesses did not hear about the subsidy until the topic was raised by a job applicant. Awareness of the additional Government training support on offer was equally low among the smaller businesses.

Employer experiences of using the voucher to submit a claim were generally positive. On the whole employers were satisfied with their new staff and the value of the subsidy was viewed as generous by most. Even at a reduced level, several employers thought the funding would still be worthwhile.

Overall employers were attracted by the extra financial support; they found the paperwork straightforward and the payments efficiently administered. The recruitment subsidy was seen to be best suited for smaller businesses and for customers seeking low paid work.

9 Work focused training

The Six Month Offer (6MO) work focused training option offers upskilling or reskilling opportunities to help improve customers' chances in the local labour market. There are some differences in the support offered in England, Scotland and Wales.

This chapter presents the perspectives of Jobcentre Plus staff and customers on the option. The research did not include the experiences of training providers, which are the focus of a separate evaluation.¹⁸

9.1 Delivery structures

The work focused training strand was slow to be introduced in some Jobcentre Plus districts. It was one of the last 6MO services to be implemented, partly due to compressed timescales and delays in finalising contracts between training authorities and learning providers, as noted by Jobcentre Plus staff. At the time of wave 3 fieldwork in March 2010, the 6MO training option had been effectively implemented in most study districts. In Scotland, existing provision was rebranded as work focused training and is being offered from 13 weeks of a claim, and even earlier in some special cases. In Wales, specific funding for training was not issued until later in the fieldwork period which restricted learning opportunities to other sources of local provision.

There was substantial variation between the districts concerning the range of courses available under the 6MO, reflecting the fact that provision was negotiated locally between learning providers and Jobcentre Plus and was intended to reflect employer demand for skills at the local level. For example, training was available in retail, caring, security, IT skills, construction equipment, welding, hairdressing, health and safety, first aid, and food safety.

Generally, advisers who were knowledgeable about the option and familiar with what was available from contracted learning providers felt most confident promoting the offer. Most districts engaged with a number of training providers, and the customer's choice of training course usually determined which provider was contacted. In other cases, the referral was dictated, along with course availability, by the location of the provider and ease of access in terms of travel time and costs. Some offices had resorted to referring customers to alternative, non-contracted provision or, in one office, local authority led employment services because of poor proximity to relevant 6MO courses.

9.1.1 Referral process

Once a customer had decided to take up work focused training, the adviser would either discuss the courses available or immediately refer them to a training provider. Communication of a referral typically took place by telephone. After a referral, the training provider was required to contact the customer, usually by telephone, from which point the customer would be offered a one-to-one advisory session or a group session where the training options would be discussed in more detail. In practice, the referral process was characterised by delays in initial contact with learning provider staff, long waiting times for course starts and poor communication with providers.

In offices where the work focused training was available, the referral process was marked by delays that varied in length but were substantial enough to be of concern to advisers. In some offices advisers reported that it was difficult to reach the learning provider by telephone. This meant that

¹⁸ Refer to Learning and Skills Council publications (2009, 2010) for details on the evaluation of training providers.

customers' details had to be posted and individual advisers had to spend additional time chasing up the referral. Staff also said that some customers were waiting up to a month for their initial meeting, after which they experienced a further waiting period for the course to start. In some districts, courses were over-subscribed and customers interested in the course were being put on a waiting list. In other instances, customers had to wait for colleges to fill their student quotas before starting a course. In both cases this meant that some customers were waiting for months before starting their chosen course. This scenario was relayed by one manager:

'The work focused training hasn't been quite so successful. It's great when you look at the package that's on offer. There's a lot of things that people want on the list that we've got from our contractor. The problem that we've had with it is that the courses are just filling up so quickly and all we're doing is putting people on waiting lists and things.'

(Manager, District code 4)

In some districts the referral rate was relatively low. This was particularly true for the Scottish study district where staff expressed concern, attributing this to a general lack of provision and travel distances in rural areas. In other districts, there were very high referral rates but very low start rates. Some advisers were of the opinion that, due to the delays, customers were disengaging from the process, resulting in high fail to attend (FTA) rates in some districts. Reported estimates of FTA rates in the study districts ranged between 20 and 70 per cent.

9.2 Jobcentre Plus staff perspectives

Work focused training received mixed reviews from staff. In some study offices it was regarded as a popular option that was useful for a large part of the caseload. Advisers mentioned this option of upskilling or reskilling as a useful starting point, particularly in the current economic climate with the resultant high rate of redundancies. Some advisers thought that the training option had numerous benefits, apart from skills qualifications, and felt strongly that participating in training was helpful in keeping customers busy and in building confidence:

'It's great because they've never been to any training programmes before and they feel like they're doing something, they feel like they're kind of having an activity to take up their day.'

(Adviser, District code 5)

Overall, most staff thought that customers were very receptive to the training offer and despite the delays and waiting times most of the feedback they had received was positive. But staff had little knowledge of job outcomes as they tended to hear from customers only if there were problems with the training. The lack of information on job outcomes may also reflect the process as advisers would not hear from customers who are no longer claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

While some advisers were positive about the quality of training, they also felt that the available courses were too basic and the offer was limited in terms of the qualifications that customers could acquire. Overwhelmingly, advisers were of the opinion that courses that offer qualifications beyond NVQ Level 1 should be available and that there was a need for 'higher level' courses for graduates and skilled trades people. Some advisers also thought that training should be made available earlier, particularly for customers who, from the outset, were enthusiastic about learning.

While advisers felt that the training option was useful for most customer groups, age was considered to be a barrier, with young people more enthusiastic to take up training and the 50 plus age group most hesitant about participating in learning. One adviser mentioned that offering this training option to a professional was 'embarrassing' and that instead, at the 26-week stage, this

group of customers would benefit from more support in managing their expectations and adjusting their employment-related aspirations, specifically in relation to the types of jobs advertised through Jobcentre Plus offices.

One of the key concerns raised by staff was the cost of transport to attend courses. Among the study districts, only one training provider covered travel costs for customers and Jobcentre Plus staff were unable to offer financial support for transport. Travel distances were acutely problematic for customers resident in rural locations and advisers mentioned the difficulties some customers experienced in reaching their training locations. In order to address this issue some advisers were referring their customers in rural areas to local European Social Fund training.

9.3 Customer perspectives

Eight customers who had taken up work focused training were interviewed. All resided in England.¹⁹ Employment histories were diverse and included: labourers, trades people, engineering and caring. Some found that their skills had become obsolete and as the economic climate changed, all had been made redundant from their previous jobs. The weak economy was cited as a key obstacle to finding work and those who claimed that their skills were obsolete understood that they needed to find new avenues of work. Two customers of minority ethnic origin believed that their ethnic or racial background constituted a barrier to finding work.

All respondents recalled having a discussion about the training and in some cases this was instigated by the customer. Training was the preferred option of most of the customers who were interviewed. They were keen to take positive steps to improve their employment chances, rather than just waiting for a job to come along and for the recession to pass. Courses taken were diverse: computer skills and security training were the most common, followed by training in technical trades.

Most customers reported the decision to pursue training was entirely their own, as was the choice of course. Some were well organised and proactive, attending their 26-week review meeting with all the information needed to take the next step:

'I chose the specific course, I had the option what to do, what course I would like to choose.'

(Customer, District code 8)

In some instances customers' experience of choosing training represented a more collaborative approach. In such cases Jobcentre Plus advisers were supportive and involved with training emerging as an option after some discussion about a customer's employment history, job search activities and employment-related aspirations.

There was evidence that some customers were pushed in a certain direction against their wishes and a few felt cajoled into taking courses in which they had no interest, one of whom was threatened with benefit withdrawal. In one instance, a customer with a background in computer engineering said he was pushed by his adviser to take a basic course in computer applications:

'Well I did ask her and she says what the course is all about to be able to use the computer, to be able to go onto the Internet, create your CV, PowerPoint. But at the time I said to her, "All of it I know"...and she said, "Well this is what is on offer, if you don't take it then they will take you off the benefits."'

(Customer, District code 7)

¹⁹ At the time of the research, a sample of customers in work focused training was not available in Scotland or Wales.

Customers' views on the training were generally positive, but they ranged from *'happy/satisfied'* to *'a waste of time'*. On the positive side, customers praised the course content and said they found the instructors professional and very helpful. Those who found the training to be helpful intended to put it to use: noting it on a CV, applying for related jobs or using the training to pursue self-employment. These positive views contrasted with the more negative comments on course facilities and the standard of teaching. In other cases, courses were viewed as *'too basic'* or unsuitable. For example, one customer, who participated in security training, felt the course was pitched at people with very little command of English. A few customers also felt that training should have been available earlier in their JSA claim.

Given the mixed perceptions on the training received, customers' views on the value of the training for their job search were inconsistent. A few agreed that the course would have a positive effect on subsequent job prospects, particularly if they earned a qualification or trade certificate. One individual who found unrelated work still felt that the training had *'opened up possibilities'*.

Other customers were a little more circumspect about the usefulness of the training. One person pointed out that a lack of job experience in the field of training detracted from his chances of finding relevant work. For some the type of qualification achieved was inadequate to make a difference and not sufficiently advanced. This was the experience for one customer who had taken a course in basic computer skills who observed,

'...I know as much now as when I went in there. No, I gained nothing from it, to be honest, nothing.'

(Customer, District code 8)

9.4 Summary

Over a protracted implementation period, work focused training was operational in most of the study districts by the time of the March 2010 fieldwork. Slower to be introduced in Wales, funding for the option was more recently released by the Welsh Government so it may be some time before a complete service is available to customers. In Scotland, existing provision has been rebranded as work focused training and is being offered from 13 weeks of a claim, or earlier in some special cases.

Despite the implementation challenges, work focused training was a popular option among staff and customers. Training customers reported mixed reviews based on their experience. Those who found the training to be helpful intended to put it to use: noting it on a CV, applying for related jobs or using the training to pursue self-employment. Negative feedback related to course start delays and the perception that course content was too basic for higher skilled individuals.

In study districts where providers were offering a range of training options, Jobcentre Plus staff generally felt the option was useful for a large part of the caseload and noted that most customers were receptive to the offer. Anecdotal feedback from customers was mainly positive but staff were unaware of job outcomes. However, due to course start delays, some staff had resorted to referring customers to training offered by non-contracted local providers and local authority led services. The location of learning providers, particularly in rural areas, and transport costs were cited as key barriers to accessing training and some staff were frustrated that they were unable to provide financial support to cover customers' travel. Suggestions for a wider range of training subjects, advanced courses and credits leading to higher qualification levels were put forth by staff and customers.

10 Volunteering

This chapter examines the Six Month Offer (6MO) volunteering option. The first section describes how the option was being delivered. This is followed by a discussion on the views of Jobcentre Plus staff, volunteer brokers and customers who took up the option.

10.1 Delivery structures

The network of providers who brokered 6MO volunteer placements was organised in a multi-tiered system. In each of England, Scotland and Wales, a major volunteering organisation had been appointed as a prime contractor with overall responsibility for the service. In England, the prime contractor had delegated responsibility to four regional subcontractors who, in turn, subcontracted to a range of local providers – volunteer centres and other voluntary organisations – to deliver the service to Jobcentre Plus customers. The prime contractors in Scotland and Wales had subcontracted directly to volunteer centres, some of which were delivering the service themselves while others were engaging local third-sector organisations to do so.

Most local brokers had started to supply the service between April and July 2009. Some had started as late as August 2009, due to unclear contract specifications and slow information dissemination. These brokers tended to be small organisations with one or two members of staff – themselves volunteers in some cases. Most had had previous experience of working with Jobcentre Plus either formally, through labour market programmes, or less formally through individual advisers. Generally the 6MO brokering was the same service that was available to the wider public.

Customers who took up the volunteering option were granted a ‘broker interview’, usually conducted face-to-face by a local provider, who then tried to arrange a suitable placement. Following the interview, the customer would be provided with a list of opportunities to consider. The customer would then indicate their choices to the provider, who would make the referral to the placement organisation.

Some providers had developed sophisticated IT systems that allowed automatic matching of skills with a database of available volunteering opportunities. Customers were matched according to their skills profiles and, in some cases, with external training providers when further training was required.

Securing a sufficient supply of placements was managed locally and for this reason it was necessary for brokers to maintain close links with the local community. The quality of the placements was usually assessed locally too. Providers were governed by strict health and safety policies which required them to personally ensure that all placements met standardised criteria.

All placement opportunities were arranged with community and voluntary organisations. In general, brokers did not maintain ties with commercial organisations, because they believed that this could lead to a volunteer being used to fill what would otherwise be a paid job.

The duration of the placements varied considerably and there seemed to be different understandings among the brokers of what the 6MO volunteering entailed. One organisation offered extremely short-term placements (two hours long) that required no training and tended to have a high take-up and completion rate. Other organisations offered placements over several weeks or even months, depending on the customer and the placement opportunities available. The two-hour placements had the advantage that they did not require a CRB check or extensive training and could, therefore, be arranged quickly.

10.1.1 Referral process

Referrals were typically arranged by the Jobcentre Plus adviser over the telephone in the presence of the customer. Sometimes the customer would have a short chat with the broker so an initial assessment could be made. In some areas, administration procedures were more complex and required an extra level of referral: advisers would contact a central telephone hotline, after which the customer would be referred to a local brokering organisation.

The volume of referrals varied significantly between study offices. In some cases this was due to quotas that were placed on referrals. In one Jobcentre Plus office, managers and advisers commented that the funding for the volunteering option did not allow the local broker – which served two large Jobcentre Plus offices – to take more than eight referrals per week. In another district, the local broker had stopped taking referrals all together because they could not cope with the volumes. Differences in referral rates were also attributed by brokers to differences in adviser awareness about their services. In addition, Jobcentre Plus staff recruitment (and turnover) had resulted in relatively high ratio of inexperienced staff.

10.2 Jobcentre Plus staff perspectives

Although advisers across the districts saw the benefits of the volunteering option, many sympathised with customers who did not wish to ‘work for nothing’. There was a common view held by advisers that volunteering was the last possible option for customers to do something positive about their situation and was perhaps more appropriate for customers who needed work experience, as one manager noted:

‘If we’ve tried other things and it’s not helping and they’re not finding work, then volunteering is a way...so if there’s nothing else available or if they’ve got that gap at the beginning, then we’re making these referrals.’

(Manager, District code 9)

Some advisers lamented that the number and variety of placements was insufficient. It was noted that placements for customers in rural areas were limited and some brokers specialised in one particular type of placement (for instance, outdoor activities). A larger concern was the number of customers who were placed in third-sector and community organisations. This outcome was at odds with some advisers’ perceptions of 6MO volunteering as a work experience or an ‘internship’, which was not necessarily expected to be with a charity, as one adviser explained:

‘I’m quite keen on getting...people...into something on a voluntary basis. Now that doesn’t necessarily mean doing charity work, so if I think something’s useful to them and there might be a position available to volunteer to do something on a kind of internship basis...then I’ll encourage them to do so.’

(Adviser, District code 5)

Contrary to this view, one manager stated that the main aim of the volunteering option was to place customers in ‘*third-sector organisations, the charities, or your bog-standard normal type of volunteering*’ and only occasionally in other settings.

Advisers had received varying amounts of feedback from customers who had been referred to a volunteering broker, and they were often unaware of how many had started a placement. In the few instances where advisers were aware of these outcomes, customers had reported positive experiences and these included examples of people who had obtained jobs with their placement organisation.

10.3 Broker views and experiences

Sixteen telephone interviews were conducted with brokers of 6MO volunteering, at the national, regional and local levels.

Brokers experienced fluctuating demand for volunteer placements. Some felt their services were underutilised while others had struggled to keep up with the demand. Most, however, noted that referral levels had steadied over time and some brokers that had had a slow start were building to expected levels of placements. Still, some organisations reported that they were already close to reaching their two-year quotas within the first year of the contract.

Generally, there was a view that once a customer had started a placement they were fairly committed to what they were doing and the system worked well.

However, the quality and appropriateness of referrals were a major concern raised at all levels of brokerage. National conversion rates from referral into a placement start were low (between 15 and 20 per cent of referrals). The main issue for local brokers was the high number of customers referred who appeared to lack a genuine interest in volunteering. Common among these customers was the perception that their benefits would be affected if they did not take up the volunteering opportunity. For example:

'We find some people even though they are referred by the jobcentre, they're not actually as committed to voluntary work as what we'd like because sometimes they feel that if they don't attend, or if they don't pursue voluntary work that they're going to perhaps put their benefit in jeopardy. But, you know, sometimes they're not quite as committed as what perhaps they could be or should be.'

(Volunteer broker, District code 3)

In addition, capabilities differed widely among referred customers, from highly qualified and motivated professionals to long-term unemployed people with low skills profiles who sometimes also battled with various illnesses. For some of these customers it was difficult to secure placements and this was partly due to false expectations or substantial support requirements. In addition, funds were not available to cover travel expenses and this posed a barrier to some potential volunteers.

Overall, it was the lack of appropriate referrals that was seen to place a strain on broker resource. Some local providers felt that there was a conflict between their service delivery approach, which was process-focused, and the service targets and payment system, which centred on achieving placements. The payment system did not take into account the time needed to seek out specialist placements or the need for customer training and timescales of CRB checks, or, more generally, time invested in a client that did not result in a placement. Some brokers suggested that for each customer there should be an additional payment, made in advance, to cover extra costs such as 6MO client training or travel expenses.

Inappropriate referrals which resulted in unfulfilled expectations in the host agency (for example, cases where opportunities were not followed up or where arranged placements were short lived due to a lack of interest/commitment or a conflict with employment) were also viewed as bad publicity for the broker in the community. Although most were positive about the involvement of the voluntary sector in the 6MO, a few brokers were doubtful about the suitability of short-term volunteering as a means to build work-related experience. As one broker explained, an attitude like *'it's only two hours, how wrong can it go?'* could pose a high risk to a broker's credibility in the local community.

10.4 Customer views and experiences

Eight customers in the 6MO volunteering option were interviewed. Customer backgrounds varied considerably: professionals, lone mothers who had transferred onto Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and customers who were close to retirement age. Some experienced health and educational barriers to employment. Placements taken up by customers were all in the third sector and included working in a charity shop, administrative work, and maintenance. The latter position had been arranged by the customer without the help of a broker.

10.4.1 Motivation for volunteering

Customers went into placements with a generally positive attitude and the expectation of a worthwhile activity. Many saw volunteering as a way to improve their employability. Reasons given for taking up the offer included a lack of previous work experience or a long gap since their last employment, a desire to explore new career options, and previous volunteering experience.

Some customers did not recall having been offered a choice of options at the initial 26-week interview. There were a few cases (found in both Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) Phase 1 and Phase 2 districts) where customers reported that they had felt pressured or compelled by their Jobcentre Plus adviser to take up the volunteering option. One customer, an unskilled worker close to retirement age, highlighted how he feared being sanctioned if he did not take up volunteering, stating '*...if I didn't do it, me money would have been dropped*'. This customer, as opposed to others who indicated that taking up the volunteering option was their decision, felt pressured by the adviser:

'By kicking on to me all the time you know, every time, "have you got a job yet?" Just pushing me. And I just had enough and I said "well I'll do voluntary work then for you to come off my back", and that's what I did.'

(Customer, District code 8)

Another customer who, again, was approaching retirement age and was looking for clerical work, was generally happy with the level of services provided by Jobcentre Plus but felt forced into taking up the volunteering option:

'It was basically a case of you must do...Don't get me wrong, everyone that I've dealt with down there has been absolutely fantastic. It's not the people, it's the system, and it is very much "You must do". There is no choice in it, there is no individuality.'

(Customer, District code 6)

These accounts mirrored the experience of local volunteering brokers who reported instances where customers had been made to feel that the volunteering option was a mandatory activity.

10.4.2 Experiences of volunteering

Feedback from customers about their placements was mixed. For the most part, their expectations and experiences of the volunteering option were influenced by their personal backgrounds. Some commented on the overall sense of well-being the placement created as a constructive way of occupying their time, as one customer explained: '*...it's like you get up in the morning, it's like you are in a job, you know*'. In addition to the opportunity to '*get out the house*', customers also valued the skills they obtained.

However, not all customers were entirely positive about their placements. These included people with barriers to work, like learning difficulties, and customers from a professional background.

Those facing additional barriers sometimes mentioned a lack of support from the placement broker, such as a lack of training and negative experiences with other staff members at the placement organisation. One person who had volunteered at a charity shop felt that she was required to learn too much, too fast and could not cope with the intensity of the placement:

'[I] just wanted to do some work, meet customers, you know. I didn't want to get anything out of it, didn't go in far that, no.'

(Customer, District code 8)

As a result, the customer left the placement after a few days.

The customers from professional backgrounds indicated they lost motivation in their placement, due to a lack of challenge. One customer, who had been made redundant from a managerial job and was considering a career change into writing or editing, was assigned to a placement doing data entry at the broker organisation. He said he felt he was being exploited:

'They didn't seem to really put any effort into looking for any external opportunities so I kind of got the impression after a while that I was kind of free admin for the volunteer centre.'

(Customer, District code 7)

In terms of work-related experience, some customers said they had entered their volunteering placement on their CV, or had selectively referred to certain tasks they had performed because they felt that the placement itself would not substantially improve their CV and chances of employment. At the time of the interview, few customers were still actively volunteering. Some had left altogether due to employment or reaching State Pension age while another was waiting to hear word of a second placement. One customer was disappointed that she had to abandon her volunteer placement doing charity work which she *'thoroughly enjoyed'*, when she started the Flexible New Deal (FND). This was because the timing of the placement clashed with programme activities.

10.5 Summary

Overall, Jobcentre Plus staff and brokers felt that, after initial teething problems, the provision and processes of the volunteering option had bedded in. Referral procedures and co-operation between the brokers and Jobcentre Plus office staff were described as good. Yet the study revealed a mismatch of understanding between the volunteering brokers and Jobcentre Plus advisers about the purpose and scope of volunteering. The data also suggest that the 6MO volunteering option was not implemented as the policy had intended.

Jobcentre Plus staff were generally positive about the benefits of volunteering and considered the option as an excellent tool to help a customer to improve their employability, particularly for those who lacked recent work experience. However, there were some critical voices that sympathised with customers who viewed volunteering as *'working for nothing'*. Advisers were generally unaware of the outcomes of their referrals and whether customers had started placements.

The up-take of the volunteering option varied greatly among the study offices. This was partly related to the limited availability of placements in some locations. The volunteering experiences of customers in the study varied greatly, with some indicating gains in self-confidence and skills, while others reported few tangible benefits from the experience. Some customers reported feeling pressured or compelled into volunteering under the threat of losing their benefits. People with substantial barriers to work and those from a professional background were less satisfied with their placements, citing that their needs or interests were not catered for. These experiences reflected negatively in their views about the usefulness of the 6MO option for enhancing their employability.

Inappropriate referrals were the biggest concern among broker organisations. Customers whom brokers regarded as unsuitable for volunteering (those with low or no skills, those with multiple barriers to work, and those lacking motivation) were viewed by Jobcentre Plus staff as a prime target group for the volunteering option. Brokers identified a number of factors that posed as challenges to achieving placements, including managing customer expectations, the availability and accessibility of placements, reimbursement of transport costs, availability of training, timescales of CRB checks, and customers starting work. In particular, they felt that Jobcentre Plus advisers needed to make it absolutely clear to customers that taking part in the voluntary option was truly voluntary and that non-participation would not have an impact on their benefits. There was a concern for brokers at all levels that the development of placement opportunities was not included in the contracted provision, and the resource invested in setting up a placement was not financially remunerated, thus placing a large burden on local providers.

11 Support for self-employment

Customers who are interested in self-employment can receive information, advice and practical support on becoming self-employed from specialist providers. These comprise Business Link (in England), Business Gateway/Training for Work (in Scotland) and Flexible Support for Business (in Wales). Customers moving into self-employment can also receive a Self-Employment Credit (SEC) worth £50 per week for the first 16 weeks of trading.

This chapter examines the self-employment offer. It begins by setting out the delivery structure and referral processes, followed by a discussion of the views and experiences reported by Jobcentre Plus staff, self-employment service providers and, finally, customers.

11.1 Delivery structures

Self-employment support is delivered through large delivery networks of providers and the organisation of the service differs across the three countries. National level contracts are subcontracted at the regional and sub-regional levels. In Scotland, the service is managed by local authorities. In Wales, customers are centrally screened at the national level then referred to a local service. In Wales, many providers also offer the pre-start business support under the Welsh Assembly Government's Inclusion Programme. England has a hybrid funding model with added support from the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) which in turn oversee the suppliers (e.g., in the London RDA there are 39 local delivery partners). The exact nature of services vary from country to country and can also vary within countries, by provider. For example, within England, individual RDAs may offer different services.

England operates a two-stage process: the core service consists of a central gateway call centre which operates a telephone diagnostic screening process. From there, a customer is offered a small taster workshop. If they choose to proceed with the service they are referred to an intensive support programme consisting of two elements: enterprise coaching and intensive start-up support. On-going support is available for customers who have started trading.

A referral is followed by a diagnosis of customer need. In all countries, the typical service model consists of core and enhanced services for 6MO customers. Core services are intended to provide an introduction to self-employment and are delivered through workshops, website access and printed materials. If a customer wishes to pursue the option further, various workshop or business start-up course modules are available. These cover a business start-up introduction, self-marketing, financial planning and legal aspects. Provision is also available to help identify and overcome barriers such as confidence and basic skills. The enhanced service is intended to support a customer to start a business, offering tailored help that may include coaching, mentoring and one-to-one advice. A diverse range of services is intended to cater for all needs including: start-up advice, business mentoring, training, one-to-one coaching, telephone advice, access to website information and printed materials. To respond to additional customer needs, providers also make referrals or signpost to other support organisations or college training. Providers may also lend support to existing businesses to help them grow to potential.

Self-employment support services were also available to the general public and the 6MO support is very similar in content. The difference lies in the client group, as one provider explained:

'Effectively we're not doing anything radical here, we're basically delivering the support that Business Link's been delivering to clients for quite a long time, so there's nothing particularly innovative about this approach, the only real difference is the particular focus on the unemployed client group.'

(Provider of self-employment support)

Providers offer inclusive services to address equality and diversity, ensuring programmes meet needs of people with physical disabilities and visual impairments and from different community backgrounds.

11.1.1 Referral process

Customers are referred to self-employment support through a Jobcentre Plus personal adviser. A preliminary telephone call to a provider is used to register customer interest. This can be followed by a 'warm handover' in which the adviser passes the phone to the customer who can speak directly with the provider to possibly arrange an appointment. Alternatively a customer is signposted and responsible for initiating contact with the provider.

Due to different service structures, variations occur by country. For instance, in England, an initial regional level contact refers customers to the provider nominated to deliver services in that region or sub-region. In Wales, one local provider described a three tier referral process where the customer communicated with the national contact who passed on to a regional contact who then passed on to the local provider.

During the earlier implementation research, Jobcentre Plus staff reported that customers were mostly expected to contact the provider themselves rather than being referred directly by an adviser. Advisers did not necessarily know if contact had been made and offices were using staff resources to follow up customers to find out if they had contacted the provider. Consequently, some offices were recording very few starts. Issues were largely resolved over time. By the time of the most recent fieldwork, in March 2010, the practice in many offices had shifted to one where the adviser initiated a referral during a customer meeting and with the customer present.

The referral process was largely perceived by staff as straightforward. It was felt that a 'warm handover' by telephone, with the customer present, reduced service delays and ensured that the referral took place. The main disadvantage of making contact during the interview was that time was squeezed, preventing the discussion of other issues or presentation of other offers that may also be of interest. From the customer's perspective, referral during the six-month interview seemed to be favoured. For example, one customer described an efficient turn around of services:

'Spoke to the [provider] themselves. The [provider] then rang me...it was good...it was pretty quick. They booked me on the first available course so it was good.'

(Customer, District code 9)

In contrast, when it was left to the customer to initiate contact, individuals would have appreciated more guidance,

'They [Jobcentre Plus adviser] just give you the telephone number or the website and you're just meant to get on with it really and that's it, there's nothing to it. They don't give you anything else.'

(Customer, District code 7)

11.2 Jobcentre Plus staff views

The uptake of the self-employment option was quite variable across the districts and offices. Some Jobcentre Plus staff described it as a very popular, widely used option, while others suggested that the numbers taking advantage of self-employment provision were few. Advisers specialising in 18-24 year old customers did not encounter much interest in the self-employment option.

The popularity of self-employment in some offices does not reflect a surge in entrepreneurial spirit, however. Instead, according to advisers, pursuit of the option was often a constrained decision or an act of 'desperation' in the face of few alternatives and not always fully thought through, as one manager noted:

'We get quite a lot of interest in the self-employment option at the moment. I suppose that's almost symptomatic of the recession and people not being able to find work themselves.'

(Manager, District code 8)

There was also the view among some Jobcentre Plus staff that entry into self-employment after a claim of six or more months was effectively legitimising work that customers were already doing 'on the side'.

11.2.1 Staff views of SEC

If a customer decides to sign off Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and set up trading they can receive a transitional fund of SEC at £50 per week for 16 weeks. A follow-up interview to ensure all is well and the customer is still trading is then organised by the adviser, normally after 12 weeks. If the business is not doing well the customer has the option of ceasing self-employment and reclaiming JSA, in which case a 'rapid reclaim' would be initiated.

The majority of Jobcentre Plus staff perceived the credit as a transitional payment which was treated by most customers as a bonus or a safety net, helpful during the early months of business start-up. One adviser described how customers appreciated the temporary support:

'A lot of my clients have said it's been a weight off their mind, because they've been thinking, "I need to start, I'm worried. Until I start making money, how am I going to cope, how am I going to manage?" So it's been a really, really good tool for them...they've all been very grateful about the financial support that's been there for going self-employed.'

(Adviser, District code 3)

A few advisers expressed the view that the credit was not enough of an incentive and that the transitional arrangement was quite a risk as customers receive a lower weekly benefit and quickly lose their housing benefit entitlements also. It was a challenge for businesses that were starting up on a small scale, with an uncertain revenue stream, as noted by one adviser:

'You tend to find that because the Self-Employed Credit is kind of £50 a week for 16 weeks okay, it's more helpful to people that don't have to worry about things like rent and council tax and stuff like that. Because, if you've got rent and housing and stuff like that to pay for, the £50 a week isn't really going to cover it basically.'

(Adviser, District code 7)

11.3 Self-employment providers

Twenty-six telephone interviews were conducted with providers (national, regional, local) of self-employment support.

Perceptions about the volume of referrals were mixed, varying by region and position in the chain of services. It was reported that the numbers of 6MO clients who opted for the more intensive support were lower than expected, so these providers were underutilised. There were also a high number of enquiries that did not take up services and high fail to attend (FTA) rates for services. One provider reported that attendance at information workshops, for example, was typically 60 per cent of those registered. Estimates of the percentage of clients who received support and then went on to start trading were relatively low; between two and 7.5 per cent was suggested. Other providers said it was too early to tell.

The quality and appropriateness of referrals was commonly raised as an issue. Providers suggested that only a minority of customers were serious about self-employment; most were merely exploring it as a possible route into work and did not have any business idea or inclinations towards becoming self-employed. There was the general view that 6MO customers lacked an 'entrepreneurial spirit'.

The root of the problem was felt to be a lack of awareness among Jobcentre Plus advisers about the service process and poor communication of the service to customers. (See Chapter 3.) Providers also felt that some customers were misinformed about what the provider could do, expecting, for example, cash loans or advice about benefits. Alternatively, it was reported that some customers were not aware why they had been referred for self-employment support or they were only seeking the support out of fear of losing their benefit. The perception from one provider was that some enquiries were '*just to keep their job advisers off their backs...rather than it's something they want to do*'.

6MO customers were generally seen to be of a lower calibre and at an earlier stage in the journey toward self-employment, compared to other clients. One provider estimated it would take 12-18 months for someone like this to have the capacity to start a business. Therefore the timescale of the 6MO programme was perceived as unrealistic:

'Customers are very much at the point of exploring an idea as a route out of unemployment, that these claimants require quite a lot of intervention and quite time bound intervention, and early on in the journey.'

(Provider of self-employment support)

The main issues raised by providers as obstacles to their 6MO clients related to capacity and resources: a lack of confidence; low level skills; a lack of managerial skills; the added risk of the recession; and a lack of information and access to start-up financing. A lack of funding was considered to be a major barrier to people attempting to start a business. One provider identified two types of customers: those who have been out of work for six months who tend to be more serious about self-employment, if only as an employment option, and; the long-term unemployed who were difficult to deal with and required extra support. Providers felt that unanticipated numbers of their 6MO clients were '*unsustainable*' or not '*enterprise ready*'. For example:

'They're not aware of the financial needs to start a business, the additional skills required and some have not actually got an idea to market either.'

(Provider of self-employment support)

11.4 Customer views and experiences

The eight customer interviewees who chose to embark on self-employment were highly diverse in terms of job history, educational attainment and skills. The occupational backgrounds of these customers included engineering, retail management, building trades, fashion design and television production. Obstacles faced in their search for work included; ageism, lack of experience, broken career histories, eldercare responsibilities, dyslexia and low and falling salaries among available jobs that were perceived as unsustainable. Some people chose to seek self-employment support due to disillusionment with their job search while for others the desire to be self-employed was a long held goal.

Among the sample, self-employment was perceived by some as the only option available to them, given the dearth of employment opportunities. So rather than being pulled into entrepreneurial endeavour with innovative business ideas, most were pushed into this option in the face of circumscribed employment choices. The extent to which customers felt pushed by their circumstances in this direction is highlighted in the following statements:

'Well I didn't really have a choice in a way...well I'll be 59 in September, I didn't think I would... get a staff job.'

(Customer, District code 8)

'You ask them [employers], they say, "it's full", you can't even talk to these people...I'm like insulted to be honest and I'm not going to bother anymore. This is what is driving me to do something on my own. Really, I don't have enough funding, but somehow ...'

(Customer, District code 7)

The above situations raise the issue of risk, particularly where the investment of savings is required at the start-up stage. However, the decision to become self-employed was more typically initiated by customers, rather than advisers.

11.4.1 Views on services

Customers received a mix of services. At one extreme the support amounted to nothing more than *'just a talk for a few hours'*. At the other extreme was described well crafted, dedicated self-employment modules, one of which lasted five weeks and covered business plans, cash flows, bank account set up, pricing, employing people, paying VAT and sole traders limited. One such course, attended by a person who set up a business as a car mechanic was well received:

'...worthwhile. It did help me set up and guide me through it. It was a pretty good process although it was a lot of work...you wouldn't take it in a week...it was a good base to start. It would be good for other people starting fresh you know.'

(Customer, District code 3)

However, all customers should have received self-employment leaflets, produced by each country in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for issue to customers in jobcentres at the point of initial interest.

Given the diversity of support received, it is not surprising that views on the quality and extent of the support were inconsistent among the sample. Some customers expressed high praise and considered the help to be practical and professionally presented. Others were more negative and felt they were not offered any useful help. For some this was because the course was considered to be pitched at the wrong level – in other words, ideal for those who were already in business but of less use for those at an earlier stage of developing a business.

The complex needs of many customers highlight the complementary nature of some of the 6MO options, like combining training with self-employment support. Although helped to start self-employment, some customers believed they were not always also offered appropriate or sufficient training in their occupational field. In one case a customer who had been made redundant from a long standing professional career, reported that the pursuit of self-employment did not preclude the search for paid work with other employers. This person expressed interest in both training and the recruitment subsidy voucher. Despite attending various self-employment workshops, he was still looking for jobs and considering alternatives:

'I am still job hunting, I have to admit...definitely it [recruitment subsidy] would be something I'd still be looking to use, if I went to an interview and said, "I can offer you this"...probably I'm 60/40 self-employment.'

(Customer, District code 8)

A number of customers suggested changes that would improve Jobcentre Plus services. Several felt that their Jobcentre Plus adviser told them little about what was available for the self-employed beyond the names and contact details of a few key colleges or the provider organisation. Many would have liked more details about what to expect and more encouragement. One customer suggested that this situation could be improved through offering information materials about self-employment, similar to the leaflets they had received on volunteering and the recruitment subsidy voucher:

'It would be quite nice if they had a pack or a little leaflet to say almost like bullet points, "If you want to become self-employed, this is what you need to do, these are the steps you need to take"...'

(Customer, District code 7)

One customer wanted self-employment support much earlier in the claim as he had a clear and workable proposition from the outset.²⁰

11.4.2 Self-Employed Credit

In the sample, individuals who took up the SEC were running a variety of businesses: including merchandise sales, engineering, entertainment and freelance journalism.

Customers were generally positive about the credit which was largely regarded as an added bonus during the early months of trading. There were no objections to the weekly payment structure but views on the value of the credit were mixed. A couple of customers felt the value of the payment, £50, was inadequate:

'It wasn't an awful lot...The only thing I would change was that I thought that £50 wasn't sufficient transition from being out of a job for umpteen years to going self-employed.'

(Customer, District code 6)

Other customers were more satisfied with the value of payments, for example:

'It's only £50 a week but it is exceptionally useful 'cause it's the only £50 I get.'

(Customer, District code 8)

²⁰ Self-employment support is now available earlier in a JSA claim, from 13 weeks.

There was little evidence that the weekly sum was a significant incentive to take the self-employment route, as expressed by one customer:

'I think if I hadn't got it, if there wasn't that money available I still would have gone self-employed.'

(Customer, District code 8)

While the credit didn't influence the decision to become self-employed, customers found the money helpful and felt it was a distinct incentive to remain in business during the difficult first few months. For example, one person who had been running an entertainment business on and off for a number of years felt the credit prevented him from sliding back onto JSA when business was slow,

'I guess it was an incentive for me to stay off [JSA]...For example, there could have been a couple of weeks where I didn't have anything and it is worth it to sign back on, of course. But if you're getting that £50 a week and you know that you can't sign back on again, then you just stick with it and wait for the next gig to turn up.'

(Customer, District code 8)

11.5 Summary

Self-employment support was established and available throughout the study districts. The nature of services varied by prime contractors in England, Scotland and Wales and customer experiences reflected the diversity of services that tailored for different needs. The policy intent was mostly confirmed by the study, although providers identified relatively high numbers of JSA customers who were considered to be inappropriate for their services.

Impressions of self-employment support services were largely favourable among the customers in the study. The structure of provider support, with light touch preliminary assessments followed by more detailed, tailored help, appeared to be effective and the content of advice, courses and seminars mostly appropriate. However, some had resorted to pursuing self-employment because they had no other work options and in these cases the support content was not considered to be as relevant.

There was considerable diversity between offices in terms of the extent to which the self-employment offer was promoted and, therefore, the volumes flowing to service providers. A key issue identified by providers and customers, was the limited knowledge base of Jobcentre Plus staff, many of whom did not seem to have a clear idea of what is on offer from the providers nor what is involved in becoming self-employed. As a consequence, providers viewed a substantial proportion of the 6MO client referrals as poor and inappropriate. Limitations on 6MO client capacity and resources were identified: lack of confidence; low level skills; lack of managerial skills; and limited information and access to start-up funding. These factors translated into low attendance rates and low rates of conversion to self-employment.

SEC was regarded by customers, providers and Jobcentre Plus staff as a beneficial support during the transition from JSA to self-employment, particularly given that it can take some time to establish a business and become profitable. Customers did not view the extra money as an incentive to become self-employed, but some said it helped them to remain in work (and off benefit) when business was slow.

12 Conclusions

This evaluation report presented qualitative process study findings on the Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU) and the Six Month Offer (6MO), extra help to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers that was introduced nationally in April 2009. This research is part of a wider evaluation of these initiatives and should be read in conjunction with findings from surveys of customers (Knight *et al.*, 2010; Adams *et al.*, forthcoming) and future reporting of 6MO impacts.

The additional support under SNU and 6MO is delivered jointly by Jobcentre Plus and specialist partner agencies. Both support packages are available to customers at the adviser's discretion and take-up by the customer is voluntary.

SNU provides supplementary job preparation and job search services from day one of a JSA claim. The package of support is designed for people who have recently become unemployed and have little or no experience of modern job search techniques. Support delivered by Jobcentre Plus can either take the form of a group session or one-to-one job search coaching. Separate contracted providers supply job search support for non-professionals and professional/ executive customers.

Eligibility for the 6MO package of support generally starts from 26 weeks of a claim and continues to 52 weeks. There are four voluntary strands to the 6MO, which are supplemented by extra advisory support. A recruitment subsidy to the value of £1,000 is paid to employers in exchange for hiring an applicant who has been claiming JSA continuously for six months. Work focused training offers college-based courses to customers who would benefit from upskilling or reskilling to expand their employment opportunities. Volunteer placements arranged through third sector brokers can provide work-related experience. Finally, self-employment support is available from specialist providers and a Self-Employment Credit (SEC) offers financial assistance for those customers who become self-employed.

The overall aim of the study was to:

- assess the delivery of 6MO/SNU by Jobcentre Plus and contracted providers;
- examine the customer experience of 6MO/SNU and to determine what elements of 6MO/SNU appear to help customers;
- contribute to future policy development.

The qualitative evaluation gathered evidence in Jobcentre Plus offices throughout the first year of implementation. Separate studies were undertaken with service providers, employers and customers in SNU and 6MO support.

This chapter summarises the findings from the research and discusses the key emergent themes. The final section addresses the findings with recommendations for future practices.

12.1 Interpreting the findings

The qualitative evaluation was designed as both an implementation study tracking the first year of Jobcentre Plus delivery and as a study on the specific experiences of the different stakeholder groups: customer users, Jobcentre Plus managers and delivery staff, service providers and employers. The implementation research in Jobcentre Plus offices studied the delivery processes over three observational periods. In contrast, the separate stakeholder studies provided a detailed snapshot at one point in time.

The purpose of the longitudinal Jobcentre Plus fieldwork was primarily to provide formative feedback on the delivery implementation and to gauge how service delivery evolved and matured over time. This process research is inherently issues driven and therefore should be used to identify areas of delivery that need to be addressed, both for the current programmes and in the design of future policy initiatives.

While the Jobcentre Plus fieldwork highlighted changes over time, the research with stakeholders was designed to illuminate a different dynamic, diversity of experience. The research collated the direct experiences of service suppliers and users at different points in the service network to build a picture of each SNU and 6MO support. These separate studies can identify service interactions encountered by the different stakeholders and how the services responded to different customer needs.

When interpreting the findings, the two types of research complement one another with explanatory evidence. The longitudinal fieldwork provides contextual information on practices and changes in practices providers and customers may be encountering. The stakeholder studies are not intended to be representative of the service experience; rather, they provide an indication of how people in different roles reacted to these practices.

12.2 Findings overview

The new employment initiatives were announced in January 2009 and rolled out in April 2009. Jobcentre Plus and contracted providers struggled to get the separate strands of the SNU and 6MO fully operational within the short timescale. Still, nearly one year after the roll-out, some challenges remained and changes to delivery systems created new difficulties.

12.2.1 Support for Newly Unemployed

SNU services were introduced at different rates across the country and, at the end of the first year of implementation, variations remained at district and office levels in what was being offered to newly unemployed customers. The research found that the two Jobcentre Plus delivered SNU services were not being offered in all study offices, as was the policy intent. Furthermore, SNU one-to-one sessions were sometimes delivered as extra advisory support as opposed to a one-to-one coaching session on modern job search techniques. In contrast, the SNU group sessions offered a more standardised service because they were based on a national script. In general, feedback from customers who participated in a group session was more favourable about the information covering Jobcentre Plus services than the job search advice.

The feedback was generally more positive about the support for professionals/executives compared to the support for non-professionals when it was delivered by Programme Centres. However, the evidence suggests that although the support for professionals/executives was being delivered according to the design, they may not have been targeted appropriately; customers represented a wider range of occupational backgrounds than anticipated and some providers encouraged this. The evaluation cannot comment on the SNU services for non-professionals delivered through the new Support Contract as much of the evidence predates its roll-out in December 2009.

12.2.2 The Six Month Offer

Throughout the first year of implementation, systemic factors had restricted the availability of the full range of 6MO options in some areas of Great Britain. Work focused training and volunteering had been particularly affected. Where and when available, the training, volunteering and self-employment support options were generally delivered according to the policy design by experienced

providers. However, from the provider perspective, the main issue for effective service delivery pertained to the appropriateness of JSA customers who were referred to the 6MO volunteering and self-employment support options. It was the view of these providers that Jobcentre Plus advisers were not fully aware of the nature of these services.

The recruitment subsidy was offered systematically to all individuals who reached six months of a JSA claim, according to the policy design. It was viewed as more useful for positions in small businesses and for people with lower earnings potential.

A more detailed discussion of the findings on each of the separate SNU and 6MO options is provided in the next section.

12.3 Discussion

Over time, the research on Jobcentre Plus' role in the delivery of SNU and 6MO confirmed that processes, delivery and staff experience have developed to a positive degree. Staff remained committed to the initiatives and provision was generally established. The additions of the provider, employer and customer perspectives help to complete the picture on the services. Together, the evaluation findings highlight several issues for discussion.

12.3.1 Support for Newly Unemployed

The policy intention was that the SNU services would better equip jobseekers early in their claim for their job search. The services were voluntary and the four formats of support would be targeted to different customer groups, identified by Jobcentre Plus advisers. Results from the evaluation reveal an inconsistent picture on both the availability and take up of the separate SNU services, over the course of the fieldwork and across the study offices. Possible reasons for this are discussed separately for services supplied by Jobcentre Plus and those contracted to outside organisations. It also became more widely recognised that the services for the 'newly unemployed' would be worthwhile to jobseekers at a later stage in their claim so advisers were using their discretion to broaden the eligibility criteria to include longer-term customers.

SNU delivered by Jobcentre Plus

When SNU was launched in April 2009, Jobcentre Plus was responsible for initiating new services. This entailed nurturing resources which were in stiff competition with the demand for resources already imposed by the economic recession. Over time, the services became available to customers to various degrees as delivery was adapted to suit office capacity in terms of staff skills and office space, sometimes investing more resource into one of the services at the expense of the other. The high fail to attend rates associated with the voluntary services, together with a general perception that the SNU group session was targeted at too basic a level discouraged Jobcentre Plus office staff from investing much resource in the services.

Therefore, the offer of SNU voluntary group sessions and one-to-one coaching sessions was partly dependent on the area of Great Britain a customer resided in. Given these local office adaptations, there was also evidence to suggest that the Jobcentre Plus SNU services sometimes deviated from the policy intent; for instance, some one-to-one sessions were used as a continuation of an Initial Jobseeker Interview or there were instances where suppliers of support for professionals/executives were brought in to address SNU voluntary group sessions.

SNU delivered by contracted providers

Whereas Jobcentre Plus SNU delivery involved starting and nurturing new services, customer access to SNU contracted services was more a case of establishing adviser awareness and trust with external providers.

Adviser awareness of the contracted services played a big role in their successful implementation. From the outset, most advisers were generally comfortable referring to the support for non-professionals because the service was delivered by Programme Centres, a network of providers with whom they had established contacts. In this case, customer access to the service might only be restricted if the Programme Centre had a poor service reputation. The importance of this professional relationship to service access was underscored when new providers were introduced with the Support Contract. No doubt this was exacerbated by the new electronic referral system, Provider Referral and Payment (PRaP), that was launched at the same time. The cycle of building familiarity with service delivery had to be repeated. Therefore, due to substantial changes that were brought in eight months after the service was initially introduced, it is still not possible to assess the success of the support for non-professionals.

On the other hand, the delivery of SNU for professionals/executives by specialist agencies remained consistent throughout the study period. The issue lies with the volume of unfamiliar suppliers situated in a range of geographical locations. Moreover, advisers were largely unfamiliar with the targeted customer group and the notion of referring to non-local services. The need to address adviser awareness was recognised among the providers. This created an open market in which separate suppliers competed for business, by widely disseminating favourable feedback from clients and sometimes through extensive marketing campaigns direct to Jobcentre Plus offices. Over the course of the evaluation, referrals to the support for professionals/ executives grew beyond expected levels. A side effect of this, however, was that the service may have been over-utilised by advisers who referred customers from a wider range of occupations than was the policy intent. By the time of the March 2010 fieldwork, perceptions on service content and delivery across the study districts were mainly positive.

In conclusion, implementation of SNU services that were delivered by Jobcentre Plus and those delivered by contracted providers took different paths. For the most part, local office capacity defined the nature and availability of Jobcentre Plus delivered SNU services. In contrast, the extent to which advisers had established professional relationships with providers and positive perceptions of services defined the degree to which the contracted SNU services were made available to customers.

12.3.2 Six Month Offer

Generally, after 26 weeks, JSA customers were introduced to opportunities available under the 6MO at a mandatory meeting with a Jobcentre Plus adviser. Of the four options, information about the recruitment subsidy tended to be regularly distributed to customers, as was the policy intent. Training was also widely offered though the opportunity was not consistently available across Great Britain. The supports available for volunteering and self-employment were considered to be suitable to a narrower customer population and, for this reason, they were offered with more discretion.

Recruitment subsidy

The recruitment subsidy was mainly viewed by Jobcentre Plus staff as giving six month customers an advantage over other jobseekers and it was also something tangible that advisers could hand out. Customers were somewhat reluctant to self-market with the subsidy and some felt it was stigmatising as a label of long-term unemployment. The moral integrity of the subsidy was raised by

all stakeholders and some employers pointed out that strict equal opportunities policies precluded the viability of the subsidy in the job market.

On the whole, the recruitment subsidy was viewed to be more useful and effective when applied to low-earning jobs in smaller businesses. Moreover, the £1000 value of the subsidy was not seen to make much difference to hiring practices. It was reasoned that the value inherent in securing the best candidate far outweighed the extra cash. However, on a more positive note, there was some evidence to suggest that the extra money did enable some of the smaller businesses to alter a job offer by increasing working hours from part-time to full-time or by extending the length of a work contract.

Work focused training

Following a lengthy implementation period and despite regional variation in the availability of training, the work focused training option proved to be popular with staff and customers. It was suggested that eligibility for the wider range of training subjects available through the 6MO be extended so that customers can benefit from the extra learning earlier in a JSA claim.

Ongoing issues were raised about the delivery and nature of the courses. Unreasonable waiting times for course starts were reported and it was generally recognised that there were training gaps regarding the scope of subjects and the level of skills learning on offer. It was largely accepted that the training was not suited to customers with higher qualifications and higher skilled backgrounds.

Volunteering

Volunteering worked well for customers who chose the option and genuinely wished to take part in a community activity. But for some customers and Jobcentre Plus staff, volunteering equated to 'working for nothing' which was at odds with the pursuit of employment.

The 6MO volunteering option was arguably the most problematic of the offers. The research identified a tension between the purposes of Jobcentre Plus advisers and the purposes of volunteering brokers. To brokers, the ethos of volunteering was about giving time and skills to good community endeavours, hence placements were arranged with third sector organisations. In contrast, some Jobcentre Plus staff felt that a volunteer placement was ideal for individuals who required more skills and recent work-related experience, essentially placing more emphasis on receiving than giving to the community. In more extreme cases, there was evidence from brokers and customers to the effect that some individuals were being pressured to become volunteers.

It was widely asserted by the volunteering brokers that this mismatch of understanding was costing them unnecessary resource serving clients who were inappropriate for volunteering. Principally, many of the referred customers lacked the commitment or the capability (some lacked skills or were ill) to engage in a community activity. Furthermore, the prospect of work or the onset of a work programme activity shifted commitment away from volunteering. It was suggested that the design of how volunteering sits within an employment programme be revisited.

Self-employment support

As a source of earnings, self-employment was perceived to entail a higher risk to customers compared to work through an employer. Most advisers agreed that the offer of this kind of support was highly reliant on the customer having skills in a saleable trade and the ability to self-market. The SEC was welcomed by Jobcentre Plus staff and customers as a financial safety net to smooth the transition from benefits to work. Rather than a financial incentive to start trading, however, the Credit held more sway in encouraging the self-employed to remain off benefit, although only available in the short term.

Providers of self-employment support were established specialists in the field. Their experiences suggest that advisers were not necessarily following strict rules of screening for appropriate referrals. Rather, compared to other clients, 6MO customers were perceived to be less enterprise ready, with lower calibre of skills and less understanding of what self-employment entails. Furthermore, it was asserted that preparation for these clients required a longer time period than was allowed under the six month agreement, which has implications for the design of the support programme.

12.4 Recommendations

The SNU and 6MO were introduced to address the extra support needs of JSA customers and bolster the labour market position of jobseekers during an economic recession. The findings from this evaluation hold implications for the delivery and design of these extra supports.

General themes from the evaluation relate to the delivery processes by which customers accessed the services.

- There is a need to establish a standardised system for collecting and disseminating feedback on services (user feedback, referrals, starts, outcomes, etc). This should apply to all contracted and non-contracted services. The research showed a general lack of knowledge about the customer experience among all levels of Jobcentre Plus staff. This proved to be particularly detrimental to advisers who relied on this information when making decisions about service referrals. Communication of district level performance also seemed to be hampered by poor coordination of feedback among the different funding streams and the fact that some services are regionally administered.
- To optimise the advisory function, it is recommended that the administrative and advice giving roles be separated. If the adviser is expected to perform more of a diagnostic role, then more time with a customer should be devoted to familiarisation and discussion. This might entail delegating more of the Labour Market System (LMS) field entry and form processing to other Jobcentre Plus staff.
- To optimise the advisory function, it is recommended that adequate support is given to develop skills in matching customers to service opportunities. The findings reported a high incidence of inappropriate referrals to services and some of the 6MO customers indicated they could have benefited from alternative opportunities they were not offered. If advisers are to continue to exercise discretion over the offer of services then more resource needs to be dedicated to ongoing training, coaching and the sharing of best practices. To supplement this, information about the service options should be available in alternative formats, recognising customers' different language and special learning needs.
- Jobcentre Plus' role in the direct delivery of SNU services ought to be reassessed. The research found that Jobcentre Plus offices struggled to build staff and premise capacity which resulted in service compromises. Consequently, the voluntary group sessions and the one-to-one sessions were not necessarily delivered as the policy intended.
- More research is needed to better understand how referrals between Jobcentre Plus and providers occur within the different service commissioning models. The evaluation findings indicated that advisers are reluctant to refer to unknown providers. Furthermore, in the case of the multilevel networks which delivered volunteering and self-employment support, advisers were largely unaware of the nature of the local services their customers received. A main repercussion from this was a high incidence of inappropriate referrals which impacted negatively on provider resources.

The evaluation also identified issues related to the design of the SNU and 6MO services.

- More flexibility in the customer regime is needed to accommodate fuller participation in voluntary services. Jobcentre Plus staff recognised that customer needs can change and that receptivity to voluntary services may also change over time. In response, some offices were repeating the offer of SNU services later in a claim. Similarly, greater flexibility in work welfare regimes would enable customers to continue to engage in worthwhile work-related activities (e.g., training, volunteering, and developing self-employment).
- There is a need to address gaps in services. The economic recession has led to a wider diversity of support needs among the customer population. This should be reflected in the support and training opportunities available, including signposting to alternative services where appropriate.

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This research explored the implementation and delivery of Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU) and the Six Month Offer (6MO). Qualitative research was undertaken in seven Jobcentre Plus districts from September 2009 to February 2010 to help understand the impact of these measures on Jobcentre Plus customers, providers/ brokers and employers. Further qualitative research output, on SNU/ 6MO, with Jobcentre Plus staff was incorporated using associated Jobseekers Regime Flexible New Deal (JRFND) research. This is the first in series of evaluation reports aiming to establish the extent to which SNU and 6MO lead to additional customer employment outcomes.

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