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Experiencing Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders : overview of early evaluation evidence

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**EXPERIENCING JOBCENTRE PLUS PATHFINDERS:
OVERVIEW OF EARLY EVALUATION EVIDENCE**

Experiencing Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders: Overview of Early Evaluation Evidence

**A study carried out on behalf of the Department for Work and
Pensions**

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Abbreviations and acroynyms

BA	Benefits Agency
CC	Contact Centre
DEA	Disability Employment Adviser
ES	Employment Service
ESCOM	Employment Service's electronic database containing advice and guidance for Jobcentre Plus staff
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
FA	Financial Assessor
FCO	First Contact Officer
IB	Incapacity Benefit
IS	Income Support
IT	Information technology
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
LMS	Labour Market System
NDDP	New Deal for Disabled People
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
PA	Personal Adviser
VANTIVE	Electronic appointment booking system used at the contact centre; also provides staff with a script to use in conversations with clients
WFI	Work Focused Interview
WFTC	Working Families Tax Credit

Executive summary

Introduction

Jobcentre Plus is a key part of the Government's strategy for welfare reform. It brings together the services of the Employment Service and parts of the Benefits Agency to provide a single point of delivery for jobs, benefits advice and support for people of working age. In the process, it aims to provide a work focus to the benefit system for everyone using the service. The first 56 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices, established in October 2001, built upon the ONE service, which from June 1999 had piloted the integration of benefit claiming and work placement/job seeking for all claimants in 12 areas of Britain. A programme of evaluation accompanied the launch of the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders. This work was designed to provide an early assessment of the Pathfinders, to identify good practice and inform the continuous improvement and future roll out of the service.

This overview report has two principal aims. First, it brings together and reports the key findings of qualitative and quantitative evaluations of Jobcentre Plus services at Pathfinder sites that were carried out from October 2001 to May 2002. This was a period during which the implementation of Jobcentre Plus was obstructed by industrial action, a factor that needs to be taken into account when assessing early performance. The findings of this research are then related to comparable research on ONE.

Second, it charts the changes made in the provision of Jobcentre Plus since its inception and identifies how Jobcentre Plus has progressed from the ONE service from which it developed.

How Jobcentre Plus built on ONE

The Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders were designed to build on the experience of ONE and the evaluation evidence around what worked in ONE and where there were weaknesses. This meant re-designing the start-up stage, to give the opportunity for the first contact staff to undertake the role of explaining to new clients the requirement to participate in a work focused interview, and its purpose. A separate meeting with a Financial Assessor was introduced prior to the work focused interview, so that the PA meeting could focus on discussions about work and overcoming barriers to work. The focus on non-JSA clients also increased, with Jobcentre Plus including plans to introduce specialist advisers to help non-JSA clients overcome barriers to work and ensure that caseloaded was concentrated on the hardest to help. Job entry targets were introduced which gave greater priority to economically inactive clients.

First contact

Clients accessing the Jobcentre Plus service are encouraged to initiate a claim through a Contact Centre, where they would speak to a First Contact Officer (FCO). The early research on Jobcentre Plus suggested that at first contact conversations tended to focus on establishing clients' benefit requirements, with little discussion about work or job searches being conducted, especially with non-JSA clients. In addition, little explanation was given about the purpose of the work focused interview (WFI), with the emphasis on benefits as opposed to work. The early stages of Jobcentre Plus showed some parallels with the ONE pilots, where evaluation evidence suggested that Start-Up was similarly focused on benefits and Start-Up Advisers did not fully explain the work focused nature

of the ONE service. The later Jobcentre Plus research, however (undertaken six months after the first Pathfinder offices were launched), showed there had been progress in relation to establishing the correct benefit, explaining the evidence that was required when attending the WFI and conducting job searches and job submissions for JSA clients.

Financial Assessor

In Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders, benefit services are delivered through a Financial Assessor (FA), whose responsibility it is to check claim forms and supporting evidence and assess benefit entitlement. This differs from the ONE pilots, where benefits services were delivered through the Personal Adviser. The ONE evaluation evidence suggested that this had resulted in Personal Advisers spending most of the Work Focused Interview discussing benefits, leaving little time to discuss work with clients. The claim check with the Financial Assessor was highly regarded by clients, although the Financial Assessor service had been interrupted in some areas by industrial action and PAs had taken on the benefits role. Six months into Jobcentre Plus, some staff required more training about benefits other than JSA, and staff shortages also affected the delivery of the FA service.

Work focused interview

Findings from the early qualitative evaluation of Jobcentre Plus suggested that PAs tended to take a low-key approach to discussing work with non-JSA clients and employment was not discussed in any depth with this group unless the client expressed an interest in it themselves. The main message for other non-JSA clients was to come back when they felt in a position to consider work or training. Survey evidence across the first six months of the Pathfinders showed that around seven in ten non-JSA clients had discussed their previous work experience, barriers to work and help overcoming these barriers, but fewer had discussed suitable job opportunities (around four in ten non-JSA clients had done so, compared with eight in ten JSA clients). In the later qualitative research, some PAs said they felt more confident in conducting WFIs with non-JSA clients, but the research did not find much evidence that this had led to more in-depth discussions about work. The research indicated that some PAs lacked knowledge of the help and services available to encourage clients to move into work or closer to the labour market, especially for sick and disabled clients and carers.

Caseloading

One purpose of the WFI is to persuade non-JSA clients to take up voluntary caseloading, the main source of which is New Deal provision, in order to help them find work or move closer towards the labour market. The early research found that clients were not caseloaded in most cases and the main message conveyed to them was that they should return when they felt better (those claiming health-related benefits) or when they became ready to look for work (usually carers or lone parents). Later research, however, found marked changes in relation to caseloading, with PAs having a much higher degree of awareness of the need to caseload, largely because of the introduction of caseloading and job entry targets. Some problems remained however, despite this progress, with some PAs lacking the confidence and ability to deal with non-JSA clients and others reporting they were confused about referrals to New Deal and specialist advisers. Evidence from the ONE evaluation showed that JSA clients were more likely than non-JSA clients to have had follow up contact with their PA.

Deferrals

While JSA clients cannot have their WFI deferred or waived, this is possible for non-JSA clients in certain situations, such as where they are considered by the First Contact Officer or PA to be too distressed or too ill to attend, or where they are going through a life-changing event, such as having a baby. The early research found deferrals were common practice but the number of deferrals had reduced significantly by the time of the later research. As a result, more clients were attending WFIs and were accessing support and advice at the start of their claim for benefits. This was due to greater management attention on the issue of deferrals, particularly at Contact Centres, and to the fact that staff felt more confident about dealing with clients sensitively, through additional training and guidance as well as on-the-job experience: they were becoming more likely to view WFIs as something positive for clients.

Levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus and perceptions of usefulness

It is clear that clients were satisfied with Jobcentre Plus from very soon after the Pathfinder offices went 'live' and that this was maintained for the five to six months of the evaluation period. This is obviously a positive finding and should be given due weight in the early assessment of Jobcentre Plus performance. Furthermore, each of the main aspects of Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder provision: First Contact, Financial Assessor and Work Focused Interview, was regarded as either useful or very useful by around nine in 10 respondents to each wave of the quantitative customer survey. Evidence on customer satisfaction from the ONE evaluation suggested that clients in the ONE pilot areas were more satisfied with the service they had received than clients in the matched control areas.

Conclusions

The evaluation of the ONE pilots provided evidence of areas where ONE worked well and areas where there were weaknesses in service delivery. The Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders were designed to build on the experience of the ONE pilots. Early research on the Pathfinders demonstrated many parallels with evidence from the ONE evaluation, although later research produced more signs of progress. The extent of this varied quite appreciably, however, across the different elements of Jobcentre Plus provision. After a difficult start that was adversely affected by industrial action, First Contact Officers became successful in establishing the correct benefit for claimants and explaining the evidence that was required when attending the WFI, while Financial Assessors were able to check claim forms to the satisfaction of clients, despite remaining gaps in their knowledge of non-JSA benefits. A major gap in progress however, related to the work focused interview itself, where the discussion of work for non-JSA clients tended not to be very detailed, unless the customer expressed a positive interest in work, and where some PAs found it difficult to approach the subject of work with some non-JSA clients. Progress was more forthcoming in relation to caseloading and deferrals, where First Contact Officers and PAs felt more confidence in dealing with non-JSA clients by increasing the number of non-JSA clients who took up voluntary caseloading and reducing the number who had their WFI deferred.

Recommendations

Despite finding evidence of improvement in this regard in the later research, staff training and information remain key areas for advancement. Other recommendations

include: improved lines of communication among staff in different roles; better information for clients on how to access Jobcentre Plus services, especially those available after the WFI; and a more effective and integrated IT system.

1 Introduction

Jobcentre Plus is a key part of the Government's strategy for welfare reform. It brings together the services of the Employment Service (ES) and the Benefits Agency (BA) to provide a single point of delivery for jobs, benefits advice and support for people of working age. Under this new service, those entering the benefit system (either for new or repeat claims) are obliged to attend a meeting with a Personal Adviser (PA) to discuss the job opportunities and support available. The requirement to attend a meeting with a Personal Adviser represents a change for clients claiming benefits other than JSA, who previously had no such conditionality attached to their benefit claim. For clients claiming JSA, the conditionality rules of the benefit remain unchanged by Jobcentre Plus, although the environment in which JSA clients receive services has changed.

The first 56 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices were established between October 2001 and January 2002 in 17 cluster areas across the country, offering a fully integrated work and benefits service. The aim of the Pathfinder offices is to lead the way in demonstrating the new service, culture and organisation of Jobcentre Plus. Further Jobcentre Plus offices were opened in October 2002 and the network will be complete by 2006.

1.1 ONE pilots

Jobcentre Plus built on the lessons of the ONE service, which from June 1999 piloted the integration of benefit claiming and work placement/job seeking for all claimants in 12 areas of Britain.

The vision for ONE was linked closely to the Government's welfare-to-work programme. It intended to be more than just a better way to do business. A commitment to wage supplementation was one pillar of the Government's welfare-to-work strategy. An equally strong commitment to active case-managed intervention to bring benefit recipients closer to the labour market was the other. Thus, ONE had four key objectives:

- To change the culture of the benefits system towards independence and work, where appropriate, rather than benefits and dependence
- To increase the level of sustainable employment by helping more people into work
- To put more benefit recipients in touch with the labour market (through the intervention of a Personal Adviser)
- To improve the assessment and delivery of benefits to ensure clients receive an individual service that is efficient and tailored to their needs.

1.2 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders

Following the same Government objectives as ONE Jobcentre Plus shares many aspects of the ONE vision. The Jobcentre Plus vision is that the service should provide:

- a work focus to the benefit system, for everyone using the service
- a dedicated service to enable employers to fill their vacancies quickly and successfully
- swift, secure and professional access to benefits for those entitled to them
- a much better service for everyone who needs help
- active help from Personal Advisers to assist people to get and keep work
- a better working environment for staff, which will be safe and professional

- greatly improved information technology, accommodation and support services to deliver an efficient and effective service.

Despite sharing key aspects of ONE's operational vision, the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders differ from the ONE service in several important ways. These differences have emerged largely in response to the evaluation evidence gathered during the ONE pilots which are summarised in subsequent chapters of this report.

1.3 Aims of the report

This report has two principal aims.

First, to bring together and report the key findings and messages of the early evaluations of Jobcentre Plus services at Pathfinder sites that were carried out from November 2001 to May 2002. The findings of these studies are related to comparable research on ONE.

Second, to take an overview of the evaluations, charting the changes made in the provision of Jobcentre Plus since its inception, assessing changes in clients' levels of satisfaction with the new services and identifying how Jobcentre Plus has progressed from the ONE service from which it developed.

1.4 Methods

The aims of this research project are addressed by undertaking a study of the previous evaluations of Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders and the ONE service with a view, first, to identifying, distilling and synthesising their key findings and messages; and second, by making a general survey of the changes in provision for unemployed and economically inactive people reported by the evaluations. This entails charting the progress of Jobcentre Plus in terms of clients' services and satisfaction, as well as its development from ONE. The analysis is carried out from the perspective of clients and staff. While an extensive evaluation has been carried out into the labour market impact of ONE, it is too soon to provide a comparable analysis of Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders. The primary emphasis of this report, therefore, is on the quality and nature of service delivery.

The Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder studies drawn on for this report are as follows:

- The five waves of quantitative customer research carried out by GHK, in association with the Policy Research Institute from Leeds Metropolitan University and Bostock Marketing Group, between December 2001 and April 2002
- The two waves of in-depth research carried out by ECOTEC and the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) at Loughborough University to provide an assessment of the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders were meeting the policy vision and information to inform the rollout of Jobcentre Plus. The first wave of this research was carried out in November and December 2001 and the second in April and May 2002.

While the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder studies are unpublished, there is an extensive published evaluation literature on ONE. The aspects of the ONE evaluation that are drawn upon by this synthesis report are:

- An interview/observation study of staff practice and IT use in a selection of ONE offices by a team from the Tavistock Institute (Kelleher, Youll, Nelson, Hadjivassiliou, Lyons and Hills, 2002).
- A qualitative interview study of ONE clients carried out by BMRB (Osgood, Stone and Thomas, 2002)
- A quantitative interview study of ONE clients (Green, Smith, Lilly and Marsh, 2000)
- Evidence submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Work and Pensions, as presented in the First Report of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, Session 2001-02 (HC426)
- The reply by the Government to the Select Committee report, which was published in May 2002 (Cm 5505).

1.5 Structure of the report

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

Chapter Two summarises the main conclusions from the ONE service delivery and client research and assesses the performance of ONE on the basis of these findings.

Chapter Three describes the ways in which the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders were designed to build on the experience of ONE as revealed by the evaluation, including addressing some of the weaker aspects of delivery. It also provides an overview of the operational processes through which the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder service is delivered and provides more detail on the methodology and focus of the early evaluations.

Chapters Four to Eight then synthesise the research evidence on five key aspects of Jobcentre Plus provision: first contact; the Financial Assessor interview; the work focused interview; caseloading; and deferral of the work focused interview. Chapter Nine brings together the findings on client satisfaction from the early evaluations of Jobcentre Plus and compares these to the equivalent information from the ONE evaluations. Chapter Ten provides conclusions and recommendations.

2 The ONE pilots

2.1 Background

The beginning of the ONE pilots in 1999 marked an important new phase in the active case management of benefit claimants in Britain. The introduction of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) in 1996 brought in new requirements for claimants to accept supervision when they actively sought work. But they had to claim their out-of-work benefits at one office, their Housing Benefit at another, and go to a third to get active help and direction in looking for a job. ONE brought these three offices – the Benefits Agency, the Local Authority Housing Benefit Service¹ and the Employment Service – together into a 'one-stop shop'. And it brought together as a single client base the three major groups of claimants of working age: JSA clients, sick and disabled clients and lone parents.

Between 1999 and 2000 participation in ONE was voluntary for non-JSA clients. From April 2000 participation became compulsory, as a condition of application for all clients claiming a ONE benefit. This represented a considerable change from the previous benefits regime for lone parents and sick and disabled clients.

The main focus of this chapter is an evaluation of the service delivered by ONE, examining both the assessment and delivery of benefits and the efficacy of the work focused interview in communicating with clients.

2.2 The ONE process

ONE was designed as a pilot to test three separate models of service delivery:

- The **Basic model** began in June 1999 as a voluntary scheme, and became compulsory in 2000. Under this model a 'start-up' interview was carried out that introduced clients to ONE, checked basic details, gave advice on claiming and eligibility and put them in the way of any immediately suitable vacancies. A work focused interview was then arranged with a Personal Adviser (PA) within three days, according to the design. Some sick and disabled clients were excused from the start-up and some of these from the work focused interview. Subsequently, ONE clients could initiate further meetings with their PA and others were flagged to be recalled at 'trigger points' later in their claim.
- The **Call Centre model** began in November 1999 using electronically scripted interviews to take claims for Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance over the telephone. Work focused meetings with Personal Advisers were then arranged.
- The **Private and Voluntary Sector (PVS) model** also began in November 1999. Contracts were given to private firms and voluntary organisations to innovate and test different ways of delivering the ONE service to meet its four main aims.²

¹ Local Authorities had a greater role in ONE due to the inclusion of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit among the benefits that triggered a client's participation in the ONE process. Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are not among the benefits with such conditionality attached under Jobcentre Plus.

² The PVS model was not seen to perform well relative to the basic model and does not feature in the design of Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders offices.

Each model was introduced in four 'Pilot Areas'. These were matched (as groups of four, not one-to-one) with four 'Control Areas'. Tests showed that a close match was achieved in terms of the social composition and employment histories of claimant populations in pilot and control areas. Together the pilot and control areas contained between 10 and 11 per cent of the working population of Great Britain and about nine per cent of the national population claiming a ONE benefit.

Participation in each model became compulsory in April 2000 and the pilots will continue until April 2003. After this time, the ONE pilots will become Jobcentre Plus offices and some have already done so.

The ONE process consisted of three stages: a Start-up meeting, an initial Personal Adviser meeting which was a pre-requisite for making a benefit claim and, where appropriate, follow-up meetings with the Personal Adviser (caseloading). These are assessed in turn, along with ONE's success in improving the quality of benefit services.

2.3 The Start-up meeting

In the Basic and Private/Voluntary Sector models, clients had their initial contact face to face in the ONE office. In the Call Centre model they were able to get a claim started over the telephone. This aspect of the service was greatly valued by lone parents in the Call Centre model, who did not have to transport children to an office or arrange childcare for them as a result. Most visitors to the Basic and PVS models were seen promptly, though in offices where the ONE service was embedded in a larger Jobcentre, some people waited longer. When this happened they were likely to be disappointed by a brief meeting and expressed '... great frustration at lengthy waiting periods for what turned out to be a very brief Start-up meeting'³. Some JSA clients were also puzzled by the need for an introductory interview to accomplish something they used to do by post.

This first contact with the office was important and appeared to set a template for the expectations of the way the rest of the ONE experience might work out. Among non-JSA clients, four per cent said specifically they had contacted the office '...to get advice on looking for a job or training' and another 5 per cent said they had come to look at job vacancies⁴. Almost everyone else said they were there to claim benefit or to get some advice on how to claim. JSA clients too said they had come to claim but the majority were also aware they were there to get a job as well (Green et al, 2001). But Kelleher's evidence suggested that they *thought* the ONE service was primarily about dealing with their claim for benefit.

The evidence was that the Start-up interview, typically 15 minutes long (although there were variations between the different ONE models in this respect), was not successful in introducing clients to the work focused nature of ONE or explaining what the service involved. Start up advisers tended not to discuss work in depth with clients or challenge the work preferences that clients expressed. As Kelleher says '*Explaining ONE did not take much time. It did not appear to be seen as a significant task nor an opportunity to 'recruit' interest in, and promote, the new service.*' (Kelleher, Youll, Nelson, Hadjivassiliou, Lyons and Hills, 2002).

³ Osgood, Stone and Thomas (2002) pp22, line 8.

⁴ Green, Marsh and Connolly (2001) Tables 2.3 and 3.2

This limited explanation of the service caused difficulties later on in the process as Personal Advisers tended to assume that clients were aware of the work focused nature of the interview they were about to conduct. What clients still had in mind was a benefit focused interview.

The research evidence suggests that the difficulty experienced at Start-up in communicating the work focused nature of ONE was twofold:

1. In the case of JSA clients, Start-up Advisers assumed that they were there to find work, as the rules of Jobseeker's Allowance require them to do. Since JSA claimants were two-thirds of the clients that Start-up advisers saw, the research evidence did not detect much discussion about work at Start-up because JSA clients' intention to search for work was taken as read.
2. In the case of non-JSA clients, especially sick and disabled clients, the absence of a work-focused presentation at start-up was linked to Adviser's uncertainty about, and lack of confidence in discussing work with non-JSA clients. They regarded lone parents and sick and disabled clients as minority 'special cases' that would be dealt with later and at proper length by their Personal Adviser.

2.4 The initial work focused interview with the Personal Adviser

The work focused meeting with a Personal Adviser was the core instrument for implementing ONE. It was supposed to be held within three days of a client's Start-up encounter but this was not always possible and from April 2001 it was changed from within three days of Start-up to within four days. Most clients said that they had attended a meeting with a Personal Adviser; although the proportion of sick and disabled clients doing so was lower, at 68 per cent, than among lone parents and JSA clients meeting with a Personal Adviser (around eighty per cent of whom had met with a Personal Adviser).

PA meetings lasted on average just over 30 minutes - a similar duration for both JSA and non-JSA clients. The intention of ONE was not to rely solely on a single mandatory interview at the beginning of a claim, but rather to build a caseload of clients who, if they did not find work or leave benefit by another route, would return to their Personal Adviser for more advice and help.

The work focused interview was intended to assess the client's circumstances and make a judgement about 'job readiness';

- If 'job ready', consider a range of suitable vacancies and help them apply;
- If not, take a longer view of moving towards financial self-sufficiency, which included:
 - Assessing the clients' barriers to work;
 - Review strategies for overcoming barriers such as training opportunities, childcare, and debt counselling;
 - Provide a 'better-off' calculation and explain in-work benefits;
 - Review other income, especially child support from non-resident parents where appropriate;
 - Make a 'personal action plan' combining these points or a formal 'Jobseeker's Agreement' in the case of JSA clients;

- Encourage non-JSA clients to consider voluntary placements or part-time work
- Plan future meetings, and
- Check that the client would receive all the benefits or other payments she or he was entitled to receive, and submit forms.

Clients' views of their Personal Adviser and the meeting were broadly positive. In pilot areas at least half of each client group in the ONS client survey felt they had got all the information they wanted and about a third thought their Personal Adviser was knowledgeable. About four out of ten of non-JSA clients thought the interview had been 'helpful' and the same proportion said the interview had left them more 'hopeful' about the future. A quarter said they came out of the interview with new information. Eight out of ten non-JSA clients and seven out of ten JSA clients said they felt they had been treated 'as an individual'⁵. Encouragingly, each of these proportions was smaller in the control areas but these differences were not large. The qualitative study confirmed this broadly positive impression from clients:

In general, clients were positive about the ONE service; there was evidence that this included some non-Jobseeker's Allowance clients who responded to individual and sensitive approaches to a work focus (Kelleher, et al, 2002, page 3).

The research evidence suggested that the discussion and verification of benefit entitlement was discussed first and tended to dominate the rest of the meeting. Talk about work, barriers to work, and training was fitted into the tail end of the time. This was the case among JSA clients and non-JSA clients. The client surveys showed that majority of JSA clients had discussed work during their Personal Adviser meeting - 79 per cent of JSA respondents remembered doing so, similar to the proportion among their counterparts in control areas. However, Kelleher et al found that work was not discussed in any depth and the approach was formulaic. The computer was scanned for suitable vacancies against the coded entries for the type of work, wages, hours and distance from home that the clients had said they preferred, with less discussion about clients' aspirations or barriers to work.

Lone parent and sick and disabled clients were considerably less likely than JSA clients to have discussed work with the Personal Adviser. In the client survey around a quarter of these non-JSA clients had discussed work and half that figure remembered receiving any advice about jobs. Although these proportions were lower than among JSA clients, they were much higher than among non-JSA clients in the control areas. In other aspects of the work focused discussion, there were smaller differences between the pilot and control areas. Among lone parents, the proportions discussing childcare were very similar between pilot and control areas, whilst the proportion receiving the 'better off' calculation was a little higher (11 per cent in pilot areas compared to eight per cent in control areas).

Qualitative research provides further evidence of the focus on benefits, rather than work, in the meeting with the PA. As Osgood says '*Generally, clients reported their Personal Adviser meeting had been primarily focused on their claim for benefits and in some cases work had not been mentioned at all.*' (Osgood, Stone and Thomas, 2002). Work related

⁵ See Green, Marsh and Connolly (2001) Tables 2.38, 3.44 and 4.36

topics such as training were also thought low-key *'Both JSA and non-JSA clients commented on the limited advice Advisers provided about support or training opportunities, and referral was not made in most cases.'* (Osgood, Stone and Thomas, 2002).

Two other key issues emerged from the evaluation of the Personal Adviser meetings:

- Their inability to penetrate and challenge the real issues of barriers to work during the interview, including a reluctance to challenge inappropriate or unrealistic employment expectations of some JSA claimants.
- The extent to which many Personal Advisers were apparently at a loss to know how to deal with more challenging barriers to work presented by lone parents and, especially, sick and disabled clients.

ONE did not intend to address all the problems presented by a new claimant with multiple disadvantages in a single interview. This was especially true if she or he had turned up anyway expecting to be questioned about a claim for benefit rather than be guided towards the labour market. The intention was for more challenging clients to be 'caseloaded' and guided back towards work over a period of time.

2.5 Caseloading

Caseloading was intended to provide intensive work focused help to clients over the longer term, once the client's benefit claim had been processed, through further contact with clients outside of the mandatory contact (or 'trigger meetings') required as part of the ONE process. However, this aspect of the service did not meet expectations and in the Department's written evidence to the Select Committee caseloading was described as *'... one of the least successful areas of the ONE process as often adviser's caseloads were too full of JSA clients to provide the necessary intensive help that clients to other benefits might need to find work, and staff did not have time to do the work.'* (Evidence, pp 108).

Among all clients there was no difference between the proportion in the pilot areas having any contact with the ONE service at ten months after their claim start date, and the proportion in the control areas who had contacted the Employment Service or Benefits Agency. Only small minorities appeared to have had a follow-up meeting with a Personal Adviser that was actually about their original claim and was focused on work. Most of these meetings and most of the less focused 'contact with the office' continued a theme of benefit claims. Many were there to make a new claim. Among JSA clients for example, 27 per cent had seen a Personal Adviser four to ten months into their claim, but the majority of these (19 per cent of JSA claimants) were on their second time around with a new claim. The proportion having a second meeting about their original claim was eight per cent. The survey of ONE clients showed that few non-JSA clients had had any contact with their Personal Adviser after their Personal Adviser meeting.

Staff found it difficult to caseload for a number of reasons. Qualitative research suggested that many staff were particularly uncertain about how to deal with sick and disabled clients. Whilst staff knew what was wanted in general terms some lacked the training and confidence to provide the right kind of help to clients to achieve it. The research also suggested that some staff were slow to spot where a client may benefit from a referral to more specialist help. Where sick or disabled clients did participate in follow up interviews, they tended to be among a minority of clients who were more interested in

getting a job. Staff also felt that there was insufficient time and resources available to conduct follow up meetings, particularly with those clients with the greatest need.

However, where follow up meetings did take place, they discussed work, in-work benefits, childcare, and training - all the work focused topics that the service was designed to deliver -and the research evidence suggests that referrals to specialist help, especially those involving the Disability Employment Adviser, went particularly well.

2.6 The quality of the benefits service

Having provided both Start-up Advisers and Personal Advisers who then spent more time than was hoped discussing their clients' benefit claims, rather than their employment prospects, it was to be expected that there would at least be measurable improvement in the service delivery of the benefits. Research with clients, especially qualitative interviews, provided an optimistic picture and on balance they felt they were getting an improved service, though the client survey respondents in control areas had positive things to say about their experiences too. They especially appreciated having their business dealt with in a single location. Clients in the pilot areas did not report that their benefits were processed more quickly than clients in the control areas and for non-JSA clients the client survey evidence suggested their claims took longer than in control areas.

2.7 Conclusions

The research provided evidence of where ONE was working well and also identified parts of ONE that had not worked as intended. The broad conclusions that can be drawn from the evaluation evidence on ONE are:

- Clients had positive views towards the new service. The majority of those questioned in the client survey felt that they had been treated individually, which was a core value of the new service that was intended to be ‘...individually tailored’ to their employment needs.
- The introduction of the ONE service won the overall acceptance of the staff, especially after the misgivings about 'privatisation by the back door' faded. They welcomed the ambitions of ONE and were positive about supporting the vision.
- The research identified some difficulties in delivering the work focused service, as had been envisaged, in particular:
 - Start-up Advisers were not successful in communicating the work focused nature of ONE, which left clients unprepared for an interview that most thought would be about benefits.
 - The Personal Adviser meetings concentrated on benefit delivery, which left less time to discuss work and training. Nevertheless, more non-JSA clients in pilot areas discussed a search for work than did so in control areas.
 - Personal Advisers tended not to probe clients in detail about their barriers to work and found it particularly difficult to deal with the needs of sick and disabled clients.
 - Few clients were caseloaded, and engaging with clients on a long-term basis came second to establishing the basic service for clients. On the other hand, there was good evidence that when caseloading was accomplished, it has positive results.
- The research suggested that converting staff to new roles had not been accompanied by sufficient training, which had consequences for the quality of advice received by clients.

But ONE was more than a trial of a new procedure. It was the precursor of a very large change. The bringing together of the services of the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency is "A merger on a grand scale."⁶ This is not just a reorganisation; it is an attempt to bring the whole service up to a new proactive standard.

The Department for Work and Pensions was able to use the evaluation of the ONE service as pointers to improvements built into the launch of Jobcentre Plus⁷. Subsequent chapters assess the degree to which these enhancements enabled Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders to overcome some of the limitations revealed by the ONE pilots.

⁶ HOC426 pp. 41 para. 104

⁷ See *Report on the One Pilots: Lessons for Jobcentre Plus* Reply by the Government to the First Report of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, Session 2001-02 (HC426) Cm 5505

3 Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders

3.1 How Jobcentre Plus built on ONE

The evaluation of the ONE pilots identified aspects that had worked well but also identified parts that did not work as intended. The Jobcentre Plus model was, therefore, designed to build on the aspects of ONE that had worked whilst also addressing the areas of ONE that had not performed as well :

- It involved a new organisational structure. Jobcentre Plus represented the merger of two organisations (the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service) into a single new organisation with a single management chain and a single set of performance targets. This represented a major change from ONE.
- The start-up stage was re-configured to give the opportunity for the first contact staff to undertake the crucial role of explaining to new clients the requirement to participate in a work focused interview, and its purpose.
- A separate meeting with a Financial Assessor was introduced prior to the work focused interview, so that the meeting with the personal adviser could focus on discussions about work and overcoming barriers to work.
- To make more use of specialist personal advisers and to build on programmes that were already in place. For example, for lone parents, since April 2001 mandatory work focused interviews with specialist personal advisers have been introduced for all new or repeat claims for Income Support where the youngest child is aged three or over.
- Caseloading was intended to concentrate on those in most need of help so they could become job ready through referral to New Deal programmes where these are available, otherwise the adviser would help and support. Caseloading for JSA clients aimed to focus on harder to help clients.
- Action plans were introduced for each client to set out steps and timeframes to move the clients towards work.
- Three year mandatory triggers were introduced for sick and disabled people and carers so that contact could be maintained; lone parents have an initial Work Focused Interview, then further interviews at six and twelve months, after which reviews become annual.⁸
- Job entry targets were introduced which gave greater priority to economically inactive clients to encourage advisers to focus more help on clients further from the labour market.

Subsequent chapters assess the degree to which these enhancements enabled Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders to overcome some of the limitations revealed by the ONE pilots.

3.2 The Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder evaluation research

This section provides more detail on the methodology used by the early evaluations of Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders, which constitute the main research evidence drawn upon by this report. It is important to note that the timing of the research coincided with industrial

⁸ These review meetings have been introduced nationally and not just in Pathfinder areas.

action across the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder network, and the findings of the report must be seen in this context.

Jobcentre Plus: Early Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase 1)

This research was carried out in November and December 2001, shortly after the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices went live. It was commissioned to explore the ‘bedding in’ process of Jobcentre Plus. Its overall aims were:

- To assess whether Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders and Work Focused Interview (WFI) extension sites⁹ were delivering to policy intent
- To inform the next stages of the Jobcentre Plus rollout.

Qualitative research with staff and clients of WFI extension sites and Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices were carried out in five areas. These areas were selected to include: a mix of office sizes; urban and rural areas; WFI sites and Pathfinder offices and an ex-ONE site. The main fieldwork took place in November and December 2001, starting just three weeks after many of the new offices went live. It was based on 57 face-to-face interviews with staff, four focus groups with clients claiming JSA, 88 face-to-face interviews with non-JSA clients and 28 non-participative observations in Jobcentre Plus offices and Work Focused Interview sites. Given the timing of this research, it is highly likely that its findings were strongly influenced by early teething problems relating to the processes used to deliver services and the industrial action that accompanied the introduction of Jobcentre Plus across the country.

Jobcentre Plus: Early Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase 2)

The Phase 2 qualitative research was carried out in April and May 2002. The aims of this research were to

- Assess whether Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices were delivering to policy intent
- Assess the extent to which Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices had moved closer to policy intent compared with the Phase 1 evaluation
- Inform the next stages of Jobcentre Plus rollout.

Several research methods were used to represent fully the process, experience and perceptions surrounding the delivery of Jobcentre Plus. These methods included face-to-face interviews with a wide range of staff from the Pathfinder public offices and Contact Centres and with non-JSA clients. Non-JSA clients targeted for the research included lone parents, carers and sick or disabled clients. Focus groups were held with JSA clients. Non-participative observations were used to gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics of client interactions when making initial telephone contact and in WFIs.

The research was carried out in the original five case-study areas participating in Phase 1, with an additional three areas for Phase 2. The areas were chosen to ensure a good mix of office sizes, urban and rural areas, and included two ex-ONE sites in order to build on the experience learnt from the ONE pilot.

⁹ WFI extension sites were offices in which benefit claimants were subject to mandatory work focused interviews but where the benefit claiming and work placement/job seeking systems were not fully integrated as in the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices.

Clients were identified from the ES database. Letters were sent to them explaining the purpose of the research and offering the opportunity to opt out. As is standard in qualitative research, participants in the research were offered a small sum of money (in this case £15) as a token of appreciation for the time they had spared to take part in the research. The relevant manager selected staff from the Contact Centres and Pathfinder public offices for participation in staff interviews. Those interviewed included managers, First Contact Officers (FCOs), Financial Assessors, Personal Advisers, Floor Walkers and receptionists.

The main fieldwork for Phase II took place in April and May 2002. The fieldwork included 84 staff interviews, eight focus groups with a total of 68 JSA clients, 142 face-to-face interviews with non-JSA clients, and 28 days of non-participative observations in Jobcentre Plus public offices and CC sites.

Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders Quantitative Customer Survey (Months 1 to 5)

This quantitative survey was carried out in five waves from November 2001 to April 2002. The purpose of this survey was to provide a quantitative measure of client's perceptions and views of the new service, focusing on aspects of the service as set out in the Jobcentre Plus vision. This was done by interviewing

- Clients who had been deferred as a result of their first contact, in that their Work Focused Interview (WFI) had been postponed
- Clients who attended a WFI at a Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder site

The survey aim was to identify perceptions of the overall service being delivered to clients by Jobcentre Plus, report site and cluster performance, to provide the Jobcentre Plus central reporting team with an analysis of the survey's findings and identify any areas for improvement and emerging trends. The surveys were carried out by GHK in association with the Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University and Bostock Marketing Group.

A questionnaire was administered to clients through a combination of telephone and face-to-face interviews. Several hundred clients were interviewed at each wave.

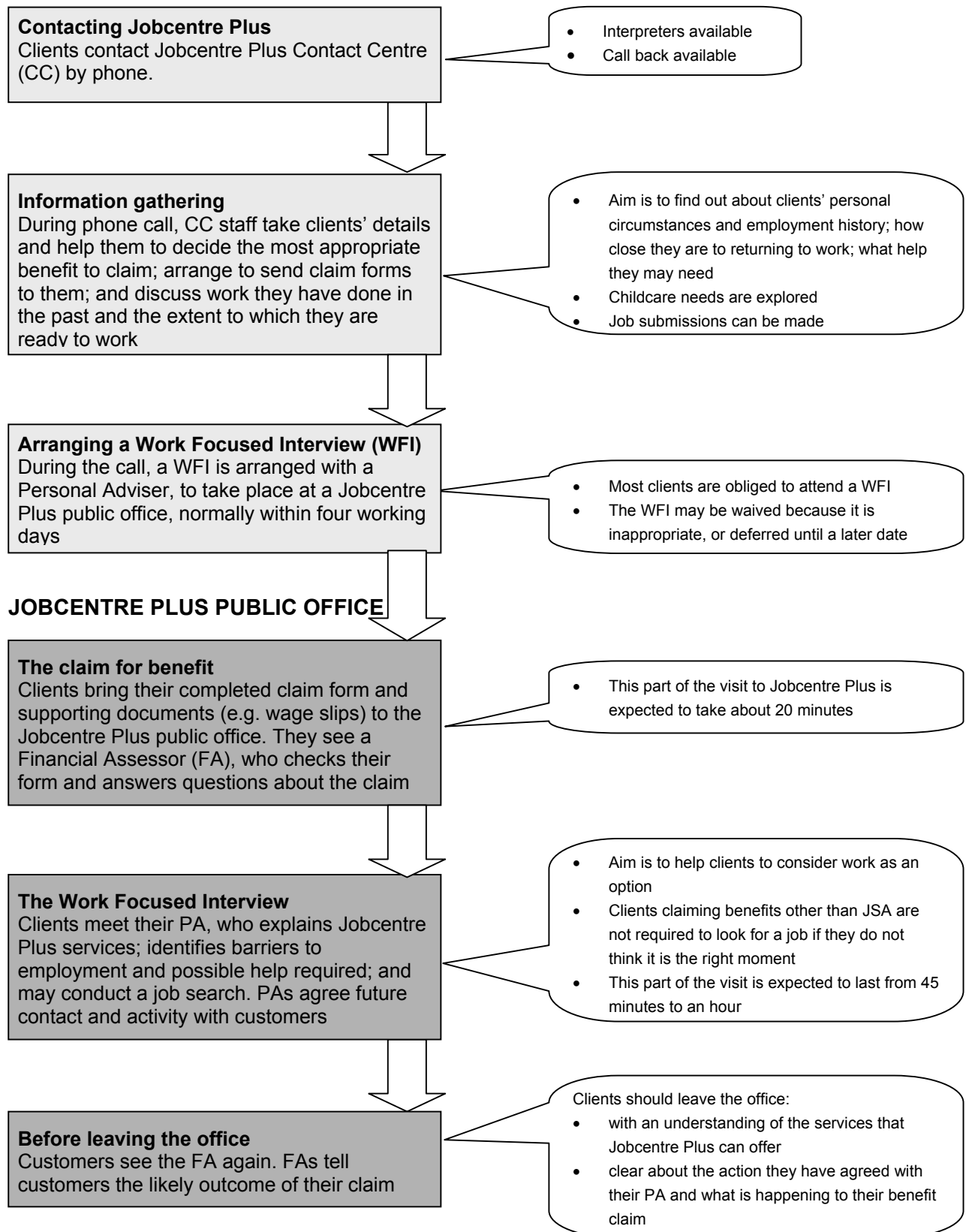
Once the survey had been completed, GHK carried out some additional analysis of the data, exploring reasons for the differences in satisfaction levels that had been revealed.

3.3 Operational processes

The success of each element of Jobcentre Plus provision, as suggested by the evaluation studies outlined above, is described in subsequent chapters. Figure 1 briefly summarises the role of each element and indicates the sequence in which services are provided.

Figure 1: The Jobcentre Plus Process¹⁰

CONTACT CENTRE



¹⁰ Adapted from Jobcentre Plus brochure, *The work you want, the help you need*

4 First contact

4.1 Introduction

Most clients accessing the Jobcentre Plus service initiate a claim over the telephone through a Contact Centre. First Contact Officers (FCOs) take details of clients' personal circumstances and reasons for making the claim; check their eligibility; and book them an appointment with a Personal Adviser for a Work Focused Interview (WFI) at the relevant Jobcentre Plus public office. An electronic appointment booking system, called VANTIVE, which also provides staff with a script to use in conversations with clients, is available to FCOs at the Contact Centre. FCOs can also provide information about work and, where appropriate, to provide job searches on behalf of clients.

Clients were found to take a variety of routes to gain access to the Contact Centre. They phoned from home, contacted ex-Benefits Agency offices, or visited the Jobcentre Plus public offices. Where clients visited the Jobcentre Plus public office, they were generally greeted by Floor Walkers or reception staff and directed to 'warm phones'¹¹, so that they could call the Contact Centre and initiate a claim.

4.2 Quantitative customer surveys

Clients were asked in the quantitative customer surveys about the things they discussed with the First Contact Officer. Table 1 summarises the responses obtained from the third wave of the customer survey, which took place in February 2002, approximately in the middle of the evaluation period (which ran from November 2001-April 2002).

Clients discussed a range of topics with First Contact Officers. Discussions about the clients' eligibility for the benefit that they wanted to claim and of their personal circumstances took place in about three-quarters (74 per cent) of cases. As one would expect, basic details of the Jobcentre Plus service were also generally provided (68 per cent). Other items, however, were discussed less commonly. The client's work experience (53 per cent) and job readiness (59 per cent) were discussed in just over half the cases, while the supply of suitable jobs in the area was mentioned as an item of discussion by only a fifth (22 per cent) of respondents. Just under half of the respondents recalled discussions of other benefits to which they might be entitled (46 per cent) and a similar proportion discussed other services provided by Jobcentre Plus.

Issues related to work were discussed more commonly with JSA clients than with non-JSA clients. Whereas about two-thirds (64 per cent) of JSA clients reported discussing job readiness, this was the case for only about two-fifths (41 per cent) of non-JSA clients. Similarly, almost three in five (57 per cent) JSA clients discussed their work experience but only just over a third (36 per cent) of non-JSA clients did this. JSA clients were also considerably more likely than non-JSA clients to have discussed whether there were any suitable jobs in the area (25 per cent against 11 per cent). Non-JSA clients were more likely than JSA clients to have discussed other benefits to which they might be entitled:

¹¹ 'Warm phones' are telephones located in publicly accessible offices including Jobcentre Plus public offices and ex-BA offices. They have a direct connection to the local Jobcentre Plus Contact Centre. Clients can use these, free of charge, to contact the Contact Centre, to initiate a benefit claim, or to make local calls to contact employers or training providers.

almost three in five (57 per cent) of such clients did so, compared with about two in five (43 per cent) JSA clients.

Table 1: Items discussed with First Contact Officer, by client type¹²

Items discussed with the First Contact Officer	Percentages		
	All clients	JSA clients	Non-JSA clients
Basic details of the Jobcentre Plus service	68	71	57
Eligibility to claim	74	77	62
Personal circumstances	74	74	74
Work experience	53	57	36
Job readiness	59	64	41
Whether there are any suitable jobs in the area	22	25	11
Other benefits you might be entitled to	46	43	57
Other services provided by Jobcentre Plus	45	46	42
Base	681	530	151

Overall, clients reported that they were satisfied with the service they received at first contact. Among respondents to the third wave of the quantitative customer survey 86 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with first contact services and 81 per cent found the service was either useful or very useful. These proportions did not vary by client type.

4.3 Qualitative research (phase 1)

The first phase of qualitative research produced the following findings relating to first contact:

- clients liked the convenience of being able to telephone from home to initiate their claim¹³
- VANTIVE scripts were used but modified
- the telephone conversation focused on establishing clients' benefit requirements
- little discussion about work or job searches was conducted with non-JSA clients
- little explanation was given about the purpose of the WFI, with the emphasis on benefits as opposed to work.

Jobcentre Plus was designed to give the opportunity for the first contact staff to undertake the crucial role of explaining to new clients the requirement to participate in a work focused interview. However, the first phase of the qualitative research showed that

¹² These figures are taken from the third wave of the customer survey, which took place in February 2002. Similar questions were asked at waves four and five but the findings did not differ substantially from those presented here.

¹³ The quantitative customer surveys showed that this was done by about half of the clients who responded to these surveys.

the content of discussions at first contact was very similar to that observed in relation to the ONE pilots.

4.4 Qualitative research (phase 2)

By the second phase of the qualitative research, a number of changes had taken place. In some areas, the length of telephone calls with clients had increased since the first phase of research, to up to 20 minutes in length. There were two reasons for this. In many areas new staff with less experience were relying on the VANTIVE script rather than tailoring the script, as was commonly observed in phase 1. In some areas, however, the length of telephone calls had increased because of an increased focus on discussing employment and explaining the WFI fully.

The second phase of the qualitative research found that progress had been made in a number of areas relating to first contact, but that there were also continuing issues:

Establishing the correct benefit and issuing the correct claim forms to clients

By the second phase of the qualitative research First Contact Officers were better able to establish which benefit clients were eligible to claim. As a result of the experience gained on the job since Jobcentre Plus was launched, FCOs were more knowledgeable and confident about the different benefit types. They were also more familiar with the VANTIVE script and aware of the necessary prompts to ask questions to determine clients' eligibility. In addition, in some areas FCOs with benefits experience (mainly ex-BA staff) had returned from industrial action. These staff were more experienced than newer staff, and were better able to identify the correct benefit type when taking calls from clients. In addition, they were also able to provide help and advice about benefits to their less experienced colleagues. Through better identification of the type of benefit that clients were eligible to claim, the issue of correct claim forms to clients had also improved.

Explaining to clients the evidence they need to bring to their WFI

In phase 2, FCOs were giving clients clearer explanations about the supporting evidence they were required to bring to their WFI. Again, this was because of increased familiarity with the VANTIVE script and awareness of the prompts on this subject. As a result, it appeared that more clients were attending their interviews with the correct evidence (as well as correct benefit claim forms). This made the next stage of the Jobcentre Plus process – the benefit claim check conducted by the Financial Assessor – more efficient.

Conducting job searches and job submissions for JSA clients

In Phase 1, Contact Centres were focusing on: taking clients' details; identifying the correct benefit type; explaining the next steps to clients; and becoming familiar with these parts of the first contact process, before moving onto to conducting job searches and job submissions. By Phase 2, in most areas job searches and job submissions were now being conducted for some JSA clients. The ending of industrial action had also enabled job searches and job submissions to be carried out in some areas because of the availability of extra staff to answer calls. Three case-study areas were not conducting job searches and job submissions. Two of these offices had started operating several months after the other areas. This indicates that a 'bedding-in' period is required for staff to become familiar with the basic elements of the Contact Centre process before going on to learn the job-search section of the VANTIVE script. In the third office, managers were still focusing on getting the other sections of the first contact process right.

IT issues

Despite these improvements, however, significant problems remained. A key problem highlighted by staff was the incompatibility of VANTIVE and the Labour Market System (LMS). At Contact Centres, transferring information from one system to another was time-consuming and resulted in the loss of important client information. This meant that further down the line in the Jobcentre Plus process, PAs often had no information about clients prior to the WFI (for example, their current circumstances, nature of their illness, whether they had a job to return to), and were unable to prepare for the interview in advance.

4.5 Examples of good practice

The second phase of qualitative research identified a number of areas of good practice which made evident the improved performance of First Contact Officers and Contact Centres during the first six months of the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders. Areas of good practice included:

Job shadowing

One site had developed a 'job shadowing' scheme among FCOs and PAs. This had helped to improve awareness and understanding about the different requirements of their respective roles. PAs stated that it was useful knowing what FCOs actually did and, similarly, FCOs felt that watching PAs conduct interviews with clients improved their knowledge and understanding of the overall process. It had also helped to aid communication between the Jobcentre Plus public office and the Contact Centre. FCOs and PAs in other sites mentioned that this would be particularly useful in improving overall understanding of the process.

Medical information

Several Contact Centres had medical dictionaries at staff's disposal. This had helped FCOs to identify specific conditions and had enabled staff to discuss options with clients sensitively.

Client information

One area posted Jobcentre Plus brochures to clients booked in for a PA interview. This had helped to provide clients with an awareness of what the service could provide before they attended a meeting with the PA.

Several Contact Centres sent out a 'check list' of evidence required at the WFI. This had helped to prepare clients before they attended the meeting and had accelerated the processing of their claim.

4.6 Conclusion

By the later stages of the research compared with the early stages, there was evidence of progress towards a swift, secure benefit system – for example by informing clients of supporting evidence needed when commencing their claim, and in issuing claim forms and letters. In some areas, progress in delivering an efficient service had also been made in determining the correct benefit because of the increased confidence of staff, coupled with the use of the VANTIVE scripts.

The main factors hindering progress were found to be a lack of training on benefits and VANTIVE and the incompatibility between the VANTIVE and LMS systems. JSA

clients were beginning to receive a work focus as job searches and job submissions were now taking place. However, those on non-JSA benefits were less likely to receive a work focus. Nevertheless, both JSA and non-JSA clients showed high levels of satisfaction with the service and the great majority thought it was useful.

Certain aspects of the first contact process were particularly popular with clients, especially the convenience of being able to telephone from home to initiate their claim, which was done by about half of the clients. To improve the service further, more publicity would be beneficial so more clients could follow this route.

5 Financial Assessor

5.1 Introduction

Benefit services are delivered in Jobcentre Plus Pathfinder offices through Financial Assessors (FAs), whose responsibility it is to check claim forms and supporting evidence and assess benefit entitlement and in the process deliver the Jobcentre Plus vision of 'swift, secure and professional access to benefits for those entitled to them'. This introduction of a separate meeting with an FA prior to the work focused interview was also one of the ways in which the design of Jobcentre Plus was informed by the experience of the ONE pilots, where a combined benefits/work interview had been dominated on the whole by discussion of benefits and thus had not delivered work focus with sufficient consistency.

The model for allocation of FAs to clients varied across the case-study areas. Generally, most areas were operating a pool system, whereby FAs dealt with the next client in line. In a few areas, specific FAs were allocated to clients. This was usually because the FAs had knowledge about specific benefits.

By the end of the evaluation period, most areas were operating an FA/PA model, whereby clients would see a Financial Assessor first, followed by a Personal Adviser for the WFI. In several areas, there were insufficient numbers of FAs and this had occasionally resulted in clients seeing a Personal Adviser before the Financial Assessor. Where this occurred, it proved unpopular with clients, as they preferred to have their benefit claim 'sorted out' prior to discussing work.

5.2 Quantitative customer surveys

Clients were asked in the quantitative customer surveys about the things that happened during the Financial Assessor meeting. Table 2 summarises the responses obtained from the third wave of the customer survey, which took place in February 2002, approximately in the middle of the evaluation period.

Table 2: Things that happened at the Financial Assessor meeting, by client type¹⁴

Things that happened at the Financial Assessor meeting	Percentages		
	All clients	JSA clients	Non-JSA clients
Claim form checked	100	99	100
Eligibility to claim was discussed	92	93	87
Evidence client brought with them to support the claim was checked	94	93	95
Client was asked to provide additional evidence	47	48	45
Base	450	348	100

¹⁴ These figures are taken from the third wave of the customer survey, which took place in February 2002. Similar questions were asked at waves four and five but the findings did not differ substantially from those presented here.

Three things almost invariably happened during the Financial Assessor meeting: claim forms were checked by the Financial Assessor, the client's eligibility to claim was discussed and the client brought with them any evidence required to support their claim. These things happened in 100 per cent, 92 per cent and 94 per cent of cases respectively. The client's eligibility to claim was discussed somewhat more frequently for JSA clients (in 93 per cent of cases) than for non-JSA clients (87 per cent of cases). In just under half of cases (47 per cent), the client was asked to provide additional evidence to support their claim. This proportion did not vary appreciably by client type. Overall, the quantitative customer surveys show that the main emphasis of the Financial Assessor meeting was on the checking of forms and discussion of the client's eligibility to claim.

As with the First Contact Officers, the services provided by Financial Assessors were highly regarded by clients. Around nine in 10 (91 per cent) respondents to wave three of the quantitative customer survey were either satisfied or very satisfied with the services provided by the Financial Assessor.¹⁵ In addition, almost nine in 10 respondents (85 per cent) to wave three of the survey thought that the services provided by the Financial Assessor were useful or very useful and this was particularly so for non-JSA clients, of whom 93 per cent said the Financial Assessor meeting was useful or very useful. The equivalent proportion of JSA clients was 84 per cent.¹⁶

5.3 Qualitative research (phase 1)

Phase 1 of the qualitative research found that:

- because of industrial action, the model was not being delivered in all areas and PAs were often providing temporary cover for the FA role
- the focus was generally on checking claim forms, with no additional information or advice provided
- clients were not usually informed of the benefit or the amount to be received and FAs did not usually see clients for a second time after the PA meeting.¹⁷

The first phase of the qualitative research thus found that Financial Assessors, or the Personal Advisers substituting for them on many occasions, were struggling to deliver the type of benefits system embodied in the Jobcentre Plus vision.

5.4 Qualitative research (phase 2)

The qualitative research suggested that it was the provision of a claim check that was especially popular with clients. In particular, they welcomed the opportunity to sit down face-to-face with someone to ensure that all the information needed to process their claim was present. This appeared to be especially useful for first-time clients. It helped to enhance the perception of an efficient service and made these clients more confident that their claim would proceed smoothly.

¹⁵ The proportion did not vary appreciably across waves.

¹⁶ All the percentages in this paragraph exclude clients who said the Financial Assessor meeting was 'not applicable' to them.

¹⁷ The actual processing of benefit claims was not part of the Financial Assessor's role although it did occur in some Pathfinder offices.

'I felt I'd understood the forms ... but there were a few minor blips, which would have meant they'd have sent it back if I hadn't sat down with them.' (Carer)

Despite the high levels of client satisfaction, the first phase of the qualitative research had identified important ways in which Financial Assessors were not delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision. Improvement was evident in a few areas by the time of the second phase research, although problems remained in the delivery of the Financial Assessor service.

Delivering the Financial Assessor/Personal Adviser model

Following the end of industrial action and Financial Assessors' return to work, most case-study areas were now able to deliver separate benefit claim checks conducted by FAs. However, even with the full complement of FAs in work, a few offices were still struggling to cope with heavy workloads. In some instances, PAs were taking on the claim-checking function as well as conducting WFIs in much the same way as they had done in the ONE pilots. It appeared that workloads had increased, partly as a result of the fall in the number of clients being deferred¹⁸.

Checking benefit claims

By phase 2, FAs felt more knowledgeable and confident in checking claims for non-JSA benefits, through experience gained on the job. As a result, fewer errors were occurring, which staff thought had speeded up the processing of benefit claims. However, less experienced FAs did not yet have sufficient knowledge or expertise to be able to advise clients about the status of their claim: that is, whether they would be eligible for benefit and the amount they could expect to receive. There was general reluctance and concern, even among experienced FAs, in giving out such information to clients, in case it was incorrect.

5.5 Examples of good practice

Notwithstanding the continuing problems with the delivery of benefit services that were revealed by the phase 2 qualitative research, the following examples of good practice were identified:-

Financial Assessor feedback

One site was operating an FA feedback scheme. Here, FAs filled in a proforma for each client and returned it to the Contact Centre, reporting if there was any problem with clients' claim forms at the FA meeting. The feedback proforma was also used to highlight any further information about clients that would have been beneficial for the FA to have received before the meeting. Use of this proforma helped to identify problems such as missing or incorrect claim forms. It had improved the efficiency of FA meetings and meant that less time was wasted for clients in the Jobcentre Plus public office. It had also improved the Contact Centre's efficiency in sending out the correct claim forms to clients.

Administrative support

At a number of sites, receptionists photocopied supporting evidence, which freed up FAs' time. As FAs appeared to be suffering from staff shortages and were under pressure to complete some claim checks in the allocated 20 minutes, this type of administrative support helped to ease the time pressures on them.

¹⁸ The issue of deferrals is given more detailed treatment in Chapter Eight.

Benefit-specific queries

One site had a system of designating a member of the different benefit processing teams to answer FAs' queries, through a direct telephone number. This enabled FAs to get answers to questions quickly and enhanced the efficiency of the service.

Client information

One site provided a contact number for clients in the event of any delays in receiving their benefit. This gave clients some degree of reassurance about their claim.

In one area, FAs explained what they were doing as they checked and completed the forms. The FAs reassured clients that they had submitted all the correct evidence, and that the forms had been stamped, recorded on the system and would be despatched the same day. This also reduced the likelihood of the forms being lost, and the claim then being delayed or jeopardised. Clients responded very positively, and indicated that they felt reassured and could therefore start thinking about other things.

5.6 Conclusion

Both the qualitative and quantitative research suggested that clients found the Financial Assessor meeting useful and were satisfied with its contents. However, some non-JSA clients were still not receiving a swift, secure and professional benefits service by the end of the evaluation period. This was mainly because of lack of training and knowledge about non-JSA benefits on the part of some of the less experienced FAs. In a few areas it was also because of staff shortages, which resulted in rushed meetings and confusion for some clients about their eligibility for benefits and the amount they would receive.

These problems can in part be attributed to the recent industrial action, and its ending may result in an improvement in service delivery. In addition, some examples of good practice were beginning to emerge, notably in improving communications between staff performing different functions, and between FAs and clients.

6 Work focused interview

6.1 Introduction

One of the most important ways in which the design of the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders attempted to build on lessons from the ONE pilots was in the separation of the Financial Assessor function from the work focused interview. This was intended to provide more time for Personal Advisers to discuss work and to assist them in realising key aspects of the Jobcentre Plus vision: the delivery of 'a work focus to the benefits system for everyone of working age' and the provision of 'active help from Personal Advisers to help people get and keep work'.

6.2 Quantitative customer surveys

The quantitative customer surveys provided evidence of difficulties in delivering the work focus to non-JSA clients. This is illustrated by the findings in Table 3, which shows the items discussed in the meetings with the Personal Adviser, by client type.

Table 3: Items discussed with Personal Adviser, by client type¹⁹

Items discussed with the Personal Adviser	Percentages		
	All clients	JSA clients	Non-JSA clients
The purpose of the meeting	94	95	92
Client's work experience	88	93	70
Any barriers to work experienced by client	75	76	70
Help available to overcome any difficulties	68	67	71
Any suitable job opportunities	74	85	36
Advice on skills and training	52	54	43
How the client might be better off in work than on benefit	52	55	42
Other services available at the Jobcentre Plus site	66	69	56
Base	684	530	151

Non-JSA clients were less likely to have discussed certain work-related issues with the Personal Adviser. In particular, whereas almost nine out of 10 (85 per cent) JSA clients discussed suitable job opportunities in their WFI, this was the case for only about a third (36 per cent) of non-JSA clients. About a fifth (23 per cent) of non-JSA clients said such discussions were not applicable to them. The differences between JSA and non-JSA clients were not so substantial in relation to aspects of the interview that were not related to entry into work in the short-term, but they were still there. So while about half of the JSA clients received advice on skills and training (54 per cent) or discussed how they might be better off in work than on benefit (55 per cent), only about two in five non-JSA clients did so.

¹⁹ These figures are taken from the third wave of the customer survey, which took place in February 2002. Similar questions were asked at waves four and five but the findings did not differ substantially from those presented here.

It is also important to note that whereas about two-thirds (66 per cent) of JSA clients who responded to the wave three survey regarded the PA meeting as the most useful element of the Jobcentre Plus service, this was the case for only about half (54 per cent) of the non-JSA clients. This is not to say, however, that non-JSA clients were dissatisfied with the service provide by Personal Advisers. In common with JSA clients, in fact, around nine in 10 of them said at the wave three survey that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the PA meeting. Similarly, around nine in 10 respondents to the wave three survey from both client types agreed that the Personal Adviser meeting was either useful or very useful.

6.3 Qualitative research (phase 1)

The first phase of qualitative research suggested that the work focused interview (WFI) was not achieving its objectives, especially for non-JSA clients. Its main findings were that:

- there was a low-key approach to discussing work – employment was not discussed in any depth with non-JSA clients unless they were interested in work as a foreseeable option for the short, medium or longer term
- for those clients who were interested in work, active help was usually provided, with job searches conducted, information and advice given and follow-up meetings arranged
- the main message for most non-JSA clients was to come back when they felt in a position to consider work or training.

6.4 Qualitative research (phase 2)

The second phase of qualitative research found that relatively little progress had been made in delivering Work Focused Interviews to non-JSA clients. There was evidence that Personal Advisers tended to take a different approach with non-JSA compared with JSA clients and that there were also some substantial differences in treatment between clients claiming different types of non-JSA benefit. The lack of work focus was particularly apparent for those clients who said they were not interested in work. Non-JSA clients were over-represented in this group. The research also uncovered important evidence on the barriers to providing a greater work focus and on the limitations on giving information, advice and making referrals exhibited by Personal Advisers. Each of these areas is examined in detail below.

Different approaches to JSA and non-JSA clients

Whereas Personal Advisers tended to take a direct approach in explaining the purpose of the Work Focused Interview to JSA clients, their approach with non-JSA clients was less direct, and PAs played down the work focus. The work element was often obscured by the emphasis on offering help and advice. Personal Advisers felt that a less direct approach was more appropriate for non-JSA clients to build a rapport with them, rather than overwhelm them with a strong work focus straight away. Personal Advisers were also concerned about upsetting carers, sick and disabled clients and bereaved clients by introducing the subject of work.

As a result of this low-key approach, non-JSA clients – especially those who appeared not to be in a position to consider work in the short term – were often confused about why they were at the meeting. They did not understand what use it could be to them. In

many cases, the work focus was not emphasised during the rest of the interview, with no discussion of whether clients might be able to move into work in the future. Clients therefore remained unsure as to the purpose of the interview.

The content of Work Focused Interviews was often determined by whether the client expressed an interest in work at an early stage of the interview.

Clients who were interested in work

For clients who were interested in work, a work focus was provided, regardless of client type. These interviews tended to last longer than for clients who were not interested in work, and the clients viewed work to be a realistic option that was available to them either immediately or at some point in the near future. Most non-JSA clients in this group were lone parents, although there were also some claiming sickness and disability related benefits.

Among those clients who were interested in work, many held positive views about the WFI. For some this was because they had received helpful and practical information on such issues as finding and returning to work, and training opportunities. Others reported the positive effect the WFI had had on their confidence and the encouragement they had been given to consider work and pursue their goals. Some clients who were interested in work were disappointed with the WFI, mainly because they did not feel the meeting discussed work in sufficient detail, or they did not receive the advice or information that they were looking for.

Clients who were not interested in work

For clients who were not interested in employment however, work was not discussed in any depth. Interviews were brief and discussions about employment prospects and aspirations superficial.²⁰ This group of clients included mostly sick and disabled clients and carers, as well as some lone parents. They did not consider work to be an option available to them in the short or medium term. For clients claiming health-related benefits, their main priority was getting better. The key concern for carers was their caring role; they could not foresee when these responsibilities might cease.

There was limited or no probing and exploration by PAs of how clients' barriers to work could be resolved. Nor did PAs explore clients' actual relationship to the labour market, such as how they felt about work and under what circumstances it might be a viable option.

Most clients who were not interested in work had neutral attitudes towards the WFI. Whilst some were unaware that the interview was supposed to be work focused (because it had not covered work in any depth), others who felt that work was not an immediate option for them were pleased that they had not been 'pressured' by the PA into looking for work. Some also thought that whilst work may not be suitable for them at that time, it was useful to know what would be available for them in the future. A few non-JSA

²⁰ These findings are similar to those revealed by evaluation of the ONE pilots, which also found that clients' relationship to the labour market was not always well explored. It was primarily the highly motivated clients who received more substantial support in relation to moving into work (Davies et al, 2001; Davies and Johnson, 2001).

clients who were not in the position to look for work expressed negative views towards the WFI, mainly because they felt that a discussion of work was not appropriate given their circumstances at the time.

Barriers to discussing work

Personal Advisers' understanding of their role

Personal Advisers viewed their role as being information givers – i.e. to tell clients what help was available. Many PAs emphasised that their role was not to push or force clients into work if they were not ready. As a result, PAs did not encourage talk about work or continue to discuss work if they perceived that clients were not interested in doing so. This was because clients might have felt that they were being pressurised.

Personal Advisers' understanding of Work Focused Interviews

There was evidence that some PAs had a narrow understanding of the objective of WFIs. They saw the purpose of the interview as being to get non-JSA clients into work, rather than looking more broadly at wider objectives of bringing clients closer to the labour market, even if the steps made were small. Some PAs reported that they were concerned about being able to meet Jobcentre Plus targets for non-JSA clients. This might have been an underlying factor in their focus on job outcomes.

Preconceptions about non-JSA clients

Some PAs had preconceptions that sick and disabled clients and carers were not able to work or would not be interested in talking about work. As a result, for some clients the WFI did not go as far as they would have liked.

'I think I brought up work. Although on IB you're not supposed to be looking for work I like to keep work focused even when I'm feeling unwell ... I explained I'd like to use the facilities downstairs. He [the PA] didn't ask me what kind of work I was looking for or look for vacancies.' (Sick/disabled client)

Personal Advisers' confidence

Many PAs did not feel confident or comfortable about discussing employment with clients who were claiming health-related benefits and carers who were unable to work. This was because they had not dealt with these client groups before. Personal Advisers also felt that they had not received adequate training on how to deal with what were perceived as more 'difficult' clients.

The areas where PAs felt particularly anxious and uncomfortable were:

- discussing work with people with mental health problems
- asking clients questions about the nature of their health problem, which was felt to be a very personal subject; this was a particular problem because PAs did not usually have this information on LMS before the appointment.

In contrast, PAs did not have the same concerns about conducting Work Focused Interviews with lone parents. Personal Advisers reported that lone parents usually wanted to return to work at some stage, and so were more interested in talking about work. Apart from concerns about childcare, lone parents did not possess the range of barriers to work

of some other non-JSA clients. Consequently, PAs felt that there was more they could offer to lone parents, such as information on training courses and job search.

Lack of prior information on LMS

An additional difficulty for PAs in conducting Work Focused Interviews was the lack of prior information about clients on LMS. Information about clients collected by First Contact Officers was not usually passed onto Personal Advisers via LMS. This meant that PAs could not prepare for interviews in advance.

Limitations on giving information, advice and making referrals

PAs were often unable to give clients appropriate information and advice and make referrals because they did not have the knowledge to do so. This was largely blamed on insufficient training. Staff identified the following training gaps:

- information on what New Deals could offer clients. One PA Manager felt that PAs needed skills in '*diagnosing eligibility for early entry into New Deals*'
- information on tax credits, such as eligibility for WFTC
- how to conduct in-work benefit calculations, which were felt to be quite complex to do
- information on the availability of training courses and training providers.

Personal Advisers reported that the following information would be of help:

- information on NDDP in the form of feedback from NDDP Job Brokers on the type of services they offer and the types of clients they deal with; this would help PAs to make appropriate referrals
- more guidance on new initiatives, but in a simplified form.

Evidence of progress from phase 1 to phase 2 of the qualitative research

In spite of the barriers outlined above, some progress was discernible in relation to the Work Focused Interview by phase 2 of the qualitative research. For example:

- the delivery of separate FA and PA interviews in one area which had been severely affected by industrial action; previously, PAs were also having to check clients' claim forms
- increased confidence among PAs in conducting WFIs, although the research did not find any evidence that this led to more in-depth discussions about work
- greater awareness among PAs and Delivery Managers of the need to caseload because of the introduction of local targets for caseloading and job entries; as a result, caseloading was being offered to a small number of non-JSA clients who were close to the labour market or viewed as likely to move into work in the future.

6.5 Examples of good practice

While work focused discussions with non-JSA clients remained limited, even towards the end of the evaluation period, the second phase of the qualitative research did produce several example of good practice, which show how WFIs might be used to deliver the Jobcentre Plus vision of a 'work focus to the benefit system'.

Staff interviewed during the research revealed the following examples of practice that had helped them perform their role better:

- In one area, PAs had started to build links with local organisations such as those dealing with drug and alcohol problems. The aim was to expand their knowledge of local support services in order to pass this onto clients. It had also raised PAs' awareness about some of the issues and problems faced by clients with these difficulties.
- In another area, PAs had attended a meeting with local New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) Job Brokers to find out more about them. However, the meeting was not felt to have been adequate in giving PAs all the information they needed because the Job Brokers had not had enough opportunity to talk individually about their services. It was suggested that meetings with individual Job Brokers might have been better.
- In one area, PAs had access to a file giving information on local provision and support services.
- In another area, PAs had attended an event run by the staff of a ONE pilot area, who talked about their experiences of non-JSA clients and how they approached them. PAs had found this very helpful.
- In one area, the PA Manager had sat in on Work Focused Interviews with PAs and given them feedback on how they were doing and given some 'hints and tips'. PAs felt much more confident in their ability after this. However, observational studies showed that interviews in this area were no more work focused than in other areas.
- PAs in several areas said they would like to be able to spend time observing more experienced PAs in other areas conducting Work Focused Interviews, as well as observing specialists such as Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) and New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) Advisers, in order to learn from them. In several areas, PAs regularly met to share their experiences and learn from each other.
- PAs who had received written guidance in simple and easy-to-read booklet format were very positive about this assistance.
- In one area, less experienced PAs were placed next to or in close proximity to those who were more experienced, so that they could 'buddy up' to ask questions when required.

6.6 Conclusion

It appears that PAs have particular difficulty in dealing with sick and disabled clients and with carers. This is because these clients are not usually interested in work at the time of their interview, because they have other priorities and cannot foresee when they might be able to enter the labour market. These clients have a wide range of barriers to work and additional support needs.

Two of the main barriers to delivering a work focus are: lack of confidence among PAs in dealing with sick and disabled clients and carers; and lack of knowledge of the help and services available. The main lesson from the research therefore appears to be that for PAs to deliver a work focus to these clients, a significant amount of training is required. Training is needed on how to conduct interviews and engage with these clients, as well as information on the range of services and help that PAs can offer to clients.

In addition, for some PAs, greater emphasis on the broader objective of moving clients closer to the labour market might offset a narrow focus on submitting clients to jobs. Having more information about clients on the Labour Market System (LMS) in advance of the Work Focused Interview would also enable PAs to prepare and tailor the work focus to individuals.

The research findings highlight a tension between PAs' understanding of their role and their ability to carry it out. PAs saw their role as being information givers and as signposting clients to specialist services and support. However, many PAs reported that they did not have the skills or confidence to engage effectively with non-JSA clients. Nor did they have the knowledge to give clients relevant information or to make appropriate referrals.

Overall, therefore, while the design of the Work Focused Interview in Jobcentre Plus had responded to the shortcomings of the ONE pilots, problems remained in delivering a work focus to the benefit system for non-JSA clients, especially sick or disabled clients, and carers. This is reflected in the findings of the quantitative customer surveys, which showed that a work focus was more common for JSA clients, who were also more likely than non-JSA clients to say that the Personal Adviser meeting was the most useful part of Jobcentre Plus. By the end of the period covered by the evaluation evidence, however, some progress had been made. Confidence among some PAs in conducting Work Focused Interviews had improved, and one area that had been severely disrupted by industrial action was now able to deliver separate FA and PA interviews. The later qualitative research suggested that where PAs had been able to deliver a more in-depth work focus (giving information, advice and support), there were many positive responses from clients. Furthermore, examples were emerging of good practice that, if spread more widely, would make delivery of the Jobcentre Plus vision more likely.

7 Caseloading

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the delivery of caseloading meetings to non-JSA clients. JSA clients are not examined here, as they are caseloaded in line with their Jobseeker's Agreement. The term 'caseloading' is best understood as the provision of a package of on-going support to help people into work, or to prepare for movements into work in the future. Caseloading is usually through the voluntary New Deals, such as the New Deal for Lone Parents and the New Deal for Disabled People, but may also be through specialist advisers, such as Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs). Where there is no New Deal available, the Personal Adviser who carries out the work focused interview can provide help and support to clients.

Personal Advisers' views as to what constituted caseloading varied, although for the most part it was consistent with the definition given above. Caseloading was undertaken by PAs through face-to-face meetings and by contacting clients by telephone. Where clients re-contacted the Jobcentre Plus service for help or advice and were offered another meeting with their PA, this was also regarded as caseloading. Some PAs reported that they viewed caseloading meetings as being focused on submitting job-ready clients for job vacancies. Others viewed caseloading as an option that clients should be able to access as and when they felt it was appropriate to their needs. A few PAs viewed caseloading as an even more intensive process whereby they could help clients to identify and address their barriers to work, and gradually move towards and into the labour market. Jobcentre Plus provision also includes more formal provisions for ongoing contact with clients in that there are three year trigger interviews for sick and disabled people and carers and six months and twelve month reviews for lone parents, but the timespan of the early Jobcentre Plus evaluation research was too short to include any assessment of these meetings.

The Jobcentre Plus vision is intended to deliver 'a much better service for everyone who needs help' and to provide 'active help from Personal Advisers to help people get and keep work'. In the first instance, this support is provided through the Work Focused Interview. One purpose of the WFI is to persuade non-JSA clients to take up voluntary caseloading, in order to help them find work, or move closer toward the labour market. The caseloading strategy for Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders was designed to build upon shortcomings revealed by evaluation of the ONE pilots, in that it was to be concentrated on those in most need of help so they could become job ready through referral to New Deal programmes where these are available.

So for lone parents, caseloading would be provided by an NDLP Personal Adviser. Those claiming Incapacity Benefit, are referred by the PA to a New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) Job Broker or a Disability Employment Adviser, who would undertake the caseloading. For all other non-JSA clients (such as carers and widows and those who could, but who chose not to, join NDDP), their PA could give help and support. In this way, Jobcentre Plus provision seeks to make use of specialist personal advisers, who are experienced in dealing with lone parents or people, to help such clients overcome barriers to work. In the ONE pilots, PAs tended to do virtually all of the caseloading themselves. An additional feature that was introduced with the Pathfinders was voluntary action plans for each client, to set out steps and timeframes to move the clients towards work.

7.2 Quantitative customer surveys²¹

The quantitative customer surveys suggested that being caseloaded was relatively unusual for non-JSA clients. Overall, about a sixth of non-JSA client respondents said they were referred to the Jobcentre Plus caseload as a result of the PA meeting. Other results of the PA meeting with relevance to caseloading also suggested that it took place on a limited scale for non-JSA clients, even under a relatively broad definition:

- entered into a customer action plan (a quarter)
- were referred for help to overcome any difficulties identified during the interview (a fifth)
- had another work focused interview arranged for a later date (a tenth)
- applied for a job or a number of jobs (a tenth)
- were referred for training (a twentieth).

7.3 Qualitative research (phase 1)

The first phase of the qualitative research produced evidence largely consistent with that of the quantitative customer surveys in that caseloading was not widespread. It found that:

- in most cases, clients were not caseloaded or given any further contact details
- the main message conveyed was that clients should return either when they felt better (those claiming health-related benefits) or when they became ready to look for work (usually carers and lone parents); most non-JSA clients were aware that they could make use of voluntary follow-up if they wished
- in a few cases, follow-up was arranged with lone parents who were interested in training
- PAs and clients made oral agreements on actions during the WFIs, but in general written action plans were not produced.

7.4 Qualitative research (phase 2)

The phase 2 qualitative research produced detailed evidence on the barriers to caseloading, which were acting to prevent it from operating in a manner consistent with the policy design. These are outlined below.

The main barriers to PAs' caseloading clients were: time constraints; staff's lack of confidence; and poor client understanding of the role of caseloading.

Time constraints

Many PAs identified lack of time as being one of the key factors preventing them from following up caseloaded clients. It also discouraged them from caseloading clients in the first instance.

In most case-study areas, PAs either had time slots for caseloading built into their diaries, or indicative caseload sizes (some had limited caseloads of five to six, others had 15 or more). However, PAs reported that other demands on their time, including the Work

²¹ The proportions in this section are averaged across the five waves of the survey. There was little tendency for the percentages to vary appreciably across waves.

Focused Interviews, administration or client enquiries, cut into the time allocated for following up on caseloading. Some PAs reported that for this reason they were unable to arrange meetings with all caseloaded clients, and instead contacted them by telephone.

Time constraints also appeared to have an impact on whether PAs were able to explain the caseloading option and explore whether this would be appropriate for clients.

Staff confidence

The degree to which PAs undertook caseloading also depended on the confidence and ability with which they were able to 'sell' the option of caseloading. This depended on how comfortable PAs were in discussing the prospect of work with some non-JSA clients. It also depended particularly on how well they were able to explore the issue of the timescale under which clients might be able to return to work. For example, lone parents, who were viewed by PAs as being more likely to move into work in the short to medium term, were caseloaded more frequently than other types of non-JSA clients, who were not as close to the labour market.

Many PAs indicated that they did not feel very confident in dealing with some groups of non-JSA clients, including those with more severe health problems, those who had been bereaved, or people with caring responsibilities. These PAs did not feel confident about promoting participation in a voluntary activity such as caseloading. In some case-study areas, PAs had been offered disability awareness training. They indicated that this had helped them in discussing work with sick and disabled clients.

The confidence with which PAs promoted caseloading also depended on their understanding of what they could offer to clients. Some PAs indicated that they had not received sufficient training in what they could provide through caseloading. In particular, some PAs reported feeling that there was probably more they should be able to offer lone parents, including information on subsidies, advice on in-work benefits, and help with costs towards training or childcare. Personal Advisers also felt that they were able to provide limited support to clients claiming health-related benefits, apart from signposting to Job Brokers.

Client understanding of the role of caseloading

The lack of client understanding of caseloading services meant that they were unlikely to 'buy in' to caseloading support and return to the service, even if there was support they might have benefited from.

Evidence of progress

These barriers to caseloading notwithstanding, the phase 2 qualitative research found that there had been some marked changes in relation to caseloading, compared with phase 1 of the qualitative research:

- PAs and Delivery Managers had a higher degree of awareness of the need to caseload, largely because of the introduction of caseloading targets and job entry targets.²²

²² Caseloading targets were introduced at the local level in many areas, whereas the job entry targets were the result of national policy. These job entry targets gave priority to IS and IB claimants.

- allocated time was available for caseloading in some areas, although time constraints still impacted on PAs' ability to caseload clients effectively
- caseloading of those closer to the labour market (for example, those with short-term illnesses or injuries, lone parents and some carers), and of those who were viewed as being likely to move into work in the future, was taking place.

7.5 Examples of good practice

While significant problems with the caseloading process were still apparent in phase 2 of the qualitative research, a number of examples of good practice had also emerged:

- In one area, PAs were observed to identify key barriers to work (particularly English-language needs) and to refer clients to a local English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provider. A further appointment was arranged for a date within three months. PAs explained that they would then be able to see if clients' English was good enough to move into work, and if there was any other help that they needed.
- Some PAs identified a range of types of support that could be offered in subsequent meetings. They asked clients whether this support was something that they would benefit from, thus getting them to 'buy in' to the caseloading process.
- In some case-study areas, PAs had been offered disability awareness training. They indicated that this had helped them in discussing work with clients with disabilities.

7.6 Conclusion

Early qualitative research showed that there was a lack of awareness and confidence among staff around caseloading, but research six months into the Pathfinders found that there was more awareness of the role of caseloading among staff and steps had clearly been taken towards delivering a caseloading service more consistent with the Jobcentre Plus vision. However, staff reported a number of factors which meant that caseloading was still not being undertaken as much as they thought it should be. Many of these factors were also significant in other parts of the Jobcentre Plus process, for example PAs' confidence and ability to deal with some non-JSA clients, and time constraints.

In some areas, PAs were aware of the specific help and support that could be offered to their clients following referral to New Deal. However, other PAs reported that they were confused about referrals to New Deal and specialist advisers.

Clients reported having a limited awareness of the types of help and support available through Jobcentre Plus; few therefore returned to the service on a voluntary basis.

8 Deferrals

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents evidence on practice in relation to the deferral of Work Focused Interviews for non-JSA clients.²³ There are no groups of clients for whom automatic deferrals are made; staff are expected to explore individual circumstances. The ESCOM Guidance²⁴ suggests that deferrals may be considered where clients are too distressed (through bereavement or relationship breakdown), too ill (or about to go into hospital, or recuperating from a serious illness or operation), or going through a life-changing event (having a baby or taking on a major caring responsibility). Where clients are still employed and are on sick leave with a medical certificate for four weeks, the guidance suggests that they be deferred for the length of their medical certificate plus two weeks. After that, if clients have not returned to work it is up to PAs to decide whether they should be seen at that time. This is the only circumstance where guidance is given on the length of the deferral.

In cases of deferral, a benefit claim pack should be sent to clients. They then forward the completed forms and evidence to the appropriate benefit processing office. Where deferral is agreed, clients should be allocated to a PA, given their contact details, and a review date set for the WFI.

8.2 Qualitative research (phase 1)

It was clear from the evidence presented in phase 1 of the qualitative research that a high proportion of non-JSA clients were having their WFIs deferred during the early stages of the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders²⁵. Nevertheless, PAs reported that they were interviewing clients who they believed should have been deferred at the first contact stage. Three main categories were highlighted:

- clients with short-term (minor) illnesses or injuries
- a small number of clients with longer-term or more severe illness or injury
- other very distressed clients, including those who had just lost a close relative.

In these situations, PAs deferred or waived the WFI altogether, or conducted a short WFI to avoid clients having to return at a later date.

8.3 Qualitative research (phase 2)

The key change apparent in phase 2 of the qualitative research was that the number of deferrals had reduced significantly across all case-study areas. As a result, more clients were attending WFIs and were accessing support and advice at the start of their claim for benefits.

The reasons that staff gave for this drop in the levels of deferrals were:

²³ JSA clients cannot have their WFI deferred or waived.

²⁴ ESCOM is an electronic database containing advice and guidance for Jobcentre Plus staff.

²⁵ It was not possible to explore this issue in any detail through the quantitative customer surveys because it proved impossible to secure a sufficiently large number of interviews with deferred or waived clients for the results to be statistically reliable.

- greater management attention on the issue of deferrals, particularly at Contact Centres;
- staff at Contact Centres and public offices felt more confident about dealing with clients sensitively, through additional training and guidance as well as on-the-job experience; they viewed WFIs as something positive for clients.

8.4 Examples of good practice

Several examples of good practice in deferrals emerged from the phase 2 qualitative research. For example,

- Several case-study areas indicated that they had devised their own policy sheets to advise staff on deferrals; these included suggested timescales for the length of deferrals.
- In some areas, deferrals had to be justified and authorised by team leaders, which gave staff the opportunity to discuss particular cases and the reasons why they should or should not have been deferred.
- In one area, PAs completed feedback forms on deferrals to indicate to colleagues where they felt that deferrals could or should have been made.
- Several Contact Centres had clear systems for dealing with deferrals, including providing PAs with contact details and sending out letters to clients explaining what deferral meant.
- In one area, PAs were positive about a course on deferrals that they had attended. The activities had included looking at examples of clients and deciding if they should be deferred or waived and role-play exercises.
- One public office was starting up a new initiative to deal with deferrals. It was likely to include case conferencing for deferred clients, to decide which ones were the most likely to benefit from support and call them back into the office.
- In one area, protocols had been established for automatic deferral at the Contact Centre stage for clients on certain programmes. Examples included clients who were undertaking dependency treatment programmes (they were deferred for the length of the programme plus two weeks) and those who had recently entered a local women's refuge (deferred for four weeks).
- Job shadowing occurred so that Contact Centre staff and local office staff could gain a better understanding of each other's roles.
- In a limited number of areas, non-JSA clients could choose which Jobcentre Plus public office to attend for their WFI. This improved access for some clients or gave them the opportunity to attend a smaller, quieter or familiar office.

8.5 Conclusion

Staff felt that guidance provided on deferrals was vague, so local offices had developed their own interpretation of it. This meant that inconsistent approaches to deferrals were being adopted. Nevertheless, by the end of the period covered by the evaluation several areas were developing good practice in their deferral systems.

The level of deferrals had reduced significantly across all case-study areas by the time of the phase 2 qualitative research. As a result, more clients were attending WFIs and

accessing support and advice at the start of their claim for benefits. This resulted in PAs being exposed to a wider range of non-JSA clients.

Most Jobcentre Plus public offices had systems in place to ensure that deferred clients had a WFI when appropriate. However, a couple of offices expressed concern that there may have been clients who had not been re-contacted when they should have been.

There may be a need for further specific training and support on deferrals. Home visits could be offered to clients who could benefit from a WFI, but face difficulties in accessing the Jobcentre Plus public office.

9 Levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus

9.1 Introduction

References have been made throughout this report to the relatively high levels of client satisfaction with the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders that were identified by the early evaluation evidence. In addition, reference was made in the chapters on First contact, the Financial Assessor and the Work Focused Interview, to the degree of usefulness clients attributed to the services offered by each element of Jobcentre Plus. It was invariably the case that the great majority of respondents interviewed as part of the quantitative customer surveys thought each element was either useful or very useful. This chapter draws together some of this material and also explores in greater depth client perceptions of the usefulness of different elements of Jobcentre Plus provision.

9.2 Client satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services

The quantitative customer surveys asked respondents to rate each element of Jobcentre Plus provision according to whether they were very satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with that aspect. Table 4 reports the percentage of respondents who were either very satisfied or satisfied with each element of provision for each wave of the survey and by type of client.

Table 4: Levels of satisfaction by aspect of Jobcentre Plus provision and client type

Aspect of provision	<i>Per cent very satisfied or satisfied</i>									
	JSA, month 1	JSA, month 2	JSA, month 3	JSA, month 4	JSA, month 5	Non-JSA, month 1	Non-JSA, month 2	Non-JSA, month 3	Non-JSA, month 4	Non-JSA, month 5
First Contact	85	87	87	85	84	88	88	84	88	86
Financial ²⁶ Assessor	92	92	91	92	92	93	94	89	95	86
Personal Adviser	89	90	89	88	91	90	90	88	88	90

Four main findings emerge from Table 4. First, levels of satisfaction with each aspect of Jobcentre Plus provision were high, with levels of satisfaction never falling below 84 per cent and rising as high as 95 per cent. Second, there was some variation across aspect of provision in terms of satisfaction levels, but this was not marked. Mean levels of satisfaction across survey month and client type tended to be highest for the services provided by the Financial Assessor (92 per cent), followed by the Personal Adviser (89 per cent) and then the First Contact (86 per cent). Third, there was no difference between JSA and non-JSA clients in their levels of satisfaction. Each client type was satisfied in 89 per cent of cases on average across survey month and aspect of Jobcentre Plus provision. Four, there was no discernible tendency for levels of satisfaction to alter in any systematic way from the beginning of the evaluation period to the end. This is perhaps surprising given the improvements in provision that were identified by the qualitative

²⁶ The percentages in this row exclude clients who said that the Financial Assessor meeting was 'not applicable' to them

research, but as satisfaction levels were so high at month 1 the scope for them to rise further would of course be limited.

9.3 The element of Jobcentre Plus provision that clients found most useful

As earlier chapters of the report showed, the majority of clients who participated in the surveys reported that they had found first contact and the meetings with the Financial Assessor and Personal Adviser to be useful. When asked to say which aspect of the service overall they had found to be most useful, most respondents had an opinion on this matter and in the case of both JSA and non-JSA clients this was invariably the service offered by the Personal Adviser. Table 5 summarises the responses.

Table 5: Aspect of Jobcentre Plus perceived to be most useful - by aspect of provision and client type

Aspect of provision	<i>Column percentages</i>									
	JSA, month 1	JSA, month 2	JSA, month 3	JSA, month 4	JSA, month 5	Non-JSA, month 1	Non-JSA, month 2	Non-JSA, month 3	Non-JSA, month 4	Non-JSA, month 5
First Contact	10	10	10	12	9	11	17	16	17	16
Financial Assessor	7	8	7	10	9	17	18	16	18	15
Personal Adviser	65	67	66	63	63	53	44	54	50	50
Other	14	10	12	11	10	14	14	10	14	15
Don't know	4	5	6	3	2	5	7	4	2	2

The Personal Adviser service was regarded by JSA clients as most useful in 63-67 per cent of cases across survey month, while non-JSA clients concurred in 44-54 per cent of cases on the same basis. This means the Personal Adviser service can be regarded as emphatically the most useful, since no other element of Jobcentre Plus was rated most useful by more than 18 per cent of either JSA or non-JSA clients in any of the five survey months. The usefulness of the PA service might be partly explained by the fact that, in many areas during the early part of the evaluation period, PAs were carrying out the FA function as well, but against this there was no tendency for the perceived usefulness of the Personal Adviser service to decline as their function narrowed (appropriately) towards the end of the evaluation period.

What *is* clear from Table 5 is that JSA clients were more likely than non-JSA clients to regard the PA service as being the most useful (65 per cent on average across survey month, compared with 50 per cent of non-JSA clients). This finding was highlighted in Chapter Six and is reflective both of the greater relevance that the Work Focused Interview was perceived to have for JSA as opposed to non-JSA clients, from the viewpoint of both clients and staff.

Another difference, albeit a smaller one, emerges between JSA and non-JSA clients in relation to the element of Jobcentre Plus provision that the next largest proportion of respondents saw as most useful. This was the First Contact service in the case of JSA

clients but the Financial Assessor in the case of non-JSA clients. An average of 10 per cent of JSA clients across survey month regarded First Contact as being most useful, while eight per cent regarded the Financial Assessor as offering most help. For non-JSA clients, the equivalent proportions were 15 per cent for First Contact and 17 per cent for the Financial Assessor. Non-JSA clients were considerably more likely than JSA clients, therefore, to regard the Financial Assessor to be providing the most useful service. This probably reflects the greater tendency for non-JSA clients to regard the Jobcentre Plus service as being predominantly about benefits, whereas for JSA clients there was a greater emphasis on work.²⁷

9.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined levels of satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus and explored client perceptions of the usefulness of different elements of service provision. It is clear that clients were satisfied with Jobcentre Plus from very soon after the Pathfinder offices went 'live' and that this was maintained for the five to six months of the evaluation period. This is obviously a positive finding and should be given due weight in the early assessment of Jobcentre Plus performance. It should be noted, however, that levels of satisfaction with the ONE pilots were also high and that this coincided with a relatively poor performance on the part of the pilots that extended beyond the early stages of their evaluation. Levels of satisfaction with a programme or service are not necessarily correlated that closely with its performance. Another point to note is that satisfaction levels with ONE were relatively high compared with the ONE control areas so that the existence of this greater satisfaction could be established with statistical reliability. It is not possible to do this in the case of Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders because of course there is no control group against which to compare their performance. The reported findings on satisfaction are, therefore, more indicative than definitive.

²⁷ While relatively low proportions of respondents identified the services provided by the First Contact Officer and the Financial Assessor as being the *most* useful element of Jobcentre Plus provision, this should not be taken to mean that their services were not considered useful in an absolute sense. As chapters Four and Five made clear, these aspects of provision were considered useful by the great majority of clients.

10 Conclusions and recommendations

10.1 Conclusion

Evaluation evidence on the ONE pilots suggested they had not been successful in delivering a work focus to the benefits system for non-JSA clients. The Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders were designed to overcome many of the limitations revealed by evaluation of the ONE pilots. High levels of satisfaction among Jobcentre Plus clients notwithstanding, early research on the Pathfinders, undertaken shortly after they were launched, provided little evidence that they had done so, but research undertaken six months into the Pathfinders showed more signs of progress. The extent of this has varied quite appreciably, however, across the different elements of Jobcentre Plus provision. After a difficult start that was adversely affected by industrial action, First Contact Officers have become reasonably successful in establishing the correct benefit for claimants and explaining the evidence that is required when attending the Work Focused Interview, while Financial Assessors have proved able to check claim forms to the satisfaction of clients, despite some remaining gaps in their knowledge of non-JSA benefits. A major gap in progress however, has related to the WFI itself. Despite being theoretically freed from the need to discuss benefits, PAs tend still only to conduct in-depth discussions on routes into work or movement closer to the labour market with those non-JSA clients who explicitly express an interest in work. Progress has been somewhat more forthcoming in relation to caseloading and deferrals, where increased management attention has led to an increase in the number of non-JSA clients who have taken up voluntary caseloading and a reduction in the number who have had their WFI deferred.

The evaluation of the early stages of Jobcentre Plus provided evidence of improvement from the ONE pilots to Jobcentre Plus, and during the first six months of the Pathfinders, whilst also identified areas of the service that required further attention to ensure they met the Jobcentre Plus vision. In many cases, these were found by the research to be common across different aspects of provision.

Staff's understanding of their role

Some FCOs were unsure about their role in conducting job searches and job submissions with non-JSA clients. They thought it was the responsibility of PAs, who would be better able to do this work. This was one reason why job searches were not being undertaken with non-JSA clients.

Overall, a low-key approach to discussing work was adopted. Personal Advisers saw their role as being information givers, that is to tell clients what help was available, but not to pressurise them into work. This meant that PAs did not continue to talk about work if clients were perceived as not interested.

Staff's confidence and ability in discussing work with non-JSA clients

Generally, staff did not feel confident or comfortable in discussing work with clients who appeared to be unable to work because of sickness, disability or caring responsibilities. Contact Centre staff reported feeling uncomfortable about conducting the employment history and job search section of the VANTIVE script with such clients. Furthermore, in the early months of Jobcentre Plus, staff's lack of confidence in explaining the WFI to clients had led to a high number of deferrals. Some PAs in particular reported feeling anxious and uncomfortable about discussing work with people with mental health difficulties and asking clients personal questions about the nature of their health problem.

As a result, they did not feel confident in promoting participation in any voluntary action such as caseloading.

Staff's preconceptions about non-JSA clients

First Contact Officers and PAs tended to assume that non-JSA clients with certain illnesses or impairments and carers would not be interested in talking about work, nor would they be able to work. This may have been the case for some clients, but others were interested in talking about their future employment options if their circumstances changed. These clients felt that the work focus could have been pursued further.

It appears that staff are needing time to adapt to the culture shift introduced under Jobcentre Plus, whereby the work focus is extended to clients not obliged to be available for work.

Staff's knowledge of benefit issues

Some staff, across the different Jobcentre Plus roles, reported that they did not have the necessary knowledge and expertise to conduct their jobs effectively. Inexperienced FCOs felt that they did not have enough knowledge of the benefits system to establish some clients' eligibility for benefits, although this situation improved after phase 1 of the qualitative research. Some FAs reported a lack of knowledge and expertise on all the non-JSA benefits to be able to give clients information on the status of their claim, and to answer more in-depth questions about benefits. Errors in checking claim forms were still being made by less experienced FAs (although this too had improved), which held up the processing of benefit claims.

IT systems

A key problem highlighted by staff was the incompatibility of the VANTIVE and LMS systems. At Contact Centres, transferring information from one system to another was time-consuming and resulted in the loss of important client information. Consequently, PAs often had no information about clients prior to the WFI (for example, their current circumstances, nature of their illness, whether they had a job to return to), and were unable to prepare for the interview in advance.

Workloads and time constraints

Many staff reported that they had heavy workloads and limited time to carry out some activities. Lack of time discouraged PAs from caseloading clients. Consequently, they were only able to caseload a small number of clients, or were unable to follow up those clients they said they would re-contact. Other demands on PAs' time when they were not conducting WFIs (for example, administration and answering client enquiries) cut into diary time allocated to follow-up and caseloading.

10.2 Recommendations

Some overall recommendations which would assist progress in delivering services as intended in the Jobcentre Plus vision are made below.

Further staff training and information

The research found that staff in new Jobcentre Plus roles required additional training. It is unlikely that all the gaps in staff's skills and knowledge could be filled through on-the-job experience alone:

- First Contact Officers need more training on the benefits than can be claimed through Jobcentre Plus, and more time for training on VANTIVE at the initial roll-out stage.
- First Contact Officers and PAs both reported a need for training on how to deal with non-JSA clients. FCOs wanted guidance on how to deal sensitively with clients who were reluctant to attend, and on how to 'sell' the benefits of WFIs to clients. PAs expressed a need for training on how to approach clients who were distressed or who had serious health problems (disability awareness training had helped PAs in one area to discuss work with clients who were ill or had impairments).
- PAs also wanted more practical training and guidance on how to conduct WFIs – how to structure them and what to say to clients.
- Among PAs the following knowledge gaps were identified with regard to the services and help available to clients – New Deals (services provided and eligibility criteria); tax credits and in-work benefit calculations; available training courses and providers; and local support groups and networks.

Suggestions for improving training courses were for more practical training using case studies and role play, and opportunities to observe more experienced staff, such as specialist NDLP Advisers or DEAs, to learn from them. Staff also requested that training courses occur nearer to 'go live', rather than months in advance, as it was difficult to put into practice what had been learnt some time ago.

Enhanced communication lines among different roles within the Jobcentre Plus process

Jobcentre Plus staff working at different stages of the process appeared at times to operate in isolation from their colleagues further down or up the line. Establishing lines of communication among the various roles would assist progress by enabling staff to:

- share expertise, for example between benefit experts within benefit processing teams and less experienced FAs
- develop good practice by feeding back directly any problems and issues to those staff involved, for example any problems in the process between FAs and FCOs, or between PAs and FCOs
- develop understanding of each other's roles; for example, FCOs who had a good understanding of the PA role would be able to explain in more detail to clients about Work Focused Interviews.

Suggestions for improving communications included: job shadowing, which was being introduced in some areas; and having designated contact staff within each of the Jobcentre Plus roles for quick and direct lines of communication.

There was also evidence of a need for improved communication within Jobcentre Plus roles, through staff meetings and case conferencing, so that expertise could be shared and good practice developed.

Publicity and information for clients

Further campaigns advertising the Contact Centre service and telephone number would be desirable, so that clients would be aware that they can initiate their benefit claim from home. Currently, clients take a variety of routes before getting to the Contact Centre.

Clients also need to be given more information about the services provided beyond the first contact stage (such as contact numbers for following up benefit claims, and a leaflet telling them about the WFI and the full range of services available under Jobcentre Plus) before they arrive for their appointment. This would enable clients to prepare and think about the issues they would like to discuss with their PA in advance. It would also raise their awareness of the available options, such as New Deals and opportunities for on-going support. Clients are unlikely to ask for help and advice if they do not know that it is available.

Improved IT systems

A single labour-market IT system which incorporated the VANTIVE script and appointment booking with PA and FA diaries would assist progress. It would save staff time and keep information located in the same place.

10.3 Overall conclusions

The findings of the early evaluations of the Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders, especially from phase 2 of the qualitative research, show that progress has been made towards delivering the Jobcentre Plus vision. Local offices have 'bedded in', staff have become more familiar with their roles, and have gained experience and confidence in carrying them out. Offices have also been helped in making progress by the ending of industrial action, the real impact of which should be apparent in subsequent research phases. However, the delivery of work focus remains uneven and is largely confined to JSA clients and to those non-JSA clients expressing a positive interest in work. A key requirement to achieve further progress is additional staff training.

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