

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 580

Jobseekers Regime test site evaluation: Qualitative research

Anne Bellis, Jane Aston and Sara Dewson

A report of research carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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The Authors

Anne Bellis is a Research Fellow in the Unemployment and Labour Market Disadvantage team at the Institute for Employment Studies and was previously a Research Fellow and Lecturer in Continuing Education at the University of Sussex. She has over 20 years' experience in adult education, both as a practitioner and researcher, specialising in the experiences of educationally excluded groups such as older learners, women returners and people from black and minority ethnic and refugee communities. Anne has contributed to a number of Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) projects within the fields of both labour market disadvantage and learning and skills.

Jane Aston is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Employment Studies, and has 12 years of policy research experience. Her work at the institute is mainly focused around disadvantaged groups and social inclusion. Jane is an experienced qualitative and quantitative researcher, but in more recent years she has concentrated on qualitative methodologies, managing large scale qualitative studies for a number of clients.

Sara Dewson is a Principal Research Fellow in the Unemployment and Labour Market Disadvantage team at the Institute for Employment Studies. Sara's research skills range from a thorough grounding in quantitative analysis and extensive experience of qualitative research, both of which have been utilised in her work. Sara is an experienced project manager and has contributed to evaluation studies at local, national and international levels for key public policy clients and much of her work has centred around the issues of labour market disadvantage, disability, welfare to work policy, benefit and welfare reform, and skills.

Abbreviations

ADF	Adviser Discretionary Fund
ASMs	Advisory Services Managers
BOC	Better-off Calculation
BtWS	Back to Work Sessions
CAT	Customer Assessment Tool
CETLs	Customer Engagement Team Leaders
CSCS	Construction Skills Certification Skills
DASOs	Diary/Administration Support Officers
DMA	Decision Making and Appeals
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESF	European Social Fund
ESP	Employability Skills Programme
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FLT	Fork-Lift Truck
FJR	Fortnightly Jobsearch Review
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
IES	Integrated Employment and Skills
ILA	Individual Learning Accounts
JRFND	Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance

JSAg	Jobseeker's Agreement
JSD	Jobseeker's Direction
LEPs	Local Employment Partnerships
LMRAs	Labour Market Recruitment Advisers
LMS	Labour Market System
MI	Management Information
NCAs	New Claims Advisers
NJI	New Jobseeker Interview
PAs	Personal Advisers
PET	Pre-Employment Training
SIA	Security Industry Authority
TIs	Targeted Interviews

Summary

In July 2007, the Government announced its intention to replace the existing New Deals for unemployed people with personalised support purchased from specialist providers. The Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime has been revised to provide increasing levels of support for customers during the first 12 months of unemployment after which time they are referred to these specialist providers for help that is more responsive to individual jobseekers' needs. The regime has also incorporated some of the early elements of the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) system. This research, commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), has explored the implementation of the revised JSA regime in four test sites, and assessed the impact that these revised procedures have had on Jobcentre Plus customers, staff and other stakeholders. The research has been entirely qualitative in nature and has involved regular, monthly visits to the test sites over the last six to eight months to interview those most affected by changes to the JSA regime.

The key findings from the research are:

Stage One of the revised regime

The New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) remains the same in the revised regime. New Claims Advisers (NCAs) begin the discussions with customers about the type of work they are looking for and undertake a 'light touch' skills screen of customers' basic skills and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) needs. Advisers reported that this can be difficult to do, particularly for those with basic skills needs, as customers rarely have to complete forms by hand and so opportunities to observe difficulties are not common. Some advisers reported that they had observed other skills needs during the NJI, most notably those relating to vocational skills and employability skills deficiencies (i.e. confidence, motivation, etc.). Some customers also required more up-to-date certification before taking up work in their chosen field. However, there was very little training or provision to meet these additional skills needs in most of the test sites visited for the research and so formal assessment of needs and/or referrals were rare. Some of the more experienced advisers signposted customers to generic, non-contracted provision,

for example, learndirect, but this did not happen routinely across the test sites. Interestingly, in sites that were also beginning to trial the new IES system, skills screening was becoming much more integrated and formalised into the NJI. Advisers were signposting all customers to generic provision (i.e. nextsteps and Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) services) at this early stage, and were also referring a number of customers for a skills health check, particularly those who they thought would benefit from additional vocational and skills guidance.

Back to Work Sessions (BtWS) have been introduced in all of the test sites at around week six to eight in a customer's claim. The aim of the sessions is to go over customers' roles and responsibilities, their job goals and to assist them with their job search. Many offices experienced logistical difficulties in getting the sessions up and running, and most of these related to finding suitable premises, risk assessing the sites and meeting health and safety requirements.

The quality of the BtWS varied across the sites and depended largely on the experience, knowledge and style of the presenters. Presenters who were confident, positive and encouraging seemed to provide the best customer experience, and were much more able to deal with challenging situations during the sessions if they arose. Many Jobcentre Plus staff thought that the BtWS were the best element of the revised regime: they provided a useful forum to remind customers of what they had to do in order to receive JSA but also to help them with their job search. In several sites, presenters were adding local information to the standard BtWS presentations including information on the local labour market, current recruitment drives, and local training provision, etc. In some areas, IAG and basic skills providers had been invited to take part in the sessions and this was widely viewed as good practice.

Where customers were questioned immediately after the BtWS, feedback was positive with high levels of satisfaction. However, when interviewed sometime after the sessions, a number of customers were more ambivalent about the utility of the sessions:

- Some customers had not found them to be particularly helpful.
- Some could not recall attending sessions and others were quite nervous about the content of them.

Mandatory attendance at the BtWS was introduced during the course of the tests and seems to have resulted in slightly higher attendance at the sessions. Jobcentre Plus staff thought that rises in attendance may also have resulted because they had streamlined their invitation processes, and used Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) staff to remind customers to attend and to 'sell' the benefits of the sessions.

Stage Two of the revised regime

Customers enter Stage Two of the revised JSA regime after 13 weeks of unemployment. As was the case previously, Personal Advisers (PAs) see customers for a review of job goals and to check (and challenge) any restrictions placed on their availability. Advisers have reported that they have a number of tasks to complete at this stage including:

- going over the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg);
- discussing job goals;
- completing the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT);
- carrying out an in-work, Better Off Calculation (BOC);
- identifying skills needs;
- telling customers what will happen next; and
- submitting them for jobs.

Stage Two interviews have ranged from 20 to 30 minutes although most advisers have struggled to do everything they need to do in 20 minutes, and many have experienced difficulties prioritising tasks. In many ways, the Stage Two interview remains fairly process-driven. The key difference at Stage Two of the revised JSA regime is the opportunity it presents to refer some customers for additional help in the form of two Targeted Interviews (TIs). However, there is a degree of confusion within the test sites as to the purpose of the TIs and the policy message seems unclear. Some advisers believe the additional interviews allow them to work with customers who require more help to get them nearer to becoming job ready, i.e. a carrot approach, whilst others believe they offer the opportunity to check on customers' availability, particularly where there is some doubt about how actively some customers are seeking employment (the stick approach). Some advisers were taking a carrot and stick approach depending on the customer, and many would have liked the flexibility to see customers even more frequently where they thought they could make a difference.

Current guidance suggests that 20 per cent of the customer cohort should be receiving TIs and many staff have been using the CAT to identify or verify which customers are most suited to the TIs. More recently, however, test sites have been referring customers who have been unemployed for 12 out of the last 24 months for TIs although this has not necessarily guaranteed a 20 per cent referral rate: in some offices, fewer than 20 per cent of customers at Stage Two have gone on to receive the TIs whereas in other offices far more than 20 per cent have done so (particularly in inner city offices) using this criterion. This has resource implications for national roll-out, as offices have reported they would be unable to cover any increases in the number of additional interviews with existing staffing levels, particularly as registers rise.

There was very little skills screening taking place at Stage Two of the revised regime with the exception of customers receiving TIs, who were all supposed to be screened for basic skills needs. Again, the main method for identifying customers who had basic or ESOL skills needs was a light touch, eyes and ears assessment which was fairly difficult to undertake, and which resulted in few people being identified for referral. Skills screening seems to be a fairly ad-hoc activity at Stage Two with few advisers prioritising it, and very few referrals for any sort of training provision at this time.

Customers experienced their first period of six, weekly signing sessions at Stage Two of the revised regime (the second coming at the start of Stage Three), although (again) this was not a new element to the JSA regime. Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) staff were spending up to ten minutes with customers helping them to identify suitable job opportunities and encouraging applications, etc. Some offices were also testing variations to weekly signing, for example, by reducing the number of times customers signed weekly from six to three visits but increasing the time of each visit to 15 to 20 minutes. Many sites also tried to ensure that customers saw the same FJR each time they attended the office to sign which built rapport and provided some continuity for customers and staff alike. Increasingly, however, offices were having to cut back on the resources used for weekly signing because of the higher numbers of customers flowing onto the register, and some sites had stopped weekly signing altogether. All things being equal, many sites would have liked greater flexibility and discretion to bring customers in to sign at different times during their claim, or to exempt them from weekly signing altogether if their job search was felt to be on track.

Customer views on Stage Two of the revised JSA regime were mixed with some feeling that the service they received was no different to the service at any other time. Some customers still believed that Jobcentre Plus did 'not understand' their needs and had nothing to offer them. A few other customers, however, reported that their Stage Two interviews had provided a useful opportunity to signpost where they were in the regime, and to clarify what would happen next.

Stage Three of the revised regime

Stage Three of the revised regime begins at week 26 of a customer's claim, regardless of age (unlike the existing New Deals). All customers reaching this stage received a one-to-one interview with a PA to review job goals, agree an action plan and really intensify job search activity. In most sites, advisers caseloaded customers from week 26 and went on to see them regularly throughout the next six months.

Stage Three of the revised regime was intended to give advisers greater flexibility to work with customers to meet their needs, overcome barriers to work and help them into employment, and many advisers welcomed the opportunity to work with customers in this way. Importantly, under the new regime, there was no additional provision to which customers could be referred, rather advisers have had to use their own knowledge of the local labour market and local (non-contracted)

training provision, and their own skills to identify suitable job vacancies and training opportunities. Although there was a degree of enthusiasm at the start of the new regime, many advisers have struggled with this change in organisational culture and the flexibility afforded to them. Managers have reported that many advisers appeared to lack the skills to work flexibly with customers, preferring instead a more process-driven approach. Some managers thought that advisers were not confident or knowledgeable enough about their local labour markets or training provision, or were finding it difficult to handle more challenging customers. Other managers felt that advisers needed to learn how to engage with employers more and to offer an effective brokerage service. Managers also reported that the targets that advisers have to work towards are not conducive to working flexibly with customers. Advisers have also experienced problems working flexibly with customers as their diaries are often booked up one month in advance, thus restricting how frequently advisers could see them.

All customers getting to Stage Three of the revised regime were assessed for basic skills needs if this had not already been carried out although many Jobcentre Plus staff thought this was inappropriate, particularly for highly qualified and highly skilled customers. At least one manager felt that advisers did not have the necessary skills (or sensitivity) required to screen customers and thought it should be undertaken by a specialist agency. Screening in open plan offices was also a concern. Many advisers struggled to integrate skills screening into the Stage Three interview, and in many ways it remained an ad-hoc activity, which did not sit well with the other job-focused elements of the intervention.

Advisers have identified other skills needs during Stage Three, often related to customers' vocational and employability skills, although many complained that there was inadequate non-contracted training provision available in their area and many raised concerns about the quality of the provision, where it did exist. There was little free time in the revised regime for advisers to find out what training and provision was available, or indeed to ascertain its quality, which raised questions about who should actually carry out this role. Communication between Jobcentre Plus and non-contracted providers has also been fairly poor and the flow of referral information between the two parties has been particularly problematic (as providers are not contracted to provide this information).

Customer feedback on Stage Three of the revised JSA regime was mixed. Several customers thought that advisers were trying very hard to help them to find work and some thought that the service was better than they had received on previous occasions of signing-on. A number of customers were very impressed with the quality of the advisers they saw during the revised regime, and particularly during Stage Three where one-to-one contact was more intense. However, other customers reported more negatively about the revised regime with some feeling that they were being pushed into jobs which were unsuitable. Generally, customers did not appear to fully understand the revised JSA process or the purpose of the different interventions. Although customers were given leaflets about the revised regime at regular intervals, which told them what to expect next, there remained fairly low levels of awareness and many seemed confused.

Conclusions and recommendations

At this stage, there is little hard data to assert that the introduction of the revised JSA regime is having an effect on job entry rates. Anecdotally, however, there is some suggestion that the introduction of the BtWS has resulted in higher off-flows from the register. Advisers also reported a significant number of sign-offs at Stage Three of the revised regime when they have had much more regular job-focused contact with customers. Key data is becoming available which should help to assess the impact, if any, of the revised regime.

There is also little evidence that the revised JSA regime is bringing about a greater integration of the employment and skills agenda per se. In most sites, skills and skills screening are less of a priority as advisers and FJR staff focus on getting customers into work first. There is a need to better understand the skills and training needs of customers which will then determine the appropriate Jobcentre Plus response.

Many staff welcomed the introduction of the revised regime, particularly advisers working with customers at Stage Two and Three, although some have struggled to implement and take advantage of the regime flexibilities over time. There is some confusion in test sites as to whether the revised regime is intended to offer a carrot to customers requiring more help, or a stick to those who need a greater push to find work. Certainly, the use of compliance staff has been minimal during the test, which may be an oversight. The research has highlighted the need for clear management and leadership within Jobcentre Plus offices. Managers and senior staff need to lead by example and ensure that clear messages are cascaded to all staff, so that everyone is working to the same end. The research has also raised some shortcomings in the skills of (some) advisers. Ongoing learning and development is required to ensure that they can work flexibly and confidently with all customers. The exchange of good practice within and between offices is also recommended, to improve ways of working with customers, particularly those who are the hardest to help.

The research has highlighted examples of poor communication between Jobcentre Plus and non-contracted providers about referrals, and this issue needs to be addressed, at a local (and possibly district) level, if referrals to, and outcomes from, these providers are to be effective. There is also the associated issue of the quality of non-contracted provision. Many staff do not know what is good or bad provision and therefore are not using it to meet customers needs. Resources are required and priority given to:

- improving Jobcentre Plus' understanding of what provision is available and its quality;
- improving communication between Jobcentre Plus and providers about referrals and referral mechanisms; and
- influence the type of provision that is available from the (non-contracted) market in order to meet the needs of (some) customers and the local labour market.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal and Active Labour Market Policy

In July 2007, the Government published the Green Paper *In work, Better off: next steps to full employment*, setting out an intention to replace the current suite of New Deals for unemployed people with personalised support purchased from specialist back to work providers, responsive to jobseekers' individual needs:

'Under current arrangements job seekers are required to actively seek work to qualify for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and this is supported through regular short meetings in Jobcentre Plus. For longer-term claimants in receipt of JSA, the New Deals have provided a successful programme of structured support and options for younger job seekers after six months and for older job seekers after 18 months.'

The document emphasised a wish to move away from the rigid distinctions of the current New Deals between age groups and introduce a new, flexible, personalised approach for more disadvantaged customers. This was attended by an intention to build on the strengths, experience and expertise of Jobcentre Plus, private and third sector organisations and other public bodies, and focus more on retention and progression in work.

The new approach would include the following elements:

- Self-managed job search (Stage One).

Most customers find work and leave the JSA register quickly. These customers require ready access to job vacancies and help from Jobcentre Plus to review and check their job search activity. Customers in this first stage will have fortnightly job search reviews with Jobcentre Plus although the onus is on them to find work themselves.

- Directed job search (Stage Two).

If a customer is still claiming JSA after three months they will, as now, have a formal review of their Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) with a Personal Advisers (PA) and will be expected to extend their job search in relation to travel to work distances and working hours rather than by preferred employment or occupation. Some customers, and particularly those who are the hardest-to-help or who have poor employment histories, will also have an additional two Targeted Interviews (TIs) during this stage.

- Supported job search (Stage Three).

After six months of claiming JSA, customers will have a number of mandatory interviews with a PA, the first being a formal review where the PA draws up an action plan. The plan would select from a menu of activities to help customers to make a return to work and individuals would be expected to agree and complete a number of them. Each of the agreed activities are mandatory; failure to comply results in an appropriate sanction. Any wage restrictions will end at this point so that jobs at the National Minimum Wage form part of the JSAg.

Some customers, if they are deemed to be disadvantaged in the labour market, are fast-tracked to join Stage Three of the revised regime from day one of their claim.

This stage also offers a further opportunity to refer customers to a skills health check and, if appropriate, training. The current proposals are for England. The Government aims to extend such provision across the whole of Great Britain, subject to discussions with the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly Government.

- Flexible New Deal (Stage Four).

Customers who do not find work at the end of Stage Three will be referred to the Flexible New Deal with providers from private and third sector organisations. This is a flexible, personalised and responsive service, tailored to individual's employment and skills needs. Providers will be encouraged to provide a flexible and innovative package of support to help customers find and keep employment.

Providers have up to 12 months to work with the customer to find sustained employment and will start to develop an action plan with each customer in their first face-to-face meeting. All activity in the action plan is enforceable with an underpinning requirement that every customer must have a minimum of four continuous weeks of full-time paid employment or work-related activity.

Throughout the whole of this flexible regime the offer of increased help is balanced with the responsibility on individuals to make the best use of that support or face a loss of benefit. This is an important part of the current mandatory New Deals and would continue to be a feature of the revised Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND).

In short, the key elements of the JRFND approach were:

- Jobcentre Plus to lead job search for the first 12 months (the revised JSA regime).
- Entrance into the new Stage Three after six months, common to everyone and building on the current New Deal Gateways, leading to more intense job search activity and skills assessment, with the most disadvantaged people being fast-tracked to this stage from the outset.
- People still looking for work after 12 months to be referred to a specialist provider.

In a subsequent development, the command papers: *Opportunity, Employment and Progression: making skills work* and *Ready for Work: full employment in our generation* committed to rolling out the enhanced Jobseekers Regime in April 2009 and, as part of a somewhat broader goal, to achieve an Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) system, which would provide all customers with the opportunity to be referred to a new adult advancement and careers service for a Skills Health Check from 2010/11.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus agreed that a small number of Jobcentre Plus offices/districts would test out the implementation and impact of the revised JSA regime and certain aspects of the IES process, and these tests began in April 2008.

The DWP commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to evaluate the revised Jobseekers Regime tests, the results from which are expected to feed into the design of the Jobcentre Plus guidance for the UK roll-out of this policy from April 2009. This report presents the findings from the evaluation.

1.2 Research aims and objectives

The research specification stated that the aim of the evaluation is to explore the implementation of the revised JSA regime tests and to understand the impact that these revised processes have had on Jobcentre Plus customers, staff and stakeholders.

Crucially, the evaluation is intended to identify examples of good practice in the implementation of the revised JSA regime and the IES processes that have been trialled as part of the tests in order to feed into Jobcentre Plus guidance for future roll-out. This includes what lessons have been learned and what issues have been identified and resolved. Four sites were selected for the tests: Wrexham, Edinburgh, Wandsworth and the Marches District.

The main objectives for the research for the study are to:

- evaluate the implementation of the revised JSA regime for JSA customers;
- evaluate the impact of the Back to Work Sessions (BtWS) on the customer group;

- explore the appropriateness of the timeframes associated with the revised JSA regime and key Jobcentre Plus adviser contact points, and in particular how appropriate these are to customers;
- explore referral paths from the revised JSA regime: to whom (particularly to non-contracted provision and other provision, e.g. IAG, Employability Skills Programme (ESP) providers, programme centre providers, other training providers), for whom, and for what purpose;
- explore how skills screening has been incorporated into the revised JSA regime;
- identify the likely level (and nature) of demand amongst JSA customers for training and IAG services at each stage of the revised JSA regime;
- understand the impact of the revised JSA regime tests on Jobcentre Plus personnel;
- identify the common routes and destinations out of the revised JSA regime and at what time points (e.g. employment, further training, incapacity, moves out of the area, etc.).

1.3 Our approach

A range of qualitative research techniques have been used during this study including semi-structured face-to-face depth interviews with individual respondents, some telephone interviews and observations of adviser interventions and BtWS. The research methodology has been fairly straightforward but intense. We have undertaken periods of fieldwork in each test site, each month (since July 2008 and up to January 2009), and have interviewed a range of people including:

- Jobcentre Plus Test Managers/Business Managers in the four sites;
- Jobcentre Plus PAs;
- Jobcentre Plus Advisory Services Managers (ASMs), Labour Market Recruitment Advisers (LMRAs), Customer Engagement Team Leaders (CETLs);
- other key Jobcentre Plus staff (e.g. Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviewers, Back to Work Session presenters, Diary/Administrative Support Officers (DASOs));
- providers (of ESP, IAG, other skills training providers, and non-contracted providers);
- customers.

Table 1.1 gives an overview of the fieldwork we have carried out. The number of interviews with providers of all types has been low, in large part because most providers to whom referrals have been made are non-contracted providers and have little reason to take part in the research (and no obligation to do so).

Table 1.1 Fieldwork record

	Number of interviews/observations
Implementation Managers/Jobcentre Plus Managers	26
ASMs/Team Leaders	28
PA	78
BtWS presenters	31
LMRAs/CETLs/DASOs	10
Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) staff	17
Customers	64
Observations of NJI/rapid reclaim	9
Observations of 13-week review	15
Observations of 26-week review	27
Observations of BtWS	10
Observations of weekly signing	29
Providers	6

We had also intended to draw on, and assess, customer action plans to classify particular courses of activity, and common skill needs amongst customers, to arrive at an estimation of the likely demand for integrated employment and skills training. This has proved to be much more difficult because of data protection issues and our researchers have been unable to secure access to the Labour Market System (LMS) to undertake this element of desk research (our intention was to go into local offices and trawl through LMS records but we have been unable to do this). Instead, we have sought to look at action plans during the observations and interviews with advisers and customers so that no data protection issues are compromised. Our interviews with customers have been undertaken on an opportunistic basis; that is, when customers have been in local offices for weekly signing or an advisory interview (again because of data protection issues), and this has shaped the nature of our interviews with them. Office and desk space within local offices is at a premium and so our interviews with customers have been undertaken primarily in open plan areas, which has constrained the research in some ways both in the privacy afforded to the interviews and the time available to talk to customers.

Monthly reports have been prepared for the DWP following each period of fieldwork to inform them of progress and to identify good practice. This report discusses the main findings from the research and provides some conclusions and recommendations for further policy development.

1.4 Report structure

This report is structured as follows:

- Chapters 2, 3 and 4 look at Stages One, Two and Three (respectively) of the revised JSA regime.
- Chapter 5 discusses the cross-cutting themes which are common to all stages of the revised regime. This chapter also covers the issue of impact and looks at some early indicators.
- Chapter 6 draws out the key findings from the research and offers some recommendations for policy and process development.

2 Self-managed job search (Stage One)

This chapter looks at Stage One of the revised Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime. Stage One refers to the first three months of a JSA claim, before the 13-week interview with a Personal Adviser (PA), which marks the beginning of Stage Two. As discussed previously, Stage One is intended to be self-managed and customers are expected to find work for themselves with little intervention from Jobcentre Plus and most customers will do just this. The chapter focuses primarily on the new additions to the first three months of the JSA regime for customers, which were introduced as part of the test. The chapter covers:

- the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI);
- skills screening;
- referrals to providers;
- Back to Work Sessions (BtWS);
- customers' views on Stage One.

2.1 The New Jobseeker Interview

The NJI in the revised JSA regime was in many ways, similar to the NJI in the previous regime. It primarily involved creating and going through the customer's Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg), logging customers preferred jobs and sectors, and the hours they were available for work on to Labour Market System (LMS), checking and agreeing job search methods, and establishing a fortnightly signing day and time. As in the previous regime, New Claims Advisers (NCAs) were also required to identify and fast track priority group customers (including ex-offenders, people with mental health conditions, and people with drug or alcohol dependency) to Stage Three (or to the relevant New Deal under the old regime) so that they were able to access more intensive support at an earlier stage of their claim. In addition, NCAs would also be looking for any obvious skills needs (see Section 2.2).

A few months into the revised regime test, three separate leaflets for Stages One, Two and Three became available, and the Stage One leaflets were handed out by NCAs during the NJI. Some advisers went through the leaflet with customers, telling them what to expect from Jobcentre Plus and the JSA regime in the coming weeks and months whilst others simply handed out the leaflet along with the JSAg, signing card, etc. Another new development in the revised regime was the BtWS for all Stage One customers, which rolled out in all sites and offices during the life of the test (BtWS are covered fully in Section 2.4). As a result, NCAs usually mentioned these sessions at the NJI stage, telling customers that they would be invited to a BtWS in a few weeks time, and that they would be expected to attend.

In the later months of the pilot, there was a sharp increase in the number of new customers coming onto the JSA register. This has had a major impact on the workload of Jobcentre Plus staff in general, and particularly with regard to new claims. In some test sites, advisers working on other stages of the revised regime have been drafted in to take new claims.

A general point to make about the NJI, although not specific to the test areas or the regime, is the variable quality of the interview. Researchers have observed different styles of interviewing which may have an impact on the information gleaned and knowledge imparted. Some advisers adapted their approach to the NJI in a way that was clearly tailored to the individual customer: they maintained good eye contact with customers throughout the interview and were able to elicit a good deal of relevant information through their discussions with the customer, the relevant pieces of which they then quickly entered onto LMS. Other advisers seemed to have a more 'one size fits all', process-driven approach: they looked at their computer screens more often and made less eye contact with the customer, and they were more reliant on LMS to lead them through the interview.

2.2 Skills screening

Although the emphasis of Stage One is on self-managed job search rather than referrals for training per se, the revised JSA regime included a 'light touch' skills screen by NCAs at the NJI, to identify any basic literacy, numeracy and language skills needs. The 'light touch' skills screen consisted of customer observations and a discussion of previous work experience and other areas where customers may have gained literacy or numeracy skills, their qualifications, and future work aspirations. If NCAs thought that customers had English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or basic skills needs they would be referred for formal testing with an Employability Skills Programme (ESP) or other Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)/training provider.

At this moment, no reliable Management Information (MI) is available to show how many customers attending NJIs were referred for formal screening with an external provider though this was estimated to be around one-fifth. Furthermore, it is not known how many of these customers went on to undertake any sort of course or training to meet any identified skills needs.

While customers with ESOL needs were reportedly easier to spot with a 'light touch' screen, NCAs said that it was not always apparent when a customer had literacy or numeracy issues, especially as customers did not need to complete as much paperwork by hand as they had in the past. Some customers would reach much later stages of the programme, perhaps the advisory interviews at Stages Two or Three, before their basic skills issues were identified using a more formal assessment tool. A few NCAs reported that some other skills needs might be identified at the NJI, such as very obvious vocational skills needs, perhaps amongst older people with outdated skills, or customers who needed to improve their employability skills, or who required certification to work in a particular field. However, these too would often be more likely to be picked up at a later stage and this seemed to be particularly the case where external training provision for vocational skills, etc. was not readily available. In most sites there was little provision of this nature to offer customers before they had been unemployed for six months. In the absence of relevant provision, it seemed there was less impetus to identify wider skills issues which could not be met until later in a customer's claim.

Following the start of the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) pilot in one of the test sites in September 2008, staff reported that the integration of skills screening at the start of each new JSA claim had become much more formalised: all customers were being told about the IES trial during the NJI and signposted to IAG so that they were able to make an appointment if they wanted some assistance. NCAs were also referring some customers directly to IES advisers for a 'skills health check' and further support, selecting customers with the most obvious skills needs, and those who they thought would particularly benefit from additional vocational and skills guidance. Formal feedback channels between Jobcentre Plus staff and IES staff had been established as a result of the skills pilot which improved greatly on the previous feedback systems and copies of customers' IES action plans were now routinely sent back to Jobcentre Plus.

2.3 Referrals at Stage One

Aside from referrals to IES partners, referrals to IAG provision, or referrals for obvious ESOL or basic skills as a result of the 'light touch' skills screen discussed previously, there was little formal referral to (training) providers at Stage One. At the main point of Jobcentre Plus contact during Stage One, the NJI, there was seldom time for the NCA to assess customers' requirements comprehensively enough, and little provision to refer customers to. At the same time though, some advisers had observed that many customers had other skills needs, for example, employability skills or vocational and key skills needs, which were seen to be even more of an issue with the changing nature of the economy. Although NCAs were unable to quantify this latent demand, they reported a sense of frustration at being unable to refer or send customers to any sort of provision to meet these additional needs. Some NCAs (usually the more experienced advisers) had signposted customers to

non-contracted provision, for example, learndirect, to get additional help although this was not common. Many NCAs were fairly new members of staff, or new to the advisory role, with little knowledge of the local labour market or the provision available in the area.

For a few months of the test, one of the pilot sites had access to some external, non-contracted European Social Fund (ESF) provision during Stage One, which delivered tailored employability and skills training for customers. This included occupational training, ESOL, intensive job search and application support, and specific support for people with mental health conditions, people with learning disabilities, and people with drug and alcohol dependencies. When this ESF provision first became available through external providers, Jobcentre Plus staff at this test site were told that they could refer customers to this provision from day one, to quickly address any barriers to employment that they had. However, the demand for this kind of training was so great, that the referrals from Jobcentre Plus far exceeded the providers' capacity to respond. As a result, new Jobcentre Plus guidance was issued to staff, so that they were only able to refer priority group customers at day one. Other customers had to wait until they had been unemployed for six months before advisers were able to refer them to this flexible provision.

2.4 Back to Work Sessions

This section looks at BtWS, one of the key innovations in the revised JSA regime, and the major additional intervention in the first three months of a JSA claim. Aside from some early group session development work at one of the test sites in late 2007, the revised JSA regime is the first time that Jobcentre Plus has run group sessions for customers, hence this has involved new ways of working for many of the staff involved in their delivery.

2.4.1 Outline of sessions: when, where and how often

The BtWS are presentations by one or more Jobcentre Plus staff, to groups of Stage One customers, ideally between Week 6 and 8 of their JSA claim. The presentation includes a discussion of customers' rights and responsibilities, and information and advice on finding employment with the help of Jobcentre Plus and other agencies. Customers are encouraged to complete a 3 Step Plan during the sessions, which identifies the jobs they can do, the contacts they already have to help them to find work, and prompts them to think of different approaches they could take in their job search activities. Customers also receive other information during the BtWS including, for example, a Job Kit¹ (which provides advice on finding work, and CV and interview tips), and local labour market information, incorporating details of key providers and large employers in the area. The sessions last between

¹ As from January 2009, the Job Kit is made available to customers at the NJI stage.

45 minutes and one hour. As well as presentations by Jobcentre Plus staff, some of the BtWS included short presentations by external agencies, for example, local providers of employability and skills training, IAG staff, or key employers in the area.

Sessions had been run in a variety of locations. Wherever possible, Jobcentre Plus offices had run the BtWS session in-house, whether this had been in 'front of house' (publicly accessible) areas or areas which were normally not used or accessed by members of the public, depending on the availability and suitability of rooms. In all cases, the rooms where sessions were to be held had to be risk assessed for Health and Safety purposes, and additional security staff usually had to be brought in to escort customers to the room where the session was to be held, particularly if the sessions were held in rooms, which were not normally accessible to the public. Some offices, and particularly small offices, did not host their own BtWS due to having few staff, relatively small numbers of customers at the relevant stage in their claim at the same time, or a lack of suitable premises. Customers who claimed JSA at these offices were asked to travel to their nearest larger office or to another site to attend a BtWS. Travel expenses to BtWS were paid by Jobcentre Plus.

All test sites reported that the initial logistics involved in planning for the BtWS were the most challenging and time consuming aspects of providing the sessions, and indeed, one of the most challenging parts of the Jobseekers Regime tests as a whole. The main difficulty had been identifying finding suitable rooms within their offices, or in the absence of these, finding off-site suitable community premises near to the Jobcentre Plus office where the BtWS could be held, and then making sure that they would seat an appropriate number of people, and comply with risk assessment and Health and Safety requirements. Some offices had to go through this process several times before they were able to settle on a suitable venue, and some offices had changed their venues during the course of the pilot, as a particular venue become unsuitable, or better external venues, or in-house solutions were found. External venues were seen to be unsuitable if:

- customers found the venue or room difficult to find;
- there were access issues;
- it was some distance from the Jobcentre Plus office; or
- the room was not always available on a regular enough basis to allow Jobcentre Plus to plan to hold sessions there at the same times each week.

Where external venues were used, offices tended to run fewer and larger group sessions than was the case where sessions were held in-house. Presenters always reported that they preferred, or would prefer, to have the facility to run the BtWS sessions on Jobcentre Plus premises. They gave a range of reasons for this, but most commonly cited the additional time they had to spend moving all of the equipment they needed to the external venue, and setting it up there (and vice versa). There had also been some IT problems, particularly with regard to laptops

not working properly, and these had occurred most often at external venues. In a few instances, presenters had conducted the sessions with flip charts instead, or had talked through the presentation with no visual aids.

The number of sessions delivered by offices varied, depending mainly on the size of the customer register, but also on the availability of in-house space to run the sessions. Where there was space in-house, BtWS were often delivered several times a week (and where demand required it, several times per day), while in external venues it was more usual for one or two sessions to be run per week. However, the numbers of sessions held in house also depended on the size of the available room; where there was a large enough room, fewer sessions needed to be held in order to invite all customers at that stage. One office was holding six sessions a week, two sessions each on three days, and this used a considerable amount of staff resource. In many offices, the rise in numbers of new jobseekers in recent months had meant that more BtWS per week had to be arranged in some offices, and this was placing a heavier burden on presentation and administrative staff. Numbers attending the sessions depended to a large extent on the numbers invited, which was usually determined by the size of the venue as well as the numbers of customers at the relevant stage of their claim. There were reports of one or two customers at BtWS, but there were also some examples of sessions which were attended by 20 or more customers. Offices tended to invite a few more customers than they had capacity for, to allow for some not to turn up on the day.

The quality of the BtWS appeared to be quite varied across the test sites and offices, and depended to a great extent on experience, knowledge, style and manner of the Jobcentre Plus presenters, who were usually experienced PAs. Presenters with a confident, positive and encouraging manner, who were able to facilitate some customer participation and discussion seemed to provide the highest quality BtWS experiences for customers, and were best able to handle some of the more challenging content. For example, there were examples of the first half of the presentation, focusing on customers' roles and responsibilities being delivered in sensitive way to customers, which ensured that the key (and more difficult) messages were given in such a way as to not be off-putting, although not all presenters were similarly skilled at doing this. In some offices, an additional slide had been added to the standard presentation, on the local labour market and/or with details of IAG providers, and provided it was kept up to date, this was thought to be a useful addition.

Although the BtWS brought all customer 'types' together, some sites had thought about running sessions for customers who shared particular characteristics, for example, for customers with similar job goals or occupations, or executive level jobseekers. None of the sites had taken this any further, not least because of the resources required to identify customers who shared common characteristics but also because of the logistical issues associated with getting these sub-groups of customers together for a BtWS in the appropriate time frame. There were

also concerns about equal treatment if customers were regrouped in this way, although there is arguably some sense in targeting the information in the BtWS to the specific (and shared) needs of customer groups attending the sessions. During the test, some BtWS presenters had spent time looking at participants' job goals before the sessions in order to make reference to relevant opportunities in the local labour market during the sessions, which they felt offered a more customised service.

It was seen to be important for presenters to feel equipped to deal with any difficult customers, and to have techniques to dissipate any prolonged debate or argument on a particular issue, whether or not these occurred regularly in practice. Some presenters interviewed for this research were very experienced presenters, and clearly felt confident on this issue, but there were others who had not done presentations before these sessions, and some were less confident about their abilities to deal with conflict within a group. The BtWS slide content had recently been revised slightly, and the presenter notes had been expanded to include some standard responses and ways of dealing with tricky situations and customers, and this would seem to be a positive step in equipping staff to act professionally and confidently, regardless of what may happen in the sessions they run. However, it may be suitable for some staff to also undergo training on this issue, particularly as greater volumes of customers, and potentially a wider range of customers, will be attending these sessions over the coming months.

Importantly, some test sites highlighted a need for more formal quality assurance of the BtWS. To date, ensuring quality had been done fairly informally, by office managers or ASMs observing the sessions and giving verbal feedback to presenters. Some test sites seemed to be more creative during the sessions but good practice of this sort had not really been shared with other colleagues in the other test sites.

2.4.2 Staff views of the BtWS

Many Jobcentre Plus staff reported that the BtWS were the best element of the revised JSA regime and certainly the element of the test that had worked the most effectively. Delivering group sessions was a new way of working for Jobcentre Plus, and they were deemed to have been a success, both by presenting staff and staff in other roles, and customers (customer feedback is covered in Section 2.4.3). The sessions were seen to be a useful way of reminding customers of what they needed to do to receive JSA, and of the various Jobcentre Plus services that were available to them. They were also seen to be good opportunities to engage with more than one customer at once, saving staff resources, and for customers to meet and help each other. BtWS presenters across most of the sites and offices were enthusiastic about running the sessions, although some had been a little apprehensive about this new way of working at first. Some had been particularly wary of customer responses, but they had found these to be positive in the main, both from the written responses on feedback sheets, and from anecdotal feedback when talking with customers at the end of sessions.

As a result of the changing economic situation over the lifespan of the test, presenters noted that higher proportions of BtWS attendees were professional people with much higher job expectations. At the start of the test, a number of staff said that they thought that the BtWS might be less suitable and relevant for this customer group, and there were a few reports of such customers objecting to the sessions. However, later in the test, staff tended to report that individual customer attitudes were much more important in determining how useful customers found the sessions, which were, to a great extent, unrelated to their previous work history or level of occupation. Customers who attended with a fairly positive attitude seemed to be able to find at least some of the information and discussion at the sessions useful, while those who arrived with a less open mind were, generally, more likely to view the sessions as a 'waste of time'. Having said this, presenters needed to ensure that the content and examples used during the sessions had some relevance to everyone in the group.

In terms of best practice, BtWS presenters generally found groups of about ten customers to be the best in order to encourage group discussion. Smaller or larger groups seemed to result in less discussion, which made it less satisfying for both customers and staff. More negatively, many BtWS presenters did not like the 3 Step Plan, which they introduced to customers during the session to focus their job search activity, as they thought they were unlikely to use it in the future. In terms of presentation, the plans were often photocopied because writing on the original (shiny) forms was difficult, however, the copies looked very unprofessional. Advisers working with customers at later stages of the revised regime confirmed that they had rarely seen or asked to see a customer's 3 Step Plan in any subsequent meetings.

2.4.3 Customer views of the BtWS

Written feedback from customers to Jobcentre Plus about the BtWS tended to be very positive, and was regularly collated in local offices after each session. The research team also spoke to a number of customers immediately after a couple of the BtWS, and found that most had largely enjoyed the sessions and had found them useful and pertinent to their situation. A common customer reaction was that they had found the pie chart showing the proportions of jobs which were not advertised surprising and interesting, and some said that it had made them inclined to be more proactive in their job search than they would otherwise have been. This slide appeared to have had the greatest impact of any in the presentation, and it may be worth considering using this information more widely in Jobcentre Plus, perhaps in the form of a poster displayed in a prominent place in offices, so that all customers could see it. Some customers reported feeling more positive about their chances of finding work after attending a session, and that they had new ideas about where to look, employers they could approach, or of local providers and services which might be able to help them. Some customers said that they had found it helpful to meet other people in a similar situation as themselves; and to learn that they were not alone in looking for work at a difficult time.

Feedback from customers interviewed away from the BtWS, for example, after their appointments with Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) or PAs, was more mixed. Several customers had not attended a BtWS, or could not recall attending one, and did not remember being invited to one. A few customers could recall being invited but had not attended as they did not think that the sessions would have been useful or relevant to their circumstances. On further probing, however, one jobseeker revealed that he was reluctant to mix with other jobseekers, as he had been made redundant from a reasonably high level job and did not see himself having anything in common with other people claiming JSA. A few other customers said that they had attended a BtWS but had not found it useful, and a few others reported that they had attended and while not all of it had been relevant to them, they had found some of the information useful. It appears that feedback gained some time after the sessions is less positive than that given in written format to Jobcentre Plus immediately after the sessions.

Jobcentre Plus staff and customers reported very positively on the inclusion of short presentations by external agencies, such as local employability and vocational skills' providers, or IAG staff, in the BtWS. Some customers had been able to find out about the range of provision and services on offer to them, and engage with these, at an earlier stage in the process than might have otherwise been the case. While it was sometimes difficult for offices to co-ordinate a regular attendance from external representatives, the impact of these appeared to be so positive that it would be worth making every effort to incorporate this aspect in the national roll-out.

2.4.4 Impact of mandation on customers

At the start of the revised JSA regime test, customers were invited to participate in BtWS on a voluntary basis, however, the sessions have become mandatory in all offices over the life of the test. Customers must now attend the sessions or face benefit sanctions. Attendance at the sessions has varied across the tests sites, although it has, as might be expected increased (slightly) over time. By the end of the research period, offices were regularly achieving attendance rates of around 50 per cent of those invited, a very small number had much higher attendance, of 70 to 80 per cent of invitees, and similarly, a small number of offices had very low attendance. These rates compared to attendance in the region of 40 per cent of those invited prior to mandation. Staff did not think that the rise in attendance to the BtWS over time could be solely attributed to their mandation, although they thought that it had played a part. They tended to think that attendance increases had resulted also from streamlining their own procedures, for example, some offices had transferred the process and responsibility for issuing invites from Diary Administration Support Officers (DASOs) to FJR teams, where invitation letters were issued as a matter of course to customers when they came in to Jobcentre Plus offices for their Fortnightly Jobsearch Review appointment. Customers could not then say that they had not received their invitations to the sessions.

Rising attendance over time was also attributed in part to some offices having made a particular effort to engage customers with this new Jobcentre Plus intervention, principally again through the FJR teams 'selling' the benefits of the BtWS to customers, and this was seen to have been particularly good practice. For example, rather than simply handing over the invitation letters, FJR staff went through them with customers, and told them more about what the sessions would involve. It appears that giving more information to customers to let them know what to expect from the sessions was important in lowering anxiety about attending a group session, and in increasing attendance. One site had followed up non-attenders by telephone and found that some customers believed that the sessions involved role play and other more active tasks, and they had been put off by this. Conversely, when customers knew more about the real content of the sessions, and that they would receive information about Jobcentre Plus and JSA requirements, together with information about the local labour market and help on how to maximise their chances of finding work, some customers were keener to attend. Many sites encouraged FJR staff to attend BtWS so that they could tell customers exactly what the sessions included and allay any concerns that they had.

There was some expectation that mandation would increase the likelihood of a negative group dynamic and conflict in the sessions, as customers who did not wish to attend were made to do so. However, most BtWS presenters involved in the evaluation did not feel that the behaviour of the customers attending the BtWS had changed very much following mandation, and they rarely reported that the sessions were more difficult to deliver or control as a result of mandation. Indeed, formal customer feedback has continued to be very positive following mandation.

There was numeric evidence from at least one of the test sites that making attendance at BtWS mandatory had resulted in significant numbers of customers signing off or failing to attend any subsequent signing or other appointments at Jobcentre Plus. During the test, customers have been invited to attend a BtWS and if they failed to do so once, they were mandated to attend another session using a Jobseeker's Direction (JSD). Almost one-third of customers, in one test site, who were mandated to attend a session signed off once a JSD had been issued. Although the office in question tracked these customers, and most had not reclaimed, it was not clear how long they would remain off JSA and out of contact with Jobcentre Plus although the early indications were that it may be for some time. More monitoring information is required to check this in all test sites. It is eminently possible that some customers will simply take a short break before re-entering the system, potentially in the form of a rapid reclaim. However, most customers resigning will start the process again and will ultimately have to attend a BtWS during the first 13 weeks of their subsequent claim.

One loophole that has become apparent is the timing of the first BtWS (from about Week 8) and the need to mandate customers onto a second session before they reach Stage Two (Week 13) of the revised regime. During the test, there have

been examples where there was insufficient time left in Stage One to ensure that customers who had missed one BtWS could be mandated onto another and then have time to attend. In these examples, customers have moved on to Stage Two of the regime, and all action and sanctions relating to their non-attendance at a BtWS appeared to cease. Under national roll-out, customers will receive a JSD to attend their first BtWS which should avoid this situation in the future.

2.4.5 Impact of mandation on staff

As discussed previously, by the time research was concluded in the test sites, FJR staff were routinely informing customers of the BtWS, and some had been able to sit in on sessions so that they were fully aware of what they entailed. Provided BtWS are of a high quality, this is likely to continue to be beneficial in terms of customer attendance too; offices where FJR staff had been particularly encouraged to sell the benefits of the sessions to customers had usually reaped a degree of reward in terms of higher than average attendance. Hence the role of the FJR in the invitation process was seen to be one of the most important factors, along with mandation, in ensuring good customer attendance, and in keeping JSD and sanction activity to a minimum.

All test sites had been concerned that BtWS mandation would drastically increase their workload with regard to actioning failed to attend cases and starting decision-making activity. In fact, whilst decision-making activity did increase following mandation, and did result in some additional work, managers reported that the increase was, in general, not as steep as had been anticipated and manageable at office level.

More recently, however, the rising numbers of customers claiming JSA in the later months of the test have placed an increasing burden on many staff, and this, together with additional decision-making and sanction activity will increase it further in the coming months. In addition to impacting on administrative and NJI staff workloads, presenting staff will also be affected as offices may find it difficult to hold enough BtWS for the numbers of customers reaching the eight weeks stage (when they should be attending a mandatory BtWS). Where the existing BtWS venues are small, presenting staff will need to run even more sessions per week to cope with increased demand. This may also be particularly difficult where sessions are run at external venues, due to the additional logistical and planning issues that they involve. This is likely to be a more significant issue for national roll-out: the test has not thrown any light on possible solutions as the full impact of the economic downturn had not been felt at the time of the research.

2.5 Customers' views of Stage One

The research included a small number of interviews with customers during Stage One. The views of customers with regard to the BtWS have been discussed earlier, however, other customers at this stage usually had a vague awareness of the next steps of their claim, certainly for the next few weeks, but they had little

overview of how the (revised) JSA regime looked as a whole. Leaflets about the revised regime had only become available from September 2008 (and in one test site, this was much later in November), and were given out as part of the pack of information at the NJI from this time. Even so, customer recall of the leaflets was fairly poor (amongst those who would or should have received a leaflet) and few customers, regardless of whether they had received a leaflet or not, were able to demonstrate a clear understanding of the JSA regime process.

Customers at this early stage of claiming JSA usually reported that they had found the adviser at the NJI to have been helpful and pleasant, but that there had been a great deal of information for them to take in during a relatively short amount of time. During the early phases of the research at least, most customers did not usually expect to be claiming JSA at the 13-week stage and most did not think that Jobcentre Plus could do anything more to assist them at this point.

The research team talked to a small number of customers following their NJI who were new to claiming benefits, and who had never been in contact with Jobcentre Plus before. These customers appeared motivated to find work, and they felt that they would be likely to achieve this without much intervention from Jobcentre Plus. They had found the interview to have been quite helpful, and they thought that the NCAs and the other staff they had come into contact with at Jobcentre Plus were 'quite good'. These customers reported that they thought the advisers had done just enough in the NJI to get them started, but not so much that they felt it was overly intrusive. Once again, it is important to stress that most of the customer interviews carried out for this evaluation, and particularly the interviews with customers at the NJI stage, were done so before the depth of the economic downturn had really become apparent. Many customers remained upbeat about their chances of finding work, and reported favourably on the service they had received.

2.6 Key issues at Stage One

To summarise, the key issues at Stage One are:

- NCAs are responsible for performing a light-touch skills screen for basic and ESOL skills during an NJI. No reliable MI is currently available to show how many customers attending NJIs were referred for formal skills screening with an external provider. Furthermore, it is not known how many of these customers went on to undertake any sort of course or training to meet any identified needs.
- Advisers often found it difficult to identify basic and ESOL skills needs by observing customers alone. Customers rarely had to write anything during the NJI which made spotting difficulties a lot more challenging.
- Skills screening seems to be more formalised and integrated into the NJI in areas where IES is coming onto the policy agenda.

- Some new claims advisers reported that other customers had broader vocational and employability skills needs, which they were usually unable to address at such an early stage because of a lack of provision.
- The BtWS are perceived widely to have been a success: staff enjoy presenting at the sessions and most of the formal feedback from customers has been positive. Sessions which incorporate some local flavour seem to be particularly well received and offices have been encouraged to invite external providers, for example IAG providers, and employers, although not all have done so.
- Mandating customers onto the BtWS seems to have had some effect on customer attendance with most offices reporting about a ten per cent increase in attendance (from an average of 40 to 50 per cent of those invited). One test site has reported that approximately one-third of customers who had missed a session and were subsequently mandated to attend another then signed-off.

3 Directed job search (Stage Two)

Stage Two of the revised regime introduces a period of more directed job search for customers still on JSA after three months of unemployment. During Stage Two, the job search requirements are widened to include travel to work considerations and working hours, rather than just customers' preferred employment or occupation. This chapter considers a number of issues which emerged from the research about Stage Two, with a particular focus on the revised regime elements being trialled at the test sites. These were:

- two additional TIs to support the 'hardest-to-help' customers and those with the poorest employment histories; and
- the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT), used by advisers at the 13-week review interview to help identify customers most likely to benefit from the Targeted Interviews (TIs).

3.1 13-week reviews

13-week reviews have been a central element of the JSA regime for many years. Their purpose is to check on customers' job search activities, and to discuss (and sometimes challenge) any restrictions that customers are placing on their availability for work. The revised JSA regime has tested the potential to use this stage to identify customers who require additional help much earlier than has previously been the case.

3.1.1 Timing and task issues

One of the main issues raised during the research has been the number of different tasks required to be carried out by Personal Advisers (PAs) at this stage and the pressures this created within the time allocated for the interviews. Activities at the 13-week review have included:

- reviewing the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) with customers;
- discussing job goals and broadening job search;

- completing the CAT;
- carrying out an in-work, Better-off Calculation (BOC);
- identifying skills' needs;
- informing customers about the next stage of their claim (the directed job search phases of the revised JSA regime) and issuing the Stage Two leaflet; and
- submitting customers to jobs.

The 20 minutes originally allowed for the 13-week review at the beginning of the revised regime was not considered to be sufficient to cover all the necessary elements of the interview, and particularly to go through the CAT. Some offices subsequently increased the interview time to 30 minutes and this was widely welcomed as a way of providing a better service for the 'hardest-to-help' customers. Other offices, which continued with the 20 minute time limit, in line with the national operating model, reported that it was a struggle to fit everything in and advisers were often left trying to catch up on paperwork and completing records on Labour Market System (LMS) after the customer had gone. One adviser said it was possible to fit in all the tasks required but without getting to know the customer and building up any rapport, which was the main purpose of the PA role. Advisers often issued the Stage Two leaflet without having the time to go through it with customers. Rather they told customers that the leaflet explained 'what would happen next'.

There was some discussion during the research visits about what the priority activities at the 13-week interview should be. For example, many advisers thought that BOCs were important, as customers found these both useful and motivating but, due to time, it was not always possible to carry one out and customers sometimes had to be called back at a later stage to complete the calculation. It was also felt by some staff that BOCs could make such a difference to motivation that it would be better to undertake them at the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) stage, particularly as many customers did not realise they would be entitled to tax credits. However, others thought that customers had enough information to take on board at the new claims stage and that a BOC would be confusing. Other advisers felt that job submissions should be given more priority at Stage Two. One Advisory Services Managers (ASM) considered that it was crucial for proper job brokerage to take place at Stage Two reviews (although this might challenge some advisers as they were not necessarily skilled or trained to perform this role) and that the adviser should call employers there and then, rather than give the customer the employer information to take away to do later.

Observations of Stage Two interviews carried out during the research tended to confirm the concerns raised by advisers about the number of tasks they were required to perform and the potentially negative impact on the quality of their interaction with customers. For example, some advisers spent much of Stage Two 'doing all the talking' and explaining the various processes they had to go through

with customers, or looking at the computer screen, while completing various tasks on the LMS system. In these observed interviews, there seemed to be less time spent on meaningful discussion with customers about their job aspirations and potential barriers to work. In many ways, the 13-week review was largely process-driven, although advisers and ASMs often had divergent views about what the main purpose was and what the priorities should be.

3.2 The Customer Assessment Tool

The CAT was designed by Jobcentre Plus to help advisers to identify the main barriers faced by customers when looking for work. The CAT is held on LMS and discusses a number of issues against which customers' positions are ranked, for example, in relation to their work-related skills (from very good to very poor, etc.), their confidence and motivation, their relationship with previous employers, etc. In many ways, the CAT covers the sorts of issues that advisers might discuss more generally with customers at this 13-week stage. In the revised regime, the CAT was being promoted as the tool to help advisers to identify customers who could benefit from the additional two TIs in Stage Two.

In discussions with advisers and managers about how they were using the CAT, the issue of flexibility came up. While advisers in some offices were routinely using the CAT with all customers during the test, it appeared that many others were using it on a more discretionary basis and might opt not to complete it at the Stage Two review at all, preferring instead to engage with customers about specific jobs or vocational issues. At one office, advisers were completing the CAT at the end of the 13-week review after the customer had gone. They had been advised (by a member of the Jobcentre Plus central team) that this was an acceptable use of the tool, as assessments were mainly based on adviser judgements of the customer's capabilities.

Adviser confidence and level of experience could be factors in how much flexibility was being exercised in using the CAT. Some experienced advisers reported that they did not really need to use it to identify customers requiring the two additional TIs. These advisers maintained that they could identify those who required additional help, or who needed to be more closely monitored with regards to job search activity, during the course of their normal advisory routines. In these cases, advisers (where they were completing the CAT) were tending to use it to rubber stamp or back up a 'gut-level' decision to undertake the extra TIs. In this way, the CAT was being used as a confirmation tool rather than a diagnostic one. On the other hand, newer staff or those with less experience seemed to welcome the CAT as it provided them with some structure for the interviews and their discussions with customers. In addition, the CAT process involved advisers having to make subjective judgements, and this required confidence on their part.

The research has raised some concerns over how effectively the tool was being used at some of the test sites. On various occasions, the research team observed the tool being completed in relative isolation and in the absence of any discussion

about customers' employment histories, their aspirations or any difficulties they have faced in the past. Advisers could also go through the CAT with customers at the beginning of their 13-week interview, with no lead-in or preamble. In this way, it might be possible to complete the CAT fairly easily and quickly (albeit possibly out of context), but this 'tick-box' approach would seem to be missing a valuable opportunity to work with customers to identify real barriers to employment and ways in which they might be overcome.

There were also some concerns that advisers were not always fully completing the narrative boxes on the CAT which provide an opportunity to record additional information about customers' barriers and attitudes to work. Other advisers might usefully draw on this information in future (Stage Three) interviews, and assessments of distance travelled could be more easily made if the boxes were completed.

Given these wide variations in using the CAT (and perhaps a degree of confusion as to its main purpose), it is not surprising that views across the test sites, on its usefulness as a diagnostic tool, were mixed. On the positive side, some advisers felt the tool gave them something to focus the interview on, even though it could take ten minutes out of the interview time; the CAT could also raise some useful skills questions with customers. Advisers in some offices were using the CAT to get a handle on distance travelled, and were coming back to it later on in the claim to discuss customer progress over time. This was regarded as quite a valuable use of the tool and provided advisers and customers with a focus for later interviews.

On the other hand, the unpopularity of the CAT amongst other advisers was reinforced during interviews. Some advisers thought that the assessment just skimmed the surface and did not delve deeply enough into customer barriers. Certainly, the 'tick-box' approach to the CAT (described previously) meant that many advisers were failing to explore key issues with customers. Many advisers also felt that the CAT encouraged too many subjective judgements on their part. Others commented that the wording of the questions could be made to sound more personal or friendly and that the supplementary questions really needed to be developed. Some managers believed that the time taken to complete the CAT at the 13-week review stage had impacted negatively on the time available to submit customers to jobs, or to undertake a better-off calculation.

3.3 Targeted Interviews

Two additional TIs have been trialled as part of the revised JSA regime. These interviews are planned to be undertaken at some point between weeks 13 and 26 of a customer's claim and will replace the Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) interventions on those weeks.

3.3.1 Purpose of the TIs

There was some discussion with advisers and managers about the main purpose of the TIs, and whether they should take more of a 'carrot' or 'stick' approach. According to at least two managers, either option was acceptable, depending on

the needs of the customer. According to one, the main aim should be: *'to chip away at the key barriers faced by the customer through detailed discussion'*.

Discussions with advisers indicated that they were making use of TIs both to encourage customers who required more help and motivation (the carrot) but also to give out a harsher message to those customers who were not perceived to be making much of an effort to find work (the stick). While in some cases, advisers we spoke to emphasised the 'softer', more supportive role of the extra sessions, others thought their main purpose was to monitor customers to ensure they were doing all they could to find work and were complying with their JSAg. According to this view, the interviews should be more closely aligned to the conditionality agenda. However, a different adviser view was that two additional interviews at this stage were unlikely to make a significant difference to the hardest-to-help customers or those who needed more pushing, whatever the approach.

Our observations in the test sites confirmed that, in many cases, the additional TIs were being used to check that customers were doing what they had agreed to in their JSAg and to check on job search techniques. The interviews allowed advisers a little more time to work with these customers but there was limited evidence that they were being used routinely to identify the key barriers to work or to tackle these barriers. Some advisers were also using the TIs to follow up on customers who had English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or basic skills needs to check that they had attended meetings with providers.

The biggest challenge over recent months has been the increase in the register at some of the test sites and the pressure this has placed on the time available to undertake the (additional) TIs during Stage Two. At one office (at least) there were fewer TIs being delivered because of the dramatic increase in new claims in recent months, and the consequent impact on adviser workloads. TIs are likely to be curtailed or withdrawn if registers rise significantly.

3.3.2 Identifying the target group

The guidance given to the test sites was that they should be aiming to conduct TIs with around 20 per cent of customers flowing into Stage Two. Throughout the test, however, there was reported to be considerable variation in how successfully different offices were meeting this target. There were questions raised about the extent to which the CAT was enabling them to identify the 20 per cent target group, with managers at some sites estimating that they were only hitting around ten to 15 per cent of this target using the CAT alone.

From the national roll-out, it has been decided that the use of the CAT should become discretionary and that a more 'formulaic' approach will be used to identify customers for TIs, based on a calculation of those who have been out of work for 12 out of the previous 24 months. However, it was considered that there would have to be a degree of flexibility in this approach as well, because of variations in the customer base across districts. Whereas some offices were likely to fall well below the national target figure, others considered that 20 per cent

would be a gross underestimate of the numbers of customers who would qualify. For example, at some inner-city offices, this figure was more likely to be around 40 per cent. This clearly has resource implications, as offices reported that they would not be able to cover the increased numbers of additional TIs with existing staffing levels. Clear guidance is needed for these offices to help them to identify customers who should get the additional interviews using due process.

There were different views on what type of customers would benefit most from the TIs. It was generally acknowledged that the key target group should be those who were the hardest to help or who had the greatest barriers to employment. At some sites, however, it was felt that the TIs could also support the needs of a 'middle of the road' group of customers, who were not furthest from the labour market, but still needed extra support. This group could include people with motivational and confidence issues, who only needed a bit of intervention from an adviser to help them move on. For example, at one office, customers who were coming out with a borderline score from the CAT, or who scored fairly averagely on the CAT but who were felt to need more pushing, were being put forward for additional interviews as well.

3.4 More adviser flexibility and discretion

More formally, ASMs and advisers at some of the test sites reported that they would like to move towards a variety of contacts with customers at Stage Two, in addition to the 13-week appointment and TIs. In fact, in some offices, advisers had been granted a further degree of discretion to see customers more frequently if they thought they would benefit from more help. They welcomed this opportunity, arguing the case that, once a customer had been identified as requiring more intensive forms of help, and in the absence of formal TIs, it was a pity to wait until 26 weeks before more regular contact and caseloading took place. An adviser at one test site commented that, although there was a caseloading approach at Stages Two and Three, it was rather a rigid system:

'We would like it to be more flexible, so we could, say, meet other customers at 17 and 21 weeks – we'd prefer some discretion.'

(Stage Two PA)

3.5 Skills screening and referrals

There was little in the way of systematic skills screening of basic skills or ESOL needs taking place at Stage Two, although the basic skills (Fast Track) assessment was supposed to be more routinely used with customers going on to receive the additional two TIs. As was the case at the NJI stage, one manager stated that a customer's basic skills or ESOL needs would have to be fairly obvious for advisers to take early screening action at this stage and refer the customer on to appropriate provision. Skills screening is a fairly ad-hoc activity at Stage Two with few advisers prioritising it in the 13-week review interview. As discussed previously, there is (or

has been) much greater emphasis placed on job goals and job search activity, by advisers and adviser managers, which has arguably impacted on screening activity at this stage in the customer's claim.

Although non-contracted training provision available at Stage Two was reported to be patchy or non-existent in many areas, there were some exceptions to this. For example, one office was successfully referring customers at Week 13 to a local college for employability skills training and this was reported to be going well. Advisers in this site welcomed the opportunity to send customers somewhere to improve on their job search techniques, confidence and motivation, etc. at this stage in their claim. There was, however, no hard evidence to suggest that such referrals resulted in positive outcomes into work at this stage.

3.6 Weekly signing

Weekly signing was not a departure from the JSA procedure prior to the test. However, some advisers believed that a subtle change of tempo had been introduced with the new regime and that weekly signing was a key part of the process. Customers were encouraged to attend a BtWS, then they had a 13-week review, followed by six weekly signings (of ten minutes per week) and in some cases additional TIs; then another advisory interview at 26 weeks and six further weekly signings (of ten minutes). Many advisers and managers believed that this was giving out a clear and consistent message to customers that they should be actively seeking work and engaged in job search activities which were expected to bring about more positive outcomes.

The ASM at one office thought that weekly signing was a good use of resources, even though more and more resources were required as the register increased. She thought that it was good for people to have to come in weekly and also for staff to be able to monitor job refusal and non-searches as they had targets for these.

FJR staff, generally, supported weekly signing and the longer signing times and reported that it had helped them to build up a rapport with customers and was more satisfying for both parties. In general, staff thought that seeing the same customers again and again made a difference. FJR staff also believed that the ten-minute slots provided sufficient time to do a wider job search with customers, to look at jobs over a larger geographical area or to include a wider range of jobs. The ten-minute slots also provided enough time to challenge people when FJR staff suspected that they were not doing all they could to find work.

Having said this, some advisers and managers would like to see greater flexibility in relation to weekly signing: some staff were increasingly questioning the usefulness of weekly signing for all customers. There was a growing belief that some customers could be exempted from this element of the JSA regime, in particular those customers who were looking for professional or more highly-skilled jobs which Jobcentre Plus rarely brokered, or which took longer to process

and secure, and customers who provided adequate proof of their job search. Resources could then be targeted towards customers who needed more help, who were not doing enough to find work or who required sanctions. This is an issue that is likely to move higher up the agenda as registers continue to rise and Jobcentre Plus resources are further squeezed. However, one manager pointed out that there might be legal implications from treating customers differently and 'waiving' weekly signing for some but not others.

A number of advisers and managers were also questioning the impact that six ten-minute sessions with an FJR could have. Many staff believed that fewer but longer sessions (possibly with an adviser) would bring about greater positive outcomes. Alternatively, some staff suggested combining the two periods of weekly signing (i.e. at Stage Two and Stage Three) and intensive job matching to run concurrently so that customers would be attending weekly between Weeks 13 and 26. This would really change the tempo of the JSA regime and it would be interesting to see the impact that such a change might have, particularly on those customers believed to require more of a 'stick' approach.

Some sites were trialling various flexibilities with regard to weekly signing. In one office, managers were looking to increase weekly signing slots at Stage Two and Three from ten minutes to 15-20 minutes by condensing the FJR contact time with customers in Stage One. At another office, where advisers and FJR staff were located on different floors, one of the advisers had been placed as a link adviser with the FJR team. This FJR-linked role appeared to be working well and the adviser would see customers who needed a little longer when they came into sign.

3.6.1 Difficulties with weekly signings

Interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff identified a number of difficulties associated with weekly signing:

- The resources associated with weekly signing was a key issue in some of the test sites. For example, some offices had not been routinely carrying out weekly signing at the 13 or 26-week stage prior to the test, mainly because of staffing shortages, and so had experienced quite a drain on their resources putting this into place under the revised regime. In some cases, offices were continuing to wait for (agreed) additional staff resources to ease their workload. Although such staff resourcing issues pre-dated the tests, it should be noted that they are likely to present similar problems for other offices and will have implications for the roll-out. Offices which had encountered these problems thought that the importance of having a full staffing allocation for weekly signing could not be underestimated. One office had nearly doubled its staffing allocation for FJR in order to cope with the additional weekly signing regime.

- The time allocation for weekly signing was another issue of concern, with most FJR staff having a strong preference for a minimum of ten-minute signing times, which allowed them to build up a rapport with customers and conduct more effective job search. Despite this, the time slots had recently been reduced at one office from ten to five minutes because of a sudden rise in new claims and plans for similar reductions at other offices became apparent during the latter stages of the research. Another test site has recently stopped weekly signing altogether because of rising registers. The general view among FJR staff and managers was that these developments were likely to have a negative impact on the quality of the intervention with customers.
- Difficulties were reported relating to the administrative procedures for weekly signings, such as missing paperwork and claim units. Many staff were hot desking; customers were moving from weekly to fortnightly signing or attending interviews with advisers. All these factors, in addition to inevitable staff shortages, were increasing the likelihood of claim units going missing. One FJR manager thought that more mistakes were creeping in at their office because of the recent increase in customer volumes.
- There were also problems from the customer perspective. Many customers were reported to be missing appointments, because they were confused about where they should be, when and why. At one office it was reported that many customers were unhappy about having to attend on a weekly basis, and FJR staff felt themselves to be on the receiving end of their frustration and annoyance. At test sites serving predominantly rural areas, it was reported that some customers were facing more financial hardship because of the transport costs involved in weekly signing. Jobcentre Plus were able to offer reimbursement for some, but not all, the weekly signing visits.

3.7 Customers' views of Stage Two

3.7.1 Experience of the 13-week interview

The interviews with customers at Stage Two of the revised regime revealed more examples of dissatisfaction than had previously been the case at Stage One. Having said this, about half of all customers who had experienced a 13 week review reported fairly positively with many saying that the Stage Two interview had given them some useful clarification about the process of signing on and what was expected of them.

Most of the more negative comments about Stage Two came from customers who believed that the service they were receiving under the revised regime was no different to the service they had received from Jobcentre Plus before, indeed a number of customers thought that their needs were 'still not understood' and that Jobcentre Plus had nothing to offer them.

One customer interviewed after his 13-week review meeting was a former manager who had not claimed benefits for over ten years. While he considered the service offered by Jobcentre Plus to be good on the whole, he thought it was simply not set up to help people who were looking for more senior positions. He had wanted to find out more about his options for training but had been disappointed to learn that there was little on offer at a high enough level. Another customer at the 13-week stage felt that her views had not been listened to at all by the adviser. She did not agree with the changes made to her JSAg, nor to the activities she was supposed to undertake, and had only realised that changes had been made to the agreement after she had left the Jobcentre Plus office.

3.7.2 Leaflets

When asked specifically about the leaflets for Stage Two of the revised regime, most customers (who should have received a leaflet) were unable to recall receiving them, or if they could recall seeing the leaflet, did not have any strong views of its worth or relevance. It is worth noting that Jobcentre Plus customers receive a significant number of leaflets and information, much of which is taken away and read (or not) at a later time, and trying to get customers to recall a particular piece of literature can often be problematic. It is also likely that the very nature of the 13-week review, and all it has to cover, is confusing enough for customers and recall of a particular leaflets is understandably difficult. Essentially, customers had no strong views about the information in the leaflets at Stage Two: they did not appear to have helped or hindered their understanding of the process.

3.7.3 Weekly signing

Customers consulted during the research were much less likely to be positive about weekly signing than any other aspect of the JSA regime. Negative views included comments that weekly signing was 'tedious' and 'a waste of time.' One customer was aggrieved that he would have to come into the Jobcentre more frequently, which, he believed, would involve additional travel costs.

Many customers reported that they would have liked more time with advisers. One customer, who was at the weekly signing stage, said that he was very aware that there were a lot of other people waiting behind him and that he only had ten minutes with the FJR member of staff. He felt that time with advisers was more useful. Another customer commented that FJR sessions 'could be very hectic' and he usually got no more than a brief interview: he always took his diary along but it was rarely checked.

Another issue raised about weekly signing was continuity of contact with Jobcentre Plus staff. Some customers reported that they rarely saw the same member of staff twice in a row during their signing. This could lead to inconsistency of approach and customers being confused about what was expected of them. It became apparent that customers, even within the same office, were being treated differently by FJR staff, with some being asked for evidence of job-searching and some not.

3.8 Key issues at Stage Two

To summarise, the key issues arising from Stage Two of the revised JSA regime include:

- One important issue raised at Stage Two has related to time pressures and the difficulties advisers have experienced in completing all the tasks required at the 13-week review. The fact that the CAT has now become a discretionary element at this point will obviously help to alleviate these pressures. However, the research has highlighted a fair degree of confusion among advisers about which tasks at 13 weeks should be prioritised within the new regime, and clearer guidance on this would be beneficial.
- Many advisers said they would like to be allowed more flexibility in how often they saw customers at Stage Two. They felt that some customers would benefit from more frequent contact at this stage and more help in addressing barriers to employment.
- From the national roll-out, the process for identifying customers for the TIs will be based on a calculation of those who have been out of work for 12 out of the previous 24 months. This has given rise to concerns about the resource implications this might have for some offices, particularly at inner-city locations where the numbers of customers qualifying for TIs were likely to be far in excess of 20 per cent.
- The resources associated with the weekly signings was another issue raised by advisers and managers, particularly in the light of the rapidly rising registers at some of the test sites. There were concerns about the impact on the quality of interaction with customers resulting from these time pressures: for example where weekly-signing time slots had to be reduced from ten to five minutes, restricting the time available for job search activity; or where a customer saw a different member of FJR staff at each visit. Some respondents argued that weekly signing could become more discretionary, so that resources could be targeted at those customers considered to require more help, or more pushing to find work.

4 Supported job search (Stage Three)

This chapter discusses the main findings from the research relating to Stage Three of the revised Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime, which customers enter after six months of unemployment. This stage introduces a period of more intensive and supported job search activity and skills assessment with Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers (PAs) and marks the most important change to the regime: it is now common to everyone, regardless of age. Under the old style New Deals, customers who were aged 25 and over have had to wait 18 months before being offered this kind of intervention. The policy intention is now to make every possible effort to help customers find work before they move onto Stage Four of the revised regime.

The key elements of Stage Three are as follows:

- A formal review at Week 26 with a PA to re-visit the needs identified in the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) and to draw up an action plan.
- Extra adviser support and caseloading.
- A requirement from the customer to agree to and complete a number of mandatory activities selected from a menu of options. Failure to comply with the mandatory actions may result in an appropriate sanction.
- Another opportunity for the customer to be referred for a skills assessment.
- A further six-week period of weekly signing.

4.1 26-week interview

PAs begin to caseload customers following an interview at Week 26 of their claim. The main purpose of the first interview is to update a customer's JSAg and to agree certain actions to be taken to move them closer to work and to draw up an action plan. Advisers have reported that they undertake a number of activities at this first interview including:

- explaining the process for Stage Three and issuing the appropriate leaflet;
- talking about job requirements, job search methods and revising the JSAg;
- preparing an action plan;
- completing an assessment of basic skills (if not already completed);
- telling customers about Work Trials, Local Employment Partnerships (LEPs), etc.;
- introducing the Better-off Calculation (BOC) (if not already covered); and
- intense job search activity.

Advisers would normally spend an average of 30 minutes with customers for their first appointment and then usually book customers into their diaries to see them on a regular basis. At the beginning of the test, PAs were told that they could spend a maximum of three hours with each customer throughout Stage Three, which lasts for six months. This guidance was then revised and advisers were told that they could see customers more flexibly and usually up to an average of three hours, depending on needs. What is particularly interesting about Stage Three though is the (relative) lack of prescription from the centre on the content of the interview or the activities to be undertaken: it has largely been down to adviser discretion. Importantly, there has been very little contracted provision available for customers during this stage (with the exception of help for basic skills and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training, or Programme Centres) and so advisers have had to rely on their knowledge of local, non-contracted provision, and the local labour market to make any referrals.

4.2 Adviser flexibility

As many managers pointed out, the revised JSA regime has introduced a significant change of organisational culture within Jobcentre Plus, which has been a challenge for many of the staff. It has required more joined-up thinking and planning to getting people into work (indeed, one test site has been working towards a 'whole office' approach), with much greater liaison between New Jobseeker Interview (NJI), Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) and advisory staff, greater emphasis on regular job-seeking activities and firm but fair actions against customers who were failing to comply with their responsibilities, particularly at Stage Three.

At the test sites, some advisers appeared to be coping better with the challenges of the revised regime than others, for example, in terms of responding flexibly and creatively to customer needs (in the absence of any prescriptive working practices) and in signposting customers to non-contracted provision where it was deemed relevant. Many advisers welcomed the opportunity to engage with 25+ customers at an earlier stage, and believed that this earlier intervention and the new products on offer (such as Work Trials and LEPs) would make a significant difference to customers. Experienced advisers were generally expected to perform better than other advisers, as they would have had experience of working in similar flexible

ways with customers. We observed and spoke to a number of such experienced and confident advisers during the course of the research.

One example of an adviser who appeared to be having some success under the new regime, reported that many of her customers were signing off at Stage Three. She felt that the revised regime was already showing signs of greater success than earlier New Deal programmes. This particular adviser was quite clear that the onus was on the jobseeker to bring in proof of what they were doing to find work. She seemed particularly well informed about local provision and the local labour market, Work Trials and LEP opportunities, and was very proactive with customers. At the same time, she felt it was important to use sanctions for those who were not doing enough to find work.

There were also some interesting examples of more flexible practices being developed at the office level.

An innovative approach being developed within one test site was the introduction of 34 and 44 week checks at Stage Three, which were being used by the Advisory Services Managers (ASMs) to monitor advisory activity with customers and pick up those customers who might otherwise have fallen through the net. ASMs were identifying, in association with advisers, what the barriers were to employment for these customers and then looking at ways in which these might be handled and overcome. At one office, this process was showing up where advisers could be managing their caseloads more effectively. The ASM was planning to review this process and to give staff an additional 'back to basics' workshop about the revised regime requirements. At other offices, ASM case conferencing was being used to offer a different approach to reviewing customer needs and sharing good practice. The key role played by ASMs in relation to the revised regime, motivating staff and sharing expertise became more clear over time.

4.2.1 Constraints on adviser flexibility

On the other hand, according to some managers, many advisers lacked the skills, confidence or background knowledge to offer the type of flexible service that the new regime demanded. It was thought that some advisers, more used to a target- and process-driven approach, would find the transition particularly difficult as they had to think much more creatively about what to 'do' with customers. They were not able to refer customers to external, contracted providers, rather they were expected to work with customers and build on their own local knowledge of the labour market and non-contracted provision to identify solutions. Another issue raised was the skills and confidence required to challenge customers who

were not doing enough to actively seek work or fulfil the terms of their JSAg. Advisers' ability in this area was thought to be very varied. Managers thought there would be a need for ongoing learning and development to ensure all staff were fully 'signed up' to the changed regime and had the requisite skills to respond to customer needs. The specific adviser skills and qualities considered desirable within the new regime are discussed in more detail in Section 5.2.

Some managers and advisers considered that increased flexibility was not compatible with the many targets and process that drive adviser behaviour, including the Intervention Delivery Targets and the Advisory Activity Tool (AAT). These demanded that advisers did certain things with customers rather than respond in a totally flexible way to their circumstances. Advisers could not see how they could work flexibly with customers and respond to these different priorities at the same time.

One experienced adviser commented that she was continually aware, during Stage Three interviews, of tensions between competing priorities. Despite her initial enthusiasm about the revised regime, she was now beginning to feel despondent because of the constraints on her flexibility as an adviser:

'We can't be flexible because our diaries won't let us; we can't be flexible because of the AAT; we can't be flexible because we've got nothing to offer customers.'

(PA)

4.2.2 Time allocation for customers at Stage Three

Initially, there had been a three hour time limit introduced as the maximum time an adviser should spend with any one customer during Stage Three (following the first 30 minute Stage 3 interview). This was later revised so that three hours should represent the 'average' time spent with a customer rather than the 'maximum.' Advisers, generally, welcomed the removal of the three-hour time limit, as it offered them more autonomy in deciding how often and for how long they could see customers, depending on their circumstances. However, some sites reported that advisers' understanding and use of this new degree of flexibility was variable. For example, some advisers continued to divide up the time allocation into six 30-minute sessions for each customer, regardless of their individual needs. It became clear during the research period that the organisational culture within Jobcentre Plus can be particularly difficult to change or challenge, and especially during a test or a pilot when not all members of staff are affected by the regimes being tested. Many of the supporting systems have also worked against staff who have tried to respond more flexibly to the needs of their customers (see, for example, Section 5.4.2 on the challenges presented by Labour Market System (LMS) and diary constraints). Some Jobcentre Plus staff seem more comfortable working with fairly stringent processes and targets, and have struggled to work more flexibly.

Having said this, there were also examples of how managers at some sites were thinking more creatively around how the time allocation for advisory interviews in Stage Three could be used. For example, at one site, advisers were being encouraged to run some group sessions in Stage Three, to make more effective use of the average 'three hours per customer.' It was thought that the sessions could focus on CV preparation or labour market information, or could be tailored to a particular employment sector. However, managers at the site acknowledged that some advisers would require training to run such sessions, and that, even if they had the necessary skills, it would be difficult to find the time to organise these alongside their standard duties.

4.3 Adviser caseloads and diary management

The number of customers coming through to Stage Three steadily increased as the tests progressed, which highlighted some issues with regard to caseloading strategies and the continuity of service being offered to customers. Caseloading, according to some managers, was the best way of keeping track of customer progress and gave advisers more ownership of the process. However, the extent to which customers were systematically being caseloaded across the test sites appeared to vary. Advisers in some offices felt that they had gained more control over their caseload and that customers were benefiting from the continuity offered by regular meetings with the same adviser over a period of time. On the other hand, in at least one test site, customers were not being caseloaded with specific advisers and were likely to see more than one adviser during their time in Stage Three. This approach raised questions about the continuity of service being offered to customers and relied on advisers writing detailed notes on the LMS system for colleagues picking up these customers at the next appointment.

One of the main difficulties noted at Stage Three, was that, although advisers were being encouraged to be more flexible in how regularly they saw customers, their diaries were often booked up one month in advance. In reality, this meant they had little control over their diaries, and were often unable to see customers regularly enough to maintain any kind of momentum, which was a cause of frustration for some staff. During the research, we observed some of the problems which could arise from this type of time constraint on advisers' diaries. There were some examples of customers who could be waiting for up to eight weeks for a referral to a provider to get their CVs up-to-date. Other customers were told they would be given information about work trials at their next appointment, which was four weeks away. The benefit costs of keeping customers waiting in this way are clear. Based on our observations, we believe that, at the very least, customers could be guided towards the internet, local libraries, learndirect or given leaflets to provide further information on other initiatives or CV writing, in between advisory interviews, although these alternatives were not routinely mentioned by advisers.

The problem of diary management may be resolved over time, as the numbers coming through the regime (both on- and off-flow) settle down, although the

economic downturn is likely to make caseloads heavier not lighter. Some managers also thought that, when the policy is rolled out nationally, the fact that there would no longer be two programmes running concurrently (legacy New Deal and the revised regime) would ease the pressure on adviser workloads. However, the experience of staff at the test sites has drawn attention to the types of difficulties which could be encountered more widely in managing adviser caseloads and diaries, and which might impact on the quality of service that customers receive.

4.4 Mandatory actions

An important new Stage Three element being piloted within the tests was the requirement for the customer to undertake one to three mandatory activities, as agreed with their PA at the 26-week review. The mandatory actions observed or reported during fieldwork visits included:

- referral to a Programme Centre;
- referral to Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) agencies or non-contracted provision;
- referral to learndirect for funding to pay for a short vocational course;
- exploring a work trial option;
- applying for specific vacancies; or
- making speculative approaches to an employer.

In some cases, the mandatory action could be more personal, such as requiring a customer to address personal hygiene issues before attending an interview.

Although the intention was that these actions, backed by a JSAg, should signal to the customer the importance of their mandatory nature, in practice there were limitations to the process. For example, there was generally felt to be a limit to which Jobcentre Plus could follow up or enforce customer attendance at provision which was non-contracted or take appropriate Decision Making and Appeals (DMA) action for non-attendance. In many cases, it was impossible to get referral information from providers to assert if customers had attended as they were not obliged to share this information. There were also concerns expressed at most of the test sites about the range of appropriate provision available locally to offer to customers who had reached the six-month stage of their claim (this issue is discussed in more detail in Section 4.5.2). These factors may have contributed to the apparent lack of any significant decision-making activity at Stage Three during the tests although this is likely to increase as the process becomes more embedded.

It was felt by some managers that advisers might need guidance and training to help them make the best use of mandatory activities. It was also suggested that case conferencing might help to increase advisers' knowledge of, and confidence in, the mandatory activities available to be used and where the necessary services or provision could be accessed.

4.5 Skills screening and referrals to non-contracted provision

4.5.1 Use of skills screening tools

As discussed earlier in this report, skills screening was being carried out at various stages of the revised JSA regime. For example, there were quick 'eyes and ears' or 'light touch' assessments at the NJI stage; diagnostic assessment of soft skills through the CAT at the 13-week review; and, in some cases, use of the Fast Track basic skills assessment with customers targeted for additional interviews at Stage Two. It was generally considered that the six month stage offered another good opportunity to check customers' skills needs as advisers had more time to spend with customers at this stage.

Customers are, by and large, being screened for basic skills needs at the Stage Three interview and advisers seem to be routinely screening customers who have not yet been screened, regardless of their qualifications or work history. This would seem to be a questionable use of time for some customers, e.g. those whose qualifications or previous employment record would exempt them from a test of their basic skills.²

Views on the skills screening tool itself were also mixed. At some sites, for example, there were advisers with many years' experience of screening customers for basic skills and who were comfortable with the process. On the other hand there were reported to be a number of advisers who felt uncomfortable about administering the skills screening tool: they experienced difficulty introducing it to customers and then some degree of embarrassment giving feedback to customers on their results. One manager felt quite strongly that skills screening (particularly for basic skills) could be a very sensitive issue, and that advisers did not necessarily have the right skills to administer the tests. In her view, the skills screening should be carried out by fully-trained specialist advisers in a private interview room, rather than a public area, which would be a less intimidating environment for the customer. This view was reinforced by an ASM who considered it to be 'patronising' for customers to be subjected to a test of this kind in the middle of an interview. For many other advisers, basic skills screening was not regarded as a priority, for example, compared to finding suitable vacancies or work trials for customers. It was just one task among many others that they had to perform during the revised regime process, which, like the CAT at Stage Two, was not easily integrated into the advisory interview. In addition, some advisers reported that, having diagnosed a need for skills training, they did not know where to refer customers to, or whether the provision available was of good quality.

² We recognise that this action was agreed as part of the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) project and will not be included in the national roll-out.

One manager thought that Government policy was too narrowly focused on assessing basic skills. In her view, there should be a broader skills agenda because basic skills alone *'did not deal with the job problem'* – there was also a need to consider the personal and employability skills of Jobcentre Plus customers. She thought the adviser role should focus more on assessing what skills the customer needed to get into the local labour market. However, if basic skills screening was going to continue, then adviser training on this should be a priority. At present, she felt that the Fast Track assessment tool tended to be used 'robotically' in many cases, and advisers needed to be clearer about its purpose. Also, if advisers were confident there was provision 'out there' to offer to customers, they would be more motivated to tackle this issue.

4.5.2 Non-contracted provision

A key issue raised throughout the research was the apparent lack of appropriate provision to which advisers could refer customers, once a skills need had been identified. This applied not only to basic skills, but also to employability skills and short, vocational courses. The research has explored this issue further and tried to ascertain whether the main problem has been the absence of suitable training provision in the test site areas, or a lack of information among Jobcentre Plus staff about the provision that is available. There was a general consensus across the test sites that staff needed to be better informed about the training courses available locally and most (but not all) offices had taken steps to carry out mapping of non-contracted provision in their areas. During the latter part of the test, there were reports from some offices of databases or directories of contracted and non-contracted provision being made available to staff, although it was unclear to what extent these were being used.

There was widespread recognition that compiling lists of providers and training courses was just a first step in addressing a more complex issue, and that these mapping exercises needed to be followed up with active engagement and dialogue with local providers about their provision and which courses might be appropriate for customers. As some managers pointed out, the issue was as much about the quality as the quantity of local provision. Advisers needed to know which non-contracted provider was most suitable for the customer; be able to give assurances to the customer about the quality of the provision they were being referred to; and understand what happened when a customer attended. However, very few advisers had the time or resources to update their knowledge in this way, or indeed to share this knowledge with their colleagues. One ASM questioned whether this work should be done at the local level, and thought that a more strategic approach to provision could be undertaken by Jobcentre Plus district offices (via Third Party Provision Managers), with service level agreements being drawn up with approved providers throughout the district.

An ASM at one site had allowed time for some of her staff to go and visit non-contracted providers and this would be one of her recommendations for national roll-out. Advisers needed to get a proper feel for what non-contracted providers could offer. The ASM reported that they were, on the whole, more comfortable now about this aspect of the revised regime than they had been at the beginning. They were relatively lucky in having more non-contracted provision available in their inner-city area, compared to other test sites, but the question remained of the extent of adviser knowledge and confidence in the quality of this provision.

There were a number of other problems raised during interviews about referrals to non-contracted provision:

- At one test site it was reported that accessing provision could be difficult for customers, particularly those living outside major towns and cities (where most training provision is located). At one rural office, there was little provision available locally and customers had to travel to a nearby town to attend their nearest Programme Centre.
- Another issue related to the fact that some customers would benefit from accessing training before 26 weeks but this option was currently not available. For example, at some offices, there were growing numbers of skilled workers coming onto the register who had recently been made redundant. These customers would benefit mainly from quick and cheap refresher courses to update their skills and get them back into the labour market. Another example was given of a number of construction workers at one site who had been made redundant but needed to update their certification before they could find more work. Advisers were concerned that these customers would have to wait six months to get their qualification, resulting in a six month gap on their CV and then might require extra support to help them get back into the labour market. Some of this training reputedly only cost £50 or £60, which appeared to be a low-cost investment in the short-term for significant benefit savings in the longer-term.
- Some advisers would have liked to see additional resources being made available to enable customers to access a wide range of vocational courses, as requests for these were common (e.g. health and safety, fork-lift truck driving, Construction Skills Certification Skills (CSCS) cards, Security Industry Authority (SIA) training for security staff, etc.). A manager pointed out that the Adviser Discretionary Fund (ADF) was a potential source of funding which could be used more flexibly by advisers, but could not currently be used for training, unless this was linked to a specific employment outcome. At another site, it was felt that ADF could be deployed before six months to address specific barriers to employment for customers, e.g. paying for car tax or MOT where public transport was a problem.

- Some advisers, with a history of working on New Deal, wanted to have access to a similar type of provision that had been available through the old 'Gateway to Work'. According to one adviser, they used to be able to refer customers to local colleges for vocational courses under the 'old' New Deal but they were now losing these links. Many advisers felt they now had less to offer customers under the new regime.
- It was suggested in some interviews that, even where links had been established between Jobcentre Plus and providers, there was often room for improvement in terms of communication and information flows, for example, about customer needs, barriers to employment, and progress in training.
- It was pointed out that the agenda for the integration of employment and skills was different in Scotland and Wales and was still being negotiated at the national policy level. For example, 'Skillbuild', the main programme for addressing unemployment through skills development in Wales, is currently not available to customers on New Deal programmes, including the revised regime. This could mean that, from next year, the range of vocational provision which Jobcentre Plus customers can access will be drastically reduced if these funding issues are not addressed.

Despite these concerns, there have been various examples emerging from the test sites of different types of non-contracted provision to which customers were being referred at Stage Three. These included:

- Independent IAG services: some test sites were drawing quite heavily on their local careers services, which could offer a more in-depth skills health check and subsequent referrals to other agencies. However, one office reported that they did not have access to any kind of IAG provision.
- Training at local colleges, including basic skills and ESOL provision. There was widespread concern about a lack of suitable basic skills training at many of the test sites, particularly catering for customers at the lower levels. Generally, it was felt that longer-term courses were required to address the needs of customers with language or literacy needs.
- Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) to access short vocational courses, such as Fork-Lift Truck (FLT) licences, Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) training or CSCS cards for construction workers.
- Specialised support services for drug and alcohol dependency, ex-offenders or debt issues. Customers facing these kinds of barriers might be referred to voluntary and community organisations for this type of provision, or for Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) – funded Progress to Work provision.

- One office had started the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) process which had two elements. The first was skills screening at the NJI stage, when if any obvious skill needs were identified, customers would be referred to an IES adviser/Nextsteps; otherwise they were given information about IES/Nextsteps' services. The second element was that, when customers reached the six months stage, they could attend up to eight weeks of full-time training. The local Further Education College had a very broad range of vocational courses to offer and all courses would include a job search element. The pilot was reported to be going well, with positive feedback coming from customers signposted to IES/Nextstep services although it was too early to report on the new training provision.

Some customers were also still able to access core DWP/Jobcentre Plus-funded provision during the revised regime tests as illustrated below:

- As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the test sites was taking advantage of a significant increase in local non-contracted provision, funded through the ESF and delivered by two providers. This included: vocational training, employability skills, and specific support for priority group customers, such as those with learning difficulties or mental health issues. Despite high hopes at the start, some offices reported that their experience of this provision had been disappointing, because:
 - firstly, the majority of customers could only be referred from the six-month stage, even if a specific training need had been identified earlier;
 - secondly, there was a lack of referrals successfully going through to one particular provider; and
 - thirdly, there was a general lack of communication and feedback from the providers about customer progress.
- Programme Centres: this was the most common form of referral at Stage Three, especially for customers requiring support with confidence building, interview techniques and job search, etc.
- One office had run their own two-week Pre-Employment training (PET) programmes to fill specific vacancies in the area, including catering and cleaning vacancies, which suited lone parents wanting to work limited hours. The training was run for contact centres, Royal Mail, security firms and the local council. One manager thought that there was potential for Jobcentre Plus offices to run more of these employer-led PET programmes and that there could be better links developed between staff working in the revised regime and the LEPs to facilitate this.

4.6 Weekly signing

A second six-week period of weekly signing begins following the first Stage Three interview with a PA and runs along similar lines to that in Stage Two (see Section 3.6). Some offices had been informed that they could move the six weekly signing

sessions to the end of Stage Three, should they wish to, as a final push before the handover to Stage Four providers and one office had adopted this approach and liked having the flexibility to decide when the weekly signings should take place. As discussed in the earlier section, weekly signing may become a casualty of the economic downturn as staff resources and space within Jobcentre Plus offices are squeezed.

4.7 Customers' views of Stage Three

The interviews with customers aimed to explore their views and experiences of Jobcentre Plus services and the revised regime more specifically. A number of customers were interviewed at various times during Stage Three, and this largely depended on the diaries of advisers on the days that researchers were visiting Jobcentre Plus offices. Customers may have been attending their first interview of Stage Three at the 26-week point, or they may have been attending one of the subsequent local appointments during the next 26 weeks.

Several customers thought that Jobcentre Plus staff were trying harder to help them now than they had during previous claims. One customer reported that more advisers were trying to help people now whereas previously they had seemed fed up and 'didn't bother'. Several other customers noted that the current system is 'better than it was'. A number of customers were very pleased to be receiving more intensive support from advisers at this earlier juncture in their claim. Many customers who responded positively to adviser interventions at Stage Three had been unemployed for some time, and had been through the old style New Deals, but they felt that they were receiving a more personal and tailored service from advisers under the new regime. A lot of customers were dropping into Jobcentre Plus offices on an ad-hoc basis to have a 'quick chat' with advisers and ask about current vacancies, etc.

However, other customers perceived the additional attention they were receiving more negatively. For example, one customer felt that advisers were pushing people towards work that they maybe did not want and another reported that advisers were '*target driven, more concerned about getting you off the books and into any job*' and felt as though he was being pushed through a system and into unsuitable work. Another customer thought there was now 'too much pressure, too early' in the claim, after leaving work or losing a job, and felt that people needed more time to get back on their feet. Some customers noted that they were receiving additional help with job search during their reviews, however, this was not always appreciated by customers, particularly those with professional qualifications, who, in some cases, thought they were being encouraged to take work for which they were over-qualified and which paid less well than their previous employment. Many customers who had been through the system before felt that the revised regime was just '*more of the same*' and several thought that it would make no difference to their circumstances or job chances.

In some of our earlier observations of customers, and in feedback from advisers, it appeared that many customers did not really understand the process they were going through nor the purpose of the different elements of the revised regime. There seemed to be a fair degree of confusion about why they were in Jobcentre Plus offices, whether they were there to sign weekly or fortnightly, or to attend reviews with advisers. Some advisers were reporting that claims were being closed because customers were failing to attend review meetings as a result of this confusion. In some of our observations, no explanations were being given to customers as to why they had to attend, which may have been exacerbating the confusion. The regime seemed a little 'choppy' from the customer perspective. It is worth noting again that the leaflets, although only available later in the revised regime test, had done little to alleviate customers' confusion about the regime. Once more, we found that customers (who should have received a leaflet about the stage in which they were engaged) often could not recall receiving the information, or when prompted could not remember the content of the leaflets.

Interestingly, some advisers reported that their customers were pleased that they did not have to go '*on the New Deal anymore*', following the introduction of the revised JSA regime. It is not clear from our research, however, that customers really understood the new regime, its purpose, or indeed their role and responsibilities within it.

Some customers were very impressed with the quality of advisers although a few customers noted some differences between them with one reporting that '*some people seem more interested than others*'. Customers were usually judging advisers according to how much relevant, specific help they had been given, or they perceived they had been given. Our observations of advisory interviews supported this view: some advisers were much better at listening to the views, experiences and needs of customers, and responding appropriately than others. Some advisers, however, clearly missed opportunities to refer customers for non-contracted provision, for IAG, or for work trials. Rather negatively, several customers thought that they had not learned anything new as a result of their interviews with advisers.

In the main, most customers reported that the regularity of the meetings with advisers during Stage Three were '*about right*'.

4.8 Key issues at Stage Three

- The revised regime is introducing a significant change of organisational culture within Jobcentre Plus which is likely to be a challenge for many staff. Although some advisers appeared to be coping well with the challenges, many others were considered to lack the skills, confidence and background knowledge to offer the flexible type of service required. This has reinforced the need for ongoing programmes of learning and development to ensure staff have the requisite skills to respond to customer needs.

- Various other constraints to adviser flexibility emerged from the research including the delivery targets that advisers were still required to meet, and the lack of control that many of them had over their diaries.
- Responses to the Fast Track assessment tool for screening basic skills have also highlighted some issues about its use by advisers during Stage Three. Although many advisers had no problem with carrying out skills screening, there were some who felt uncomfortable with the process. There were concerns raised by managers that in many cases it was being carried out as '*just another routine task*', without a clear enough understanding of the purpose of the assessment. Some managers questioned whether a 13 or 26-week review was the best place for carrying out the assessment: one suggested that there might be a role for trained specialised advisers to administer the assessments. However, if skills screening is to continue as part of the 'generic' PA's role, then training in how to carry this out effectively should be considered a priority.
- Lack of information about local provision and what it could offer to customers remained a key issue throughout the research, and is one which is unlikely to be resolved in the shorter-term. Although progress was being made in some areas in terms of mapping local provision, it was recognised that this was just a first step and that the mapping should be followed up by active engagement and dialogue with providers about the skills needs of Jobcentre Plus customers. However, few advisers or managers had the time or resources to undertake this work and there was one suggestion that it could be more effectively coordinated at the district level. It was also reported that, even where links had been established, communication and information flows between Jobcentre Plus and providers were often inadequate.
- The research has also provided illustrations of good, innovative practice at Stage Three which could be transferable to other Jobcentre Plus offices. For example, in one area, information was being drawn down on customers reaching particular durations of unemployment (in this example, 34 weeks and 44 weeks), to monitor how and what they were doing, and how the advisory team was working with them. Staff were using existing documentation and data held on the LMS – including the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT) – to identify customers' barriers and issues and then to devise potential solutions to overcome them.

5 Cross-cutting themes

In this chapter, we address some cross-cutting themes which are relevant to all stages of the revised Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime. We also discuss the issue of impact from the revised regime to establish what, if anything, is happening to customer flows as a result of the test. The main issues for discussion in this chapter are:

- partner organisations;
- adviser skills and training;
- management and leadership;
- resources;
- early indications of impact.

5.1 Partner organisations³

The development and maintenance of effective working relationships with partner organisations is obviously an important element of the revised JSA regime, since successful referrals to (mainly) non-contracted providers will to a large extent depend upon these, particularly during Stage Three. The research found a number of examples of fairly good working relationships between Jobcentre

³ During the course of the research, we conducted interviews with a small sample of partner organisations at the test sites, including Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) providers and vocational training providers. Although we aimed to conduct more provider interviews during the fieldwork (approximately 20), this proved to be difficult, mainly because non-contracted partners had no particular obligation or motivation to participate in the research. Moreover, local test offices were often unable to recommend providers with whom the research team could engage. The interviews undertaken provide a range of provider experiences and do give some clear indications of what is working well and also where improvements may be required. As with all qualitative research, however, these views may not reflect the full range of experiences in all the test sites.

Plus and partner organisations, and particularly with IAG providers at those sites where local providers were regularly attending the Back to Work Sessions (BtWS). Discussions with both providers and Jobcentre Plus staff and managers highlighted some of the critical factors that had contributed to (or impeded) the development of effective partnership working within the revised regime. These centred largely on good communication.

As noted in the previous chapter, a key issue of concern was a general lack of communication and two-way flow of information between Jobcentre Plus staff and partners at the local level. There was little evidence from the research overall that advisers were spending much time discussing customers' needs with providers, or vice versa. This issue was no doubt compounded by data protection issues but also related to the fact that customers were often advised to attend non-contracted provision, rather than being formally referred as such. There was also reported to be insufficient time or resources available for Jobcentre Plus staff to spend on building or maintaining more effective working relationships with existing partners, or for widening their partnership networks to address the needs of a more diverse range of customers coming into the JSA regime, e.g. community health teams, who have not been major partners in the past. A widely-expressed concern was that poor information flows and data protection constraints were making it difficult for Jobcentre Plus and providers to work together to provide a holistic service to customers, particularly if these relationships were non-contracted. This view was reinforced in an interview with a provider who commented that the formal working relationship which used to exist between Jobcentre Plus and themselves had been discontinued and that Jobcentre Plus no longer provided them with information about the customers they referred.

Advisers often expressed the view that the nature of their relationship with non-contracted providers gave them little control over the outcome of the referrals they made, or the feedback they could expect to receive on customers: non-contracted providers were not under any obligation to take on Jobcentre Plus customers who were referred or to report on the progress of any referrals they followed up. This was apparent in all stages of the revised JSA regime – advisers and FJR staff rarely reported receiving any formal feedback on referrals they had made to providers. The onus was usually on the customer to provide proof of attendance at the training by bringing referral slips and other paperwork to their next adviser review meeting. At one pilot site, advisers expressed their frustration with one local provider who had promised a lot to their customers but delivered little. Many customers had been turned away because of changes made to the eligibility criteria; and others had faced long delays before they were able to take up the training.

The research has also thrown up some examples of contrasting views between Jobcentre Plus advisers and providers in their assessment of particular customers' needs. One example of this was where an adviser had identified a training need that would enable the customer to get into a job in the next few weeks; whereas the provider had recommended a two-year training course.

Providers, for their part, reported that Jobcentre Plus procedures were rather inflexible. For example, one vocational training course provider felt that many Jobcentre Plus customers would have benefited from earlier intervention, i.e. before six months unemployment, to help them into work more quickly. Such a long wait, when an obvious training need could have been identified earlier, could leave customers feeling frustrated and de-motivated, and made the job of training providers much more difficult later on.

5.2 Adviser skills and training

Another important issue highlighted by the research has been the skills required by Jobcentre Plus staff, particularly advisers, to implement the revised regime and the broader challenge this presents in terms of staff training and workforce development.

5.2.1 BtWS presenters

The qualities and experience of the BtWS presenters were viewed as crucial to the success of the BtWS during Stage One. Managers and BtWS presenters thought these qualities should include:

- a sound knowledge and experience of the advisory role, in order to be able to answer customers' questions during the sessions;
- a good knowledge of the local labour market;
- a positive and 'upbeat' manner, while at the same time being able to make clear the conditionality issues to customers;
- confidence in being able to deliver the presentation effectively in a group setting; and
- being able to handle group dynamics and conflict situations.

Presenters also needed to be adequately prepared for the sessions: for example, we have seen that some presenters spent time prior to the sessions checking the jobs that customers were looking for and pulling out suitable vacancies from Labour Market System (LMS) prior to their attendance at the sessions; others had researched the provision available locally and collected literature and information packs to put on display at the sessions.

The centrally-organised training attended by the BtWS presenters had been very well received, with many reporting that it was the best training they had ever attended. Although the training was generic, rather than being specific to the new regime, the sessions appear to have provided presenters with very useful transferable presentational skills. It included practical help on how to set up and use the laptop and PowerPoint, and allowed presenters to role play and try out their presentation skills with colleagues.

5.2.2 Adviser skills at Stage Three

The research findings also focused attention on the knowledge and skills required by advisers involved in the delivery of the revised JSA regime at Stage Two and particularly Stage Three. These included the ability to:

- assess customer needs and distance from the labour market, and make appropriate use of skills screening tools;
- respond flexibly to customers' needs, once these have been identified, and engage with customers in order to address any barriers to employment;
- direct and challenge customers on their job search activities;
- apply sanctions and take tough action with customers, where necessary;
- 'sell' the customer to the employer and respond to employers' needs (i.e. job-brokering skills);
- have a wide-ranging knowledge of the labour market and the alternative provision available locally.

It was apparent from our fieldwork that many advisers at the test sites already possessed these skills and so were well-placed to meet the challenges of the new regime. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, there appeared to be a significant number of advisers who lacked the confidence or background knowledge to offer the type of flexible service required by the new regime and who would benefit from training to update their skills. For the future roll-out of the revised regime, advisers might also require a learning needs analysis to identify gaps in their skills. In some cases, managers thought the issue was not so much about skills training but encouraging advisers to adopt a different, more open, mindset in response to the cultural changes associated with the new regime. Our observations and interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff reinforced these points and indicated that there were wide variations in adviser styles and skills across the test sites.

There were two other key issues arising from our observations of advisory interviews, which are relevant in terms of future staff training. The first point relates to the amount of time which advisers and Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) staff tended to spend looking at the screen during the interview, and entering data and making corrections on the LMS record, rather than interacting more directly with the customer. Staff often had poor typing abilities and speeds and so completing the fields on the LMS took up considerable amounts of interview time (often while customers were doing nothing). Secondly, much of the language and terminology used during interviews was difficult to understand and was arguably not Plain English. For example, official terms such as 'adjudication', 'mandatory', 'sanctions' and 'direction' were in common usage and although customers often appeared to 'go along' with the jargon, they were often confused about what was being said or done to them.

5.2.3 FJR staff

There was also some discussion of the specific skills or attitudes required of FJR staff within the revised system, particularly in their dealings with customers at weekly signing sessions.

According to some managers, staff who were newer to the FJR role were often perceived to be offering a better service to customers as they came to the role motivated, fresh and with a more open attitude than staff who had been in the role for longer. They tended to be enthusiastic when discussing job search activities and opportunities with customers.

FJR staff in some offices had attended workshops or internal presentations on encouraging customers to attend the BtWS and these seem to have had a positive effect on staff motivation and (arguably) on customer attendance at these events. An important point to make here is that including staff and helping them to see (and be part of) the broader picture appears to have paid dividends.

5.2.4 Staff training during the tests

Training and guidance from Head Office

Staff in the test sites reported that guidance about the test from Jobcentre Plus Head Office had not been available until very shortly before the test went live, and that guidelines were still being issued in response to queries from districts and local offices as the tests were bedding down. As a result, some managers and staff felt that they had, to a large extent, been '*thrown in at the deep end*' and would have appreciated a longer lead-in time.⁴

The main source of centrally-coordinated information regarding the revised regime was the Jobcentre Plus intranet, where guidance had been issued in the form of process flowcharts with relevant tools and documents embedded via links to them. This on-line facility was only available four days before the test began, which was considered to be too short notice. However, many managers and staff found the flowcharts and other ongoing information and updates very helpful.

On-site training and guidance

Some offices also organised more internal staff training in preparation for the test. At one site, managers went to some length to ensure that all customer-facing staff received a fairly in-depth training on the new regime (the key changes, the aims of the regime, etc.) and they believed that this investment had secured 'buy-in' from their staff.

⁴ However, this would have been difficult to achieve, because of the short timescale available for implementing the tests.

Other offices involved in the test had organised their own staff workshops on various aspects of the new regime. There had also been some awareness sessions which were run prior to the start of the test, giving staff an overview of the main changes that would be introduced under the revised regime.

Some managers in the test sites reported that they were still receiving a number of enquiries from different staff (e.g. Diary/Administration Support Officers (DASOs) and Customer Engagement Team Leaders (CETLs)) several months into the test, asking for guidance and clarification on the new regime. This seems to reinforce the need for ongoing staff training and awareness sessions across Jobcentre Plus staff as a whole.

5.3 Management and leadership

The importance of effective management and leadership has become clearer throughout the life cycle of the revised regime test. Many Jobcentre Plus staff who helped to design the new processes have been instrumental in leading on implementation at a local level, and have continued to help with issues and problems as they have arisen. As we have seen, the revised regime is perceived by many staff to be a departure from the old ways of working: staff, and particularly BtWS presenters and Personal Advisers (PAs), are expected to work much more flexibly with customers and to achieve quite a lot, in terms of flows off the register, with quite a little. Many senior staff have embraced this (or did at the time the revised regime was devised) and there is a clear need for managers to continue to 'buy in' to the idea of change, and to be keen to implement the revised regime, and take full advantage of the flexibilities it offers.

What has also become apparent over time is the need to ensure that all senior staff in Jobcentre Plus offices are on board when the revised regime is introduced nationally. There have been some examples in test sites of office managers and Advisory Services Managers (ASMs) having different priorities, which has resulted in confused messages being given to staff. In one, an ASM had told advisers to focus on referring customers to non-contracted provision (i.e. a training first approach) whilst the office manager was telling them to refer customers to jobs as an absolute priority (i.e. a work-first approach). Not surprisingly, advisers were not sure which lead to follow and felt very unsupported whichever decision they made. In some sites, ASMs were fairly negative about the revised regime (in direct contrast to managers responsible for implementing the regime) and did not think it would make much difference to the customer group. In order for the regime to have a chance of success, and for other (more junior) staff to approach it with enthusiasm and creativity, there seems to be a clear need for senior staff to lead by example. Certainly the research found examples of this as discussed in earlier sections of the report: one site took a 'whole office' approach, involving all staff and briefing them on the purpose of the test to ensure that everyone was signed up to it; ASMs have held case conferences to assist advisers with particularly difficult customers; some have helped advisers to identify common barriers to employment

and to source non-contracted provision; some ASMs have actively encouraged and granted time to advisers to promote better working relationships with providers, etc. These seem to be examples of good practice which motivate and engender enthusiasm amongst operational staff and should be shared with other offices. What is missing, however, is consistency between the sites, and this will arguably become a bigger problem with national roll-out, and as unemployment increases and vacancies fall. Quality assuring the various stages of the revised regime will be very important in the future.

5.4 Resources

A number of resource issues were raised during the fieldwork in the test sites: these related primarily to premises and IT.

5.4.1 Premises for BtWS

A major challenge for some sites, in the early stages of the test, was to identify suitable premises, either in-house or externally, that had sufficient space to run the BtW sessions. Some managers reported that it took some considerable time to find appropriate premises for this purpose, or to prepare the premises for purpose (for example, fitting digilocks on doors in 'back-of-house' to allow for sessions with the public to be held in office space there). Office managers also had to grapple with risk assessments and the health and safety aspects of running the sessions off-site or back-of-house, in particular those relating to security of staff and customers. At one site, they had found a suitable external venue in a central location, but it was proving to be too expensive, so, by the end of the test, they were looking for a cheaper alternative.

There were also technical and IT problems resulting from the necessity of running the group sessions at off-site locations. For example, some BtWS presenters were required to disconnect laptops between sessions as the room being used for the BtWS was not lockable. Not only was this a repetitious task, but also the resource implications mounted up, with 12 sessions running per week. At another external BtWS location, presenters were required to return the laptop to a different office at the end of each day because of security issues. One office reported that the USB they had been using for the presentation was non-encrypted and, a few months into the test, had been instructed that they could no longer use it and would have to revert to overhead projectors or a flipchart. The presenters complied with this but considered it unprofessional.

Some offices experienced the logistical difficulty of getting customers to BtWS, particularly those living in rural locations: this is likely to become a much more widespread problem with national roll-out. The issue became more problematic if sessions were being run at a different location to a customer's normal Jobcentre Plus office, and had the potential to increase fail-to-attend rates. If sessions cannot be held on site, staff need to do all they can to ensure that customers understand where they must go for BtWS, perhaps by making this clearer to customers on the JSD.

The implications of these issues for national roll-out need to be considered: districts and local offices will need sufficient lead-time to get premises ready for BtWS once the regime becomes more widespread. Some managers suggested that all Jobcentre Plus offices needed to start thinking about these issues as soon as possible, in order to be prepared. Districts will be required to think quite creatively about how to hold these sessions. Some suggestions coming from the field during this evaluation, in addition to using back-of-house space, included looking at alternative ways of using available Jobcentre Plus space, for example, by opening up local offices slightly earlier to run BtWS (with appropriate security and supervision), etc.

5.4.2 Information technology

The LMS system impinged on the test in many ways, although it is not our intention to discuss all of the LMS problems experienced here. Jobcentre Plus are aware of the challenges presented by LMS and have planned for many of the problems to be sorted out for national roll-out. However, it is worth noting that LMS did, in some ways, impose a restraint on the adviser flexibilities that were potentially afforded to the test. One office, for example, tried to run job preparation sessions for customers (rather than referring them to lengthy Programme Centre courses) but were unable to do so fully because it was not possible to set the sessions up through the LMS system. Offices were unable to address or overcome these issues manually or clerically and so more innovative ways of working with customers remained largely untested.

In addition, diary management constraints often led to inflexibilities in the new regime. Because of high customer volumes (and possibly the LMS system itself), advisers were often not able to book to see customers as frequently as they might have liked and they may have had to wait four to five weeks to see customers again. As we have discussed above, the impact of these time-lags on off-flows from benefit may be significant.

5.4.3 Other resource issues

Another concern for some managers, was the need to find desk space for the additional tasks associated with the revised regime. Some offices struggled to find space for FJR staff involved in weekly signing (particularly in sites where it was not already being routinely carried out), or advisory teams, and these problems were exacerbated towards the end of the test, as registers and the claimant count increased.

Throughout the research, we were aware that many offices were running with head-count constraints, with some offices continuing to wait for staffing allocations made to them some time ago. Although the evaluation has not explored this issue in any detail, staffing levels are very likely to increase significantly as unemployment rises in the current economic situation. During fieldwork visits we saw examples of offices curtailing six-weekly signing to five minutes instead of ten, or doing

away with it altogether, and some offices sticking to the 20 minute allocation for the Stage Two interview, rather than increase it to 30 minutes. These approaches were intended to save time and use scarce resources efficiently. However, the impact of such approaches might also constrain the positive outcomes from the revised regime. Reliable Management Information (MI), which shows comparative performance across the test sites, might throw more light on the impact of these different approaches.

5.5 Early indications of impact

At this time there is no data available to say when customers are moving off the register, and whether they are doing so at different time periods to normal exit patterns, i.e. to off-flow patterns under the old JSA regime and so we are unable to begin to assess what impact, if any, the revised regime has had in getting customers off the register and into work, over and above what would have happened anyway (the counterfactual)⁵. We might have expected that customers would move off the register more quickly at Stage Three, as a result of great advisory interventions at a much earlier stage, but we are unable to identify or quantify this in any reliable way thus far. There is some suggestion that the BtWS have resulted in a significant number of customers signing off, however, it is not known how this compares to normal off-flow data trends and so again cannot be attributed to the revised regime in any reliable way. Key data is becoming available which should help to assess the impact, if any, of the revised regime.

Anecdotally at least, many advisers believe that they have made a difference to customer outcomes, and particularly at Stage Three of the revised regime, when they have had greater freedom to work more closely with customers than was previously the case. There have been examples of very long-term unemployed customers finding work with additional support from advisers some six months into the new regime. However, during the latter stages of the research, the recession has begun to be felt in most test sites, which is likely to result in much lower job outcomes in the future.

There is some concern that 'revolving door' customers have not actually been served by the revised regime and the question remains whether the new regime will bring about any different outcomes for these customers. Some advisers taking part in the research thought that 'revolving door' customers would be best served by provision under Stage Four of the revised regime, where stricter sanctions could be applied for non-compliance. However, this may also be (partly) the legacy of an often deeply-entrenched Jobcentre Plus mindset that has relied on external provision for customers who are much harder to help, expecting them to 'fix the

⁵ This study was not intended to quantify the impact of the revised regime but rather to gather qualitative data to improve delivery of the revised regime. Other Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) studies will provide quantitative assessments of the impact of the regime.

problem', or at the very least, get them off active, internal caseloads for periods of time. Importantly, this research has highlighted how one office has attempted to identify the barriers faced by their customers at later stages of unemployment (who might otherwise have been, or become, revolving door customers) and then gone on to identify solutions, and (if necessary) source (non-contracted) provision that was most appropriate for that customer group at the time. New approaches to working with these customers needs to be explored (locally) and good practice exchanged. In addition, advisers may need support to enable them to apply greater sanctions to these customers. Test sites do not seem to have made particular use of colleagues working in compliance during the revised regime, to assist with checking customers' availability for work, or adherence to benefit rules and regulations. Under national roll-out, it seems sensible to ensure that Compliance Officers are part of the range of Jobcentre Plus services utilised to ensure customers are meeting their roles and responsibilities under the new revised regime.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

The revised Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime was introduced in April 2008 in four test sites at a time when the economy was still fairly stable. The regime aimed to test a more personalised approach to helping unemployed customers to move back into work, and particularly those who were more disadvantaged, and was intended to be more responsive to their individual needs. This research, which has been entirely qualitative, has sought to explore the implementation of the revised regime tests and to understand the impact that these revised processes have had on Jobcentre Plus customers, staff and stakeholders. The research was intended to inform the final design of the revised regime and in this chapter, we draw together the key findings from the research and offer some conclusions and recommendations for future policy development.

6.1 Conclusions

6.1.1 Impact on customers

At this stage, there is insufficient data to say whether the revised regime is performing better in terms of job outcomes and customer sign-offs than the earlier JSA regime (other studies will be commissioned to quantify the hard effects of the revised regime). Certainly, the policy intent was to get customers into work more quickly than would otherwise have been the case but no data is available to support this. The changing economic position has muddied this picture even further. Although it may be possible to compare relative off-flow data over time in the test sites, the downturn in the economy in the latter part of the test is likely to negate any (or some of) the positive effects of the revised regime. Anecdotally though, customers seem to have moved off the register during Stage One, particularly when mandated to attend a Back to Work Sessions (BtWS), and again at Stage Three, when they have received more intensive, one-to-help from Personal Advisers (PAs). PAs have reported a number of successes with a range of customers, including those perceived to be the hardest-to-help. It is less clear that the revised regime is having much of a long-term effect on 'revolving door'

customers and in many ways, this remains to be seen. Some may have signed-off when faced with more intense Jobcentre Plus intervention but their longer term activity and claiming behaviour under the revised regime is not yet known. There has been little use of compliance staff as part of the revised regime which seems to be a shortcoming and greater inclusion of these staff, as part of a 'whole office' approach to the revised regime may bring about different, longer-term outcomes.

6.1.2 Skills in the revised regime

In relation to skills, the revised regime has attempted to (further) integrate the identification of skills needs into the various stages of the regime. The research has found, however, little evidence to suggest that identifying skills needs is a priority, particularly in Stages One and Two of the revised regime. Screening at these early stages of the regime has tended to be very light-touch and ad-hoc. All offices appear to have carried out routine and comprehensive basic skills screening at Stage Three even though this may not always have been appropriate to the customer. Several sites have responded to skills assessments in a rather tick-box way – they have not been integrated into the advisory interview, rather they are seen as something that has to be done during the interview, before moving onto other activities. The test site that is moving into Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) territory has begun to more firmly embed skills assessments into advisory interventions and incorporates a wider range of skills for assessment including basic and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) skills, plus employability and vocational skills. There is some support in other sites for taking this broader approach to 'skills', rather than remaining narrowly focused on basic skills alone. This evaluation has identified a degree of unease, and possibly inertia, amongst some advisers in relation to assessing skills, particularly basic skills, and points to the need for better training for advisers in how to undertake this task.

6.1.3 Impact on staff

The impact of the revised regime on staff has been mixed. Generally, although the test was introduced in a fairly short period of time, it has largely been welcomed by those who have implemented it. The staff who have been most affected by the regime changes, particularly advisory staff at Stages Two and Three, have, in the main, reported fairly positively on these changes: many, although not all, have welcomed the opportunity to work more flexibly with customers to meet their needs.

There remains, however, some confusion amongst operational staff as to the purpose of various elements of the regime, and particularly the additional Targeted Interviews (TIs) in Stage Two. Advisers seem unsure as to whether these interviews offer a carrot to customers requiring more personalised support, or a stick to others to ensure the conditionality agenda is being upheld. The research has identified a number of issues concerning management and leadership within offices, and the need to ensure that all staff are aware of the purpose of the regime, and are fully and consistently signed up to it. This has not always happened in test sites and a few staff have become demotivated or, at worst, disillusioned about the potential

for the regime to succeed. Jobcentre Plus managers and senior staff need to lead by example.

Staff learning and development is also a big issue: the revised regime tests have highlighted a number of shortcomings in relation to the skills of (some) advisers. Certainly, the regime demands that advisers work much more independently with customers, often without set processes, and without recourse to a great amount of contracted provision. Advisers need to have a much better understanding of the local labour market and non-contracted training provision than they may have done under the old New Deals, and this has proved difficult for some. A number of advisers have struggled with elements of the revised regime and require more help and professional development to help them to work flexibly and creatively with customers, in the way the regime intended.

In most test sites, the cost of introducing the revised regime, once the initial implementation (staff) costs have been excluded, has been relatively neutral or, at the very least, minimal. Managers were often waiting for additional headcount at the start of the tests but these constraints predated the introduction of the revised JSA regime per se. The costs associated with the JSA regime generally have begun to rise though: registers are increasing and offices are having to respond rapidly. Test sites are moving staff resources around pragmatically to meet the day-to-day needs of the current JSA regime: Stage Two and Three advisers have been pulled in to take new claims and Stage Two and Three weekly signing time-slots have been reduced and sometimes withdrawn. BtWS are also being affected as rising registers demand that more sessions are held, etc. The danger here is that the policy intent gets lost as managers try to respond to the current crisis.

6.1.4 Impact on stakeholders

The main stakeholders affected by the revised regime have been providers although again the impact on these providers has been (anecdotally) fairly minimal. No provision has been contracted specifically for the revised regime: advisers and Jobcentre Plus staff have relied on a few existing contractual arrangements mostly for ESOL and basic skills provision, and Programme Centres. With few exceptions, all referrals to other training provision have been to non-contracted providers.

The level of referral to non-contracted providers is not clear, however, and certainly no Management Information (MI) is available to enable us to estimate the likely level, or importantly the type, of demand for these services in the future. There are no composite records of referrals to non-contracted providers and so information on demand is not available. Moreover, Jobcentre Plus advisers have struggled to get feedback from non-contracted providers on any referrals they have made, partly because of data protection issues but also because these advisers have no duty to provide this sort of information to Jobcentre Plus.

Advisers have reported that they would like to be able to refer (some of their) customers for training, to meet their vocational and employability needs, which they believe will move them into work quicker and with commensurate benefit savings, but there are very real concerns about the quality of this provision

if it exists and if it remains outside of Jobcentre Plus contractual control. The mechanisms for ensuring there is a fit between demand (as identified by advisers) and supply (of training) are not always clear. The research has highlighted the need for better communication between Jobcentre Plus operational staff (e.g. advisers, Advisory Services Managers (ASMs) and office managers) and those responsible for brokering and quality assuring training provision from contracted or non-contracted providers.

6.2 Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations arising from this research:

- There is a need to ensure that the aims of the regime are fully understood by all staff in Jobcentre Plus offices, not only advisers. Staff need to be aware of, and signed-up to the new regime to bring about the biggest impact.
- There is a need to better understand the customer group and to ensure that the barriers faced by customers, particularly those who are hardest-to-help and hardest-to-engage, are fully understood and recorded. This can then inform the appropriate response from Jobcentre Plus staff and their partners. Case conferencing between advisers and ASMs is one way in which this level of understanding can be improved.
- More time and resources are needed to support and coach staff to deal with the demands of the revised regime. This has implications for national roll-out and for staff across all stages of the revised regime. This may include a learning needs analysis for Jobcentre Plus operational teams to ensure that staff understand the aims of the new regime and are trained and equipped to deliver it effectively.
- Good practice should be routinely exchanged within and between offices. The research has identified some good working practices but these are not always shared with colleagues or other offices. The type of information that could be shared includes:
 - adviser knowledge of the range and scope of (potential sources of) alternative provision;
 - useful techniques and approaches to assist customers who are harder to help, or who have attitudinal issues;
 - sharing ideas about the kinds of mandatory activities which could be given to customers in Stage Three, etc.
- Compliance Officers should have a clearer role under the revised regime. Very little use has been made of compliance staff during the test which seems to be an oversight.
- Any gaps in training and/or other provision (rather than an information gap amongst advisers or an overreliance on external partners to meet customers' needs) need to be communicated to ASMs and office managers who should facilitate the brokerage of such provision (possibly with Third Party Provision Managers at a district level).