

# At the centre

Finding the Plus for unemployed people during the recession  
Conference special — 12 November 2009

**C**onsumer Focus undertook research to determine how effectively customers are being served by Jobcentre Plus in the recession. As a consumer watchdog we sought to assess how effectively the service was managing under this pressure and how embedded the consumer experience was in the delivery of the service.

We wanted to understand and explore the challenges consumers faced. Using in-depth interviews we gained an insight into their experience of the service.

We have sought to assess how effectively the service is able to respond to people's needs, including supporting them while they return to work. We have not measured satisfaction against how quickly people have returned to work.

## Jobcentre Plus

Jobcentre Plus is the executive agency of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) responsible for supporting people who are unemployed. It is the result of a restructure that brought together the Benefits Agency and Employment Service in 2002.

As the economic downturn has deepened, Jobcentre Plus has become a vital public service for a growing number of people. There has been a substantial rise in unemployment; the number of people claiming Jobseekers Allowance has risen to 1.6 million (September, 2009). This represents the highest number yet and presents a huge challenge to the service.

## Access to information and services is restricted

Through our research we identified a range of information and support services that are in place, such as debt advice, career advice and training courses. These are either offered directly by Jobcentre Plus or by referral to third party providers. Information on how to access them is available through Jobcentre Plus.

In our research, many participants told us they needed these services to help cope with the challenges that come with unemployment. Jobcentre Plus emerged as the first point of call for many of our participants, and supporting omnibus research found that the public expected Jobcentre Plus to deliver the services they needed when they became unemployed. However, many found it difficult to access such services. It was their belief that they were not able to access the right information at the right time. The Personal Adviser service acted more as a gatekeeper than a gateway to the range of available services. Our participants wanted information early on, laying out clearly what was available and what was not, what their entitlements were and where conditions applied.

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*'They should tell you more what they can do. Make it less transactional and actually be proactive in telling you things.'*

*Male, Swindon, AB, 25-44 years old*

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## The least informed seem to be getting the worst service

The extent to which customers were informed seemed to affect the level of service they received. Some of the best-informed gathered information from friends and family who had previously experienced the service, and not from Jobcentre Plus directly. This information enabled participants to identify which services were most relevant to their circumstances and gave them the confidence to demand access to them. Where this happened the Jobcentre Plus service was responsive.

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*'I would have said I knew quite a lot because I've been going to the Jobcentre on and off for years but I had no idea that there was half as much available as you've just shown me on that list.'*

*Male, Bridgend, B, 45+ years*

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Participants who were not able to access information from Jobcentre Plus and did not have knowledgeable friends and family got the poorest service. They were unsure of the help available in their job search or what support they could expect to help them cope with unemployment. In a number of instances, those who were least aware were often the ones who most needed referrals and were less likely to have the resources necessary to successfully find relevant services themselves.

### **Individual needs are not being met because the service is not personalised or responsive**

Jobcentre Plus claims to offer a flexible and personal service, tailored to the needs of each individual, using a range of programmes including training, job search and business start-up. However, in relation to finding work, some participants felt they were not consulted on the type of employment they wanted to return to, even though many were ready to retrain and change direction and wanted to use their current status as a springboard to achieving this. Similarly, some participants felt they were neither consulted on, nor signposted to, the wider support services that would help meet their needs while looking for work.

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*'They're not doing anything to help me get a job and that's what they're there for.'*

*Male, Warrington, C1C2, 45+ years old*

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These findings indicate Jobcentre Plus is falling short when it comes to operating in a customer-responsive way. As the welfare reform process continues Personal Advisers will be given greater autonomy and associated responsibility for signposting customers to other service providers. This report seeks to support this process of reform and embed consumer experience into future service provision.

## Customer service is inconsistent

The Personal Adviser service has undergone substantial change during the reform process currently underway and will continue to change as Personal Advisers are given greater responsibility to connect customers to relevant support services.

Although we found cases of customer service excellence, and an appreciation among customers of the demands currently placed on the service, many more participants felt the service operated like a lottery. They saw different Personal Advisers on each visit, who operated at different quality standards. This left some participants feeling as though they were not being treated with dignity and respect by staff or the service as a whole. The DWP Customer Charter and Jobcentre Plus Service Standards exist to ensure consistently high standards throughout the service. However, they do not seem to be embedded in how the service is delivered due to demands on it and the lack of a customer service culture.

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*‘They are friendly but they just don’t take an interest in you.’*

*Female, Warrington, AB, 25-44 years old*

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In addition to a lack of consistency, there was a strong feeling that Personal Advisers did not spend enough time with participants to find out what their needs were or to explain what was on offer. This compounded the feeling of not being able to engage with a service that left them feeling processed by a system that was uninterested in their personal circumstances.

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*‘Surely it’s not asking for much just to show a bit of interest and enthusiasm for finding me work.’*

*Male, Bridgend, AB, 45+ years old*

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*‘Sometimes they just treat you like a number, get you in and out as quick as possible.’*

*Male, Warrington, DE, 25-44 years old*

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As a consequence, participants felt their access to services was reduced and that the Personal Adviser service was acting as a gatekeeper rather than a gateway to what was available. In some cases the inability of customers to identify the wider support services they required, or of Personal Advisers to make the necessary links between their customer’s circumstances and the support and assistance at their disposal, was limiting the responsiveness of the service.

### Customers are not at the heart of the service

Poor information provision, a lack of transparency and limited responsiveness undermine Jobcentre Plus’ claim to offer a personal service that has customers at its heart. It is difficult for customers to make use of the service if they do not know what is available and are uncertain about what support they could be getting from Personal Advisers.

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*‘They could improve by looking more closely at individuals, by tailoring what they offer more to each person.’*

*Female, Swindon, C1C2, 45+ years old*

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A consistent level of customer service operating to clear Service Standards needs to be at the core of a customer focused service. This would ensure that people receive the services and support they need while looking for work.

# Key recommendations

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Our recommendations address these key findings. They aim to help DWP and Jobcentre Plus embed consumer experience into service delivery, putting customers at the heart of welfare reform and developing stronger customer service. There is an immediate need to promote greater flexibility and customer responsiveness.

## Service design and customer service

DWP should:

- introduce a Customer Charter specifically for Jobcentre Plus to replace the generic departmental one
- review and revise current practices and guidelines, including the DWP Customer Charter and Jobcentre Plus Service Standards, to ensure they are customer focused, which will encourage Personal Advisers to act as gateways to Jobcentre Plus information and services
- systematically involve users in developing the service, including drawing up the Charters, standards, service design and evaluation

## Access to information

Jobcentre Plus should:

- provide comprehensive and easily accessible information on all the entitlements and services that are available through Jobcentre Plus
- ensure that customers understand when and where they can obtain the relevant information and that they continue to be informed on how to access services and any eligibility criteria that might apply
- communicate the role and remit of Jobcentre Plus and its staff clearly, consistently and effectively to ensure customers have realistic expectations of what is available

## Personalisation, responsiveness and access to services

Jobcentre Plus should:

- proactively tailor services and offer access to services to respond to the needs and circumstances of individuals to help them:
  - establish the most appropriate route back to work
  - respond to other support needs, such as debt and mortgage advice, training and guidance on self employment
- ensure that staffing levels, training and competencies are sufficient to deliver a customer focused service across Jobcentre Plus

## The research method

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Consumer Focus undertook the research starting from the perspective and expectations of users of the service. We sought to understand customers' diverse circumstances, their requirements for getting back to work and the service they received from Jobcentre Plus.

Ipsos MORI conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 40 Jobcentre Plus customers in five locations: Bridgend, Swindon, Warrington, Telford and East Kilbride.

Interviews were conducted in early summer 2009. Participants came from a wide range of social and occupational backgrounds. They were recruited on the basis of being recently unemployed, for between three and nine months, with quotas for age, gender, social group and previous experience of using Jobcentre Plus.

For more details on the research, including profiles of the participants, see the technical appendix in the Ipsos MORI report available at [www.consumerfocus.org.uk](http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk) which includes details of the questions, tables, and respondent profile.

## Consumer expectations of Jobcentre Plus in the recession

To complement our in-depth research into individual experiences of unemployment, Consumer Focus commissioned an omnibus survey of the general population to test what consumers across Great Britain would expect from Jobcentre Plus if they were to lose their job and need to use the service. The results showed:

- only a third felt Jobcentre Plus would be their first point of call in looking for a new job
- almost half of people thought Jobcentre Plus wouldn't help them find a new job if they became unemployed
- two fifths of people thought that Jobcentre Plus was aimed at low-skilled workers and wouldn't help people like them. A third disagreed

We also wanted to test awareness of the changes that had taken place in job centres with the introduction of Jobcentre Plus and asked people whether they thought a job centre would now offer far more than a list of vacancies. Just over a third thought it would while one in ten didn't know. Two thirds told us they would expect Jobcentre Plus to provide advice and support, such as help dealing with debt.

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