

Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal Evaluation: A report on qualitative research findings

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This evaluation presents qualitative process study findings on the Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) which was introduced from April 2009 in 28 Jobcentre Plus districts in England, Scotland and Wales. JRFND is delivered jointly by Jobcentre Plus and external providers. It is divided into four stages based on the length of a Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claim. The first three stages are delivered by Jobcentre Plus, and last up to 12 months. If a person is still claiming benefit after 12 months, they are then referred to a Flexible New Deal (FND) provider for further work preparation support.

The overall aims of this study were to:

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

The qualitative evaluation gathered evidence in Jobcentre Plus offices throughout the first year of implementation. Separate studies were undertaken with customers and FND providers. The report covers the first year of the Jobseekers Regime and the initial months of FND.

Implementation findings

The research confirmed that the new Jobseekers Regime had bedded in so that, by the end of the first year of implementation, customers moving through a full year of the Jobseekers Regime were receiving

the standard elements of the regime. Staff generally associated JRFND with bringing about a cultural change to Jobcentre Plus services, requiring advisers to work more flexibly with customers, together with a greater focus on customer obligations. However, the flexibility to adapt services to customers' needs was seen to be restricted by the structure of JRFND and pressure on advisers' time.

Jobcentre Plus staff welcomed the coordination of service supplier information through an online database. Still, managers and advisers reiterated the need to build relationships with providers, and suggested that this had become more difficult because of the move towards regional and national service contracts.

Overall, JRFND was felt to meet the needs of most customer groups. Customers with disabilities or health conditions and 18 to 24 year olds were considered well served. There were concerns that the extra recession support for young people (i.e. the Young Person's Guarantee), introduced in January 2010, had drawn attention away from other customers. The level of support available for ex-offenders, people with literacy and numeracy needs, and those with poor English language skills was regarded as less satisfactory than that provided to 18-24 year olds.

JRFND Stage 1: 0 to 13 weeks

Over time, staff reported increased familiarity and confidence with the conduct of the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI). Managers indicated that many advisers had embraced the idea of tailoring the interview and services they offered to the needs of

the customer, and, where appropriate, following up with additional support. The time allowed for the NJI was still seen as a problem by staff in some offices. To address this, some advisers were arranging additional meetings with customers (support for 18-24 year olds or Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU) one-to-one sessions) if they were not able to cover everything intended in the NJI. Most customers recalled little detail about their NJI and those who did described the meeting as largely an administrative process. The style and quality of Back to Work Sessions (BtWSs) varied greatly between offices and was often dependent on the enthusiasm and skill of the staff delivering them.

JRFND Stage 2: 13 to 26 weeks

Staff reported increased confidence in delivering Initial Stage 2 Reviews and welcomed the longer 30 minute meeting time. As many customers had not had adviser support since the NJI, some advisers felt the time for the Initial Stage 2 Review was insufficient to cover any additional customer concerns that had arisen. Customers perceived that Jobcentre Plus support increased in Stage 2, and the review meeting compared favourably to contacts during Stage 1. There was tension between the desire to find work and resistance to broadening job search criteria too far. Weekly signing was scheduled to occur during the first six weeks of Stage 2. Staff and customers were more positive about weekly signing when there was sufficient time given for an extensive job search and when there was continuity of staff week to week. Otherwise, it was perceived to be no more than a time-consuming administrative procedure. Targeted Reviews were operating in all the study offices, although eligibility was being restricted in a minority of offices where staff capacity was a factor. Some staff viewed the extra meetings as an opportunity to cover or follow up on topics from the Initial Stage 2 Review. Customers' accounts differed in relation to perceptions of support received, the approach and manner of advisers, the suitability of jobs presented and the extent to which the Targeted Reviews were regarded as helpful and worthwhile.

JRFND Stage 3: 26 to 52 weeks

In general, Jobcentre Plus staff felt that Stage 3 was working well. Most offices had sufficient staff to cope with the volume of customers and advisers were said to be adept with procedures. Overall, the support available during Stage 3 was seen as a significant improvement over the previous JSA regime. Customers generally welcomed having more customised support and more training opportunities, although some were frustrated that they had not been given the same level of support earlier in their claim. Most Jobcentre Plus advisers were confident in their handling of the Initial Stage 3 Review. However, the 40-minute timeslot was seen as insufficient for all of the tasks, data entry and information which needed to be covered. Various coping strategies had been adopted: running the Initial Stage 3 Review as a group meeting, delivering some of the information about Stage 3 to customers during Stage 2, and using additional advisory meetings to complete some tasks.

Caseloading was occurring in all offices. Advisers working in offices where they were free to decide the frequency and duration of meetings (in accordance with the policy intent) were most positive about caseloading and found it easier to work within the average three-hour allocation of contact time. Customers who had had regular meetings with their advisers during Stage 3 were generally positive about the additional support. Jobcentre Plus staff views on weekly signing at Stage 3 were mixed. Staff generally felt that the usefulness of weekly signing depended on the customer's needs and attitude. Customers' views were largely negative and most viewed it as a means of monitoring rather than support.

The assignment of mandatory activities by advisers varied greatly and was sporadic in some offices. Advisers often struggled to find suitable activities to engage customers in. Some staff believed that mandatory activities should generally be avoided as it was more effective to collaboratively agree participation with customers as opposed to making activities a formal condition of their claim. Mandatory fast-tracking was taking place in

all offices, while voluntary fast-tracking was rare. Jobcentre Plus staff believed that voluntary fast-tracking was appropriate if there was a specific reason for it – for instance, if a customer wanted to access a certain type of support which was only available at Stage 3.

Referral to the Flexible New Deal

When customers approach 12 months on JSA, they attend a pre-provision interview which was typically a 30-minute meeting with a Stage 3 adviser conducted in a Jobcentre Plus office. This is followed by an electronic referral to an FND provider. Most pre-provision interviews followed a standard format that included the collation and verification of customer data, updating goals and relaying basic information on conditionality and FND provision. Offices practiced variations to the electronic handover which entailed either telephone or face-to-face provider contact at the time of a referral. This direct contact was often referred to as a ‘warm handover’. Most Stage 3 advisers reported that they telephoned the FND provider to supply additional information about sensitive cases or when they felt extra detail about a customer would assist the provider to supply adequate support. But the nature of the handover process also depended on the organisation of FND suppliers in a district. For the most part, advisers agreed that a warm handover created a more seamless transition for the customer moving on to FND.

Jobcentre Plus staff generally felt uneasy about their lack of knowledge on the FND process and local FND services. It was felt this could be addressed by establishing regular communication links between office staff and local FND providers. Customers in the study had participated in pre-provision interviews during autumn 2010. Those who had received detailed information about FND provider services commented more favourably about FND. However, customers typically reported they had received little or vague information about what providers could offer and commented they would have appreciated more detail. Those who had developed strong ties

with their Stage 3 adviser were more likely to feel disappointed about the transition to FND.

Flexible New Deal

Ten prime contractors for FND services were operating in the six study districts. All were experienced in welfare-to-work delivery. The data from prime providers, Jobcentre Plus staff and customer experiences reflect the early months of FND delivery.

The roles of Jobcentre Plus office staff in FND was acknowledged to take the form of a fortnightly review meeting conducted by Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) staff. Stage 3 advisers had minimal contact with FND claimants and this tended to only occur when a customer proactively contacted them for help. Some Stage 3 advisers expressed a sense of loss at the change, and feelings of powerlessness and frustration at the lack of information about FND provision. Communications with FND providers generally took place at district level only. On the whole, the providers were positive about communications with Jobcentre Plus and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). For the most part, Jobcentre Plus staff reported that customers were finding FND provider services useful. Negative feedback mainly related to delays to FND starts which were attributed to initial ‘teething problems’. For customers, the nature and duration of activities varied, reflecting the flexible nature of the FND approach. They were aware of the conditionality attached to participation and understood the consequences of non-compliance. Customers either found provider services to be no different in comparison to Jobcentre Plus services or were more positive about the FND provider whom they found to be more proactive and helpful. However, across the study districts, it was evident that some FND providers were creating a more positive participant experience than others.

FND delivery structures varied considerably from an in-house model with specialist partners, to an all outsourced model delivered by a network of subcontractors. Hybrid models with varying degrees of subcontractor and specialist partner

involvement were also developed. Despite the range of delivery models, prime providers were delivering, or overseeing, a very similar range of services. All followed a participant-centred approach and offered enhanced services for participants with special needs. There was variation in the timing of work-related activity and, at the time of the fieldwork, some providers were finding it difficult to source work placements. Although service innovation appeared limited, there were examples found in front-line staff skill sets and innovative tools being used to work with participants.

Policy implications

The findings from the evaluation have implications for the design and delivery of future support for JSA customers. There are currently policies and initiatives under development to address these issues.

The skill levels of advisory and other front-line staff are key to the delivery of JRFND and underpin much of the variation in standards of support for claimants.

Greater flexibilities within the programme process would contribute to a more personalised claimant journey: the interventions could be timed and targeted to better coincide with customers' needs rather than the duration of a claim for JSA.

Improved communication links in a mixed supplier economy would ensure more seamless operations between Jobcentre Plus and FND providers.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 873 7. Research Report 706. October 2010).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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