

Accessing Jobcentre Plus Customer Services: a qualitative study

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Introduction

In recent years Jobcentre Plus has introduced a number of initiatives to improve the delivery of services to customers. There has been a rapid expansion in the use of telephony and web-based services, and so the number of 'channels' through which people can access Jobcentre Plus services has increased. The Accessing Jobcentre Plus Customer Services (AJCS) model was introduced into offices to help deal with rising levels of unappointed footfall and to help customers utilise the service channel that best meets their needs.

This evaluation provides early feedback following the national roll-out and examines whether AJCS is operating as intended.

The evaluation focused on ten Jobcentre Plus local offices and their associated Benefit Delivery Centres (BDCs) and involved: observational studies and in-depth face-to-face staff interviews in the selected Jobcentre Plus local offices; telephone interviews with staff in the five BDCs; and a focus group with the National Jobcentre Plus Customer Representative Group Forum (hereafter referred to as customer representatives).

The local Jobcentre Plus office

Staff awareness of aims of AJCS and understanding of roles

- Notwithstanding initial concerns, staff said that the roll-out of AJCS had been largely successful, including the guidance and training provided. Staff perceptions of why AJCS was introduced and the purpose of the new approach were generally aligned with Jobcentre Plus' policy intentions. Although

the reasons staff gave varied, they all focused on improving customers' contacts with Jobcentre Plus.

- Customer representatives, however, felt that the training had not equipped Jobcentre Plus staff to provide the best service to all customers, for instance, it did not fully equip staff to deal effectively with all types of disability issues.
- Jobcentre Plus local office staff reported that in general, customers were now using the most appropriate channels to resolve their enquiries. In fact, some staff suggested that customers preferred being able to contact the relevant teams – for example BDCs – directly. However, staff also said that some customers who were able to use the self-service facilities nevertheless requested face-to-face assistance with their enquiry.
- Older people, people with English as a second language and people without prior experience of Jobcentre Plus services were given as examples of customers who needed to be encouraged by staff to use the self-service facilities. This evaluation, however, did not include interviewing customers directly, and so customers' responses to the self-service channels are not fully known.

Footfall in local offices

- The design of the evaluation, in particular the absence of a comparison where AJCS had not been introduced, makes it impossible to estimate the effect of AJCS on the level of unappointed footfall in local offices. Additionally, the increase in the number of people entering local offices due to the economic downturn made it difficult for staff to identify the effects of the introduction of AJCS conclusively.

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- Nevertheless, some staff believed that the introduction of AJCS meant that the increase in customer volumes was made manageable.
- There was variation in how local offices manage footfall. Some offices' Customer Care Officers tried to control the volume of customers in the forum area by only allowing entrance to those with appointments, and staff in some local offices denied access to family and friends accompanying customers to make the forum area more manageable. This departs from AJCS, which although it aims to encourage customers to make appointments, does not remove the availability of face-to-face assistance without an appointment or access to self-service facilities by members of the public.
- Customer representatives said that by discouraging customers from going into local offices, Jobcentre Plus had made their services less accessible for those customers who were not aware of the process or did not feel comfortable contacting the BDC directly.
- On the whole, forum area staff felt relatively confident that customers with priority needs were being identified successfully and their needs met under AJCS.
- Some Customer Service Managers said that in most cases they were expected to determine vulnerability in less than one minute. In practice the length of time taken for interactions with customers was more flexible.
- Customer representatives felt that Jobcentre Plus staff's interpretation of what is a priority need varied substantially across offices; that staff were often insufficiently trained to identify any but the most obvious cases; that staff were not sufficiently trained to deliver a service to all vulnerable customers; and that too many people with perceived priority needs were being referred to advice agencies when a solution could be found within Jobcentre Plus local offices.

Health and safety

- Many forum area staff felt that the changes to health and safety management under AJCS had been positive. Staff thought that the more proactive role of Customer Care Officers was an important factor in the speedy and effective identification and management of risks.
- Staff assessments of the impact of AJCS on incidents varied across local offices. Reasons identified as potentially limiting or reducing the number of incidents were that queuing times had reduced and customers were handed on to the relevant agencies quickly. However, others said that handing on customers to the BDC could be a cause of tension, as was customer frustration with waiting times, delays and uncertainty about whether customers would receive payment.

Vulnerable customers

- The approach to identifying vulnerable (or priority need) customers varied across offices. Staff tended to use a combination of Jobcentre Plus guidelines and their own judgement when identifying vulnerable customers.

Jobsearch

- Staff said that it was difficult to gauge the effect of AJCS on jobsearch due to rapidly rising unemployment and limited job opportunities following the economic downturn.
- Some staff said that by dealing with customer enquiries as efficiently and effectively as possible and encouraging those customers who were able to use self-service facilities to contact the relevant bodies directly, they were able to focus on jobsearch.
- On the other hand some staff said that the introduction of AJCS has had a negative effect on jobsearch as once the customer's enquiry had been dealt with there was often insufficient time to promote jobsearch.
- Customer representatives said that jobsearch was not always effectively supported or in some cases is promoted inappropriately to vulnerable customers who might not be 'job-ready' and that sometimes customers were being refused access to jobsearch facilities by Customer Care Officers.

The Benefit Delivery Centre

- BDC staff felt that whilst the information they had been given in how to deal with customer enquiries under AJCS had been satisfactory, they would benefit from further training in the benefits system as a whole.
- Staff said that the majority of enquiries to BDCs are resolved without an appointment at a local office being made for the customer either in the local office or elsewhere; and that they aimed to resolve between 70 and 80 per cent of the requests they received from customers.
- However, customer representatives said that whilst BDC telephony staff were able to deal with straightforward queries, customers with more complex enquiries might find it hard to receive an adequate response from telephony staff.
- The use of the 0845 number by Jobcentre Plus for calls to the BDC was raised as an issue by local office staff, customer representatives and BDC staff.
- Customer representatives said that for their customers the call-back target time of three hours was rarely met and was frustrating for some customers.
- Staff said that there are instances where customers had been passed between local offices and BDCs a number of times before their enquiry was dealt with.

Conclusions

From the perspective of Jobcentre Plus, AJCS has met a number of its policy objectives. Thus, Jobcentre Plus local office staff said that they believed that in general customers were using the most appropriate channels to resolve their enquiries. Although older people, people with English as a second language and people without prior experience with Jobcentre Plus services were given as examples of customers who needed to be encouraged by staff to use the self-service facilities. In addition, some staff said that AJCS has helped with the management

of unappointed footfall – that the increase in customers during the economic downturn would have been unmanageable without the introduction of AJCS. However, customer representatives were less positive about AJCS, and reported how, in particular, vulnerable customers and those with complex circumstances could find the system difficult to navigate.

AJCS was designed to encourage a standardised delivery of service across local offices, and in some areas AJCS has introduced a degree of standardisation; for example, local office staff now offered less face-to-face support to customers and focused primarily on supporting vulnerable customers. Additionally, forum area staff said that they were redirecting more customers to self-service facilities since the introduction of AJCS.

However, there was also variation in how AJCS had been implemented across offices, for example, in the management of unappointed footfall, with some Customer Care Officers in local offices limiting, for health and safety reasons, access to the office, which could result in customers being refused access to jobsearch facilities.

The approach to identifying vulnerable customers also varied across offices. Staff in local offices and BDCs used a combination of Jobcentre Plus guidance and their own experience to identify the most appropriate way of meeting customers' needs. However, past experience of a customer is not necessarily a reliable indicator of whether or not they are currently in priority need. Indeed, the reliance on staff experience and judgement to identify vulnerable customers might overlook customers with vulnerabilities that are not immediately apparent. The current approach used by Jobcentre Plus staff risks both customers who were vulnerable not being identified and some people receiving assistance who do not need it. This, and the practice in some offices of denying access to family and friends accompanying customers, could potentially result in contravention of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Relations between BDCs and Jobcentre Plus office staff were raised as a cause of tension by both Jobcentre Plus local office staff and customer representatives. Issues identified include high staff turnover and available staff resources in BDCs, training provided to telephony teams, differences in terminology, and insufficient or inaccurate customer information in the shared diaries. Jobcentre Plus local office staff felt that these factors could lead to inconsistencies in the service provided to customers.

Furthermore, call waiting times for BDC telephony services and the use of an 0845 number were highlighted as examples of bad practice by customer representatives and Jobcentre Plus local office staff who argued that these often led to increased queues in local offices as customers would visit the office to avoid the cost of the call.

In general, staff were reasonably satisfied with how the scheme has been implemented, although some further training needs were identified.

Recommendations

The evaluation has identified areas where the system is working well and other areas where it is working less well. Jobcentre Plus should consider the following areas to improve service delivery to customers:

- Providing consistent public access to services across Jobcentre Plus local offices. This may involve reviewing the role and responsibilities of Customer Care Officers.
- The approach and associated staff guidance to identification of vulnerable customers; in particular Jobcentre Plus should review how customers with 'invisible' priority needs might be assisted.
- Reviewing the relationship between local offices and BDCs; in particular, call waiting and call-back times; training of staff; and what information should be entered in to the shared diary.

- Reviewing the cost of calls incurred by customers to BDCs.
- Staff have had to deal with large numbers of customers with limited prior experience of Jobcentre Plus and this has put pressure on both staff resources and the facilities available. Jobcentre Plus could explore when and what information about Jobcentre Plus is made available to people when they are made redundant and how new customers are served.
- The increased volume of customers made it difficult to evaluate the impact of AJCS on the management and level of unappointed footfall within local offices. At least for a trial period, data on the number of vulnerable customers within local offices should be collected. To complement this evaluation, research with customers using AJCS should be commissioned in order to triangulate their views and experiences with the perceptions of staff and customer representatives.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 758 7. Research Report 651. July 2010).

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

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