

Research report

# Identifying claimants' needs: Research into the Capability of Jobcentre Plus advisers

By Anne Bellis, Joy Oakley, Maria Sigala  
and Sara Dewson

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 748

# **Identifying claimants' needs: Research into the capability of Jobcentre Plus advisers**

Anne Bellis, Joy Oakley, Maria Sigala and Sara Dewson

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# Abbreviations

ADF	Adviser Discretionary Fund
ASBO	Anti-Social Behaviour Order
ASM	Advisory Services manager
AWRT	Access to Work-Related Training
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CAT	Customer Assessment Tool
CSCS	Construction Skills Certification Scheme
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
EJW	Enhanced Joint Working
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
ESF	European Social Fund
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FLT	Fork Lift Truck
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HGV	Heavy Goods Vehicle
IAG	Information, advice and guidance
IB	Incapacity Benefit
IES	Integrated Employment and Skills
JRFND	Revised Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
JSAg	Jobseeker's Agreement
LGV	Large Goods Vehicle
LMS	Labour Market System
NJI	New Jobseeker Interview
PA	Personal Adviser
PIGEEP	Preparation, Introduction, Goal definition, Evaluation, Exploration, and Planning



QAF	Quality Assessment Framework
SIA	Security Industry Association
UKCES	UK Commission for Employment and Skills
WFI	Work-Focused Interview
WTI	Work-Targeted Interview

# Glossary

<b>Adviser Discretionary Fund (ADF)</b>	Adviser Discretionary Fund (ADF) is funding (normally a one-off payment) that Jobcentre Plus can provide to customers to help them overcome small challenges that are preventing them from taking up the offer of employment. Awards should generally be linked closely to a specific interview or job offer, but can be made to help customers move closer to the labour market in limited circumstances for caseload customers. From April 2011, the ADF has been subsumed into the Jobcentre Plus Flexible Support Fund.
<b>Customer Assessment Tool (CAT)</b>	Jobcentre Plus staff use the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT) during their advisory interviews to record the evidence gained from a work-targeted interview about key attributes found to give customers the best chance of finding work. CAT is a profiling, rather than assessment tool – which records, rather than generates, outcomes. CAT covers a full range of attributes, including skills. It is expected that the CAT will be used at the Stage 2 interview (13 weeks) and Stage 3 interview (26 weeks).
<b>Enhanced Joint Working (EJW)</b>	From April 2009, a programme of Enhanced Joint Working <sup>1</sup> was introduced in the areas not operating Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials, to increase the number of referrals of Jobcentre Plus customers to both careers advice and skills provision. EJW comprised skills screening; referral and signposting to skills services; and strengthening joint working between employment and skills services.
<b>Fast Track Assessment Tool</b>	The Fast Track Assessment Tool is a paper-based basic skills assessment which is used by Jobcentre Plus advisers to identify customers requiring referral to basic skills provision. The Fast Track Assessment Tool identifies those who have literacy below Level 1 and numeracy skills below Entry 3 of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.
<b>Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials</b>	Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials were intended to test components of integrated employment and skills service delivery. These were: co-location; skills screening; referral; Skills Health Check interviews; Skills Action Plans; and work-focused skills provision [detailed at Appendix A]. IES trials ran in 12 Jobcentre Plus districts between September 2008 and August 2010.
<b>Jobpoints</b>	Computer terminals available for Jobcentre Plus office visitors to use to search for job vacancies.

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<sup>1</sup> This was sometimes referred to as 'IES-lite'.

Jobcentre Plus 'Contracted' and 'Non-contracted' provision	Contracted provision is training provision which is contracted to the Department for Work and Pensions or Jobcentre Plus and available via Jobcentre Plus; for example, Flexible New Deal provision. Non-contracted provision is also available via Jobcentre Plus but is contracted to other organisations, including the Skills Funding Agency.
Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND)	JRFND was introduced in JRFND Phase 1 Districts from April 2009 to replace the range of existing new deals for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) recipients (except for New Deal for Lone Parents and New Deal for Partners) with a single flexible New Deal. JRFND is delivered in four stages, characterised by increasing support and conditionality: Stage 1 is the New Jobseeker Interview; Stage 2 begins 13 weeks after the claim begins; Stage 3 is from 26 weeks after the claim begins and Stage 4 after 12 months.
Next Step	In August 2010, a new integrated adult careers advice service was introduced. The newly branded 'Next Step' service brought together and replaced existing separate 'nextstep' (face to face) and 'Careers Advice Service' web and helpline services. The Next Step service is underpinned by a new Customer Relationship Management system which allows customer records to be available to any adviser.
Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for Advisers	The QAF is designed to support the training that is provided by the Jobcentre Plus Learning Routeway. It helps to make sure that Jobcentre Plus' advisory services are effective, efficient and of consistently high quality. The QAF focuses on using PIGEEP (Preparation; Introduction; Goal definition; Evaluation; Exploration; and Planning) and is an essential tool in driving performance up and adviser development. Evidence to compare with the QAF standards is gathered through interview observation by managers and discussion with individual advisers. After observing the interviews, the manager discusses how the adviser performed in comparison with the standards.
PIGEEP	Work-Targeted Interviewing (WTI) is the structure for interviews delivered by Jobcentre Plus advisers. It comprises Preparation; Introduction; Goal definition; Evaluation; Exploration; and Planning (PIGEEP).
Support for the Newly Unemployed (SNU)	SNU was rolled out nationally in April 2009 in response to the economic downturn. It offered supplementary job preparation and job-search services from day one of a claim. The package of support was designed for people who have recently become unemployed and have little experience of modern job-search tools. Specialist help was also available for professionals and executives. SNU ended on 31 March 2011.

**Young Person's Guarantee**

Young Person's Guarantee was a guaranteed offer of a job, work-focused training, or meaningful activity to all 18 to 24 year olds who reached six months on JSA. The Young Person's Guarantee consisted of the following strands:

- Future Jobs Fund (subsidised jobs);
- Community Task Force (work-experience placements of benefit to the community);
- Routes into Work (help into key sector jobs via pre-employment training and recruitment subsidy; and
- Work-Focused Training.

The Young Person's Guarantee was formally introduced from 25 January 2010 although some strands, including Future Jobs Fund began earlier. From the 24 April 2010, all young people reaching ten months' unemployment were required to take up an offer under the guarantee. The Young Person's Guarantee was available through to March 2011.

**Work Trial**

Work Trials are intended to overcome any remaining suitability doubts an employer and/or disadvantaged group customer may have following a formal interview for a vacant post. It relates to a specific vacancy that an employer is actively trying to fill and is offered to a customer on a strictly non-competitive basis. This means that for the duration of the trial, the person taking part is the only person under consideration for the vacancy in question, i.e. the job is theirs if both they and the employer are satisfied following a trial period.

# Summary

The identification of skills and skills needs is a feature of government employment services and is delivered through Work-Focused Interviews (WFIs) conducted by Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers (PAs). In addition to helping people to prepare and look for work, PAs can refer claimants for training provision or careers advice if this is deemed necessary to make a return to the labour market.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to undertake research to:

- explore how ‘skills need’ is defined by Jobcentre Plus PAs;
- examine how claimants’ skills needs are identified by Jobcentre Plus PAs at the present time; and
- build an understanding of how the identification of skills can be embedded within the Jobcentre Plus offer.

The Jobcentre Plus offer, introduced from April 2011, aims to allow more flexibility to Jobcentre Plus managers and advisers to judge which interventions will help individual claimants most cost effectively. This research seeks to inform that offer.

This research has been entirely qualitative and is based on observations of 112 WFIs, conducted by 57 advisers, across ten Jobcentre Plus districts<sup>2</sup>. Advisers have been observed carrying out WFIs at Stages 1, 2 and 3 of the Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) followed by short, five-minute interviews with PAs to probe on key issues arising from the WFIs and the reasons for actions taken (or not taken) by advisers in relation to skills. Fieldwork for the study was carried out between September and November 2010. The key findings of the research are:

## Screening for skills

Discussions about skills and the identification of skills needs are intended to be central to, and embedded within, WFIs. The content of these interviews at all stages of the JRFND regime was dominated by a discussion about the job(s) claimants had done in the past and their current job goals, and a range of skills issues were discussed.

Advisers taking part in this research did not explicitly perceive a purpose of the WFI to be an opportunity to identify skills or to screen for skills needs and advisers did not use this type of language to describe their activities, although they were engaged in precisely these activities. PAs were much more likely to describe their role more broadly as ‘overcoming the barriers to work’ faced by claimants.

Although advisers did not differentiate particular skills groups explicitly, they were observed to be covering a range of skills during WFIs that could be grouped as follows: basic skills; IT skills; job-search skills; employability skills; and vocational skills. Advisers also regularly checked for up-to-date licences to practise and certification (for example, Security Industry Authority (SIA) cards for the security industry or Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards for the building trade).

Formal skills screening tools, such as the Fast Track (basic skills) assessment tool and the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT), were rarely observed during the research and advisers reported that they did not use these very often in WFIs. Moreover, some advisers stated that they were not familiar

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<sup>2</sup> Therefore, while the findings are indicative, they are not representative of all WFIs and adviser interventions.

with these tools at all. PAs tended to screen for skills needs using the ‘light-touch’ eyes and ears approach: observing claimants’ reading forms to check for basic skills needs; discussing qualifications and certificates held; and assessing communication and interpersonal skills during the interviews. Skills screening tended to be more perfunctory at Stage 1 of JRFND than at the later stages of the process. It was restricted to very apparent needs as advisers were required to collect a great deal of demographic and administrative information from claimants in the New Jobseeker Interview. Skills screening activity increased over the stages of the Jobseekers Regime, and advisers were more likely to explore and discuss a claimant’s barriers to work in more depth over a series of WFIs.

The amount of time spent on skills screening within a WFI was difficult to estimate as it is such an integral part of the interview and was observed to occur over the course of the interview. The amount of time spent on skills screening varied considerably and was very specific to the claimant: advisers were observed spending more or less time on skills issues depending on the claimant’s personal circumstances. In some WFIs, it was estimated that as little as 10 per cent of the interview was spent discussing skills issues while in others this ranged up to 60–70 per cent of the interview.

### Referrals from screening

A direct result of some of the skills screening activities observed during WFIs was a direct referral to an external training provider. Advisers were observed approaching referrals in different ways: some advisers discussed a range of potential training options at the beginning of the WFI prior to the identification of specific skills needs; some advisers used the WFI to identify skills needs and then discussed referral options specific to these needs; and some advisers identified skills needs during the WFI and then attempted to meet some of these needs themselves, for example by giving detailed advice on writing CVs, going through interview skills etc, as well as referring to other provision as necessary. Advisers generally selected a provider on behalf of the claimant, although in some cases only one provider was offering particular training courses and so no decision was necessary. On occasions, advisers signposted claimants to provision and other sources of help rather than referring them directly.

A few advisers were not aware of the provision available in the local area, and some were not aware of the eligibility criteria; for example, fast-tracking claimants transferring from Incapacity Benefit/ Employment and Support Allowance (IB/ESA) directly to provision if necessary. Some advisers were not aware of the services offered by Next Step and so were unable to signpost or refer claimants who may have benefited from the service<sup>3</sup>.

In the main, the referrals observed during the research were thought to be appropriate (by advisers and researchers) and fitted the claimants’ skills needs that had been identified during the WFIs.

### Barriers to screening and onward referral

A number of barriers to skills screening and onward referral were identified in the research. Time and process barriers were noted in relation to the process-driven nature of some of the WFIs, and particularly the Stage 1 New Jobseeker Interview, which advisers thought did not allow sufficient time for the exploration of barriers to work. Advisers were observed following the structure of the Jobseeker’s Agreement (JSAg) in many WFIs and many were guided by the screens associated with the Labour Market System (LMS) rather than through an exploratory interview. Poor keyboard

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<sup>3</sup> See DWP Research Report 749: *Access to work-related training*, which has a particular focus on whether and how claimants get access to work-related skills training via a Jobcentre Plus or Next Step referral.

skills among advisers also impinged on the time available for discussion and the degree to which they could fully engage with claimants. Some advisers expressed frustration that they could not see the same claimant more than once, which left them unable to follow up on any skills issues they may have begun to identify. Claimants' language barriers also impacted on advisers' ability to screen effectively for skills needs. An important barrier to skills screening for some advisers was a (perceived) lack of ability: some advisers reported that they did not know how to screen for skills needs. Some advisers believed that their managers knew how to screen for skills, but that they did not share this knowledge with them.

Barriers to onward referral following skills screening also occurred when advisers were unaware of the provision available in the local area: some advisers were new to the role and were unfamiliar with provision and some reported that there was so much provision it was difficult to identify what was most appropriate. Conversely, in several offices, advisers reported that some provision had been suspended pending funding decisions which meant that claimants had to wait before taking up training options. Some advisers also reported that provision was unavailable for particular claimant groups and particularly older claimants (over 25 years of age) and jobseekers with professional backgrounds. Importantly, a number of claimants present very complex barriers to work, some of which are unrelated to skills, for example drug and alcohol dependency, homelessness and mental health problems, and these are difficult to overcome.

## Drivers of adviser behaviour

Significant variations were observed among advisers with some displaying more effective interpersonal skills and questioning techniques than others. Best practice in relation to advisory skills, as observed by researchers during the WFIs, included: effective questioning techniques, probing into claimants' work experience and skills to identify gaps; exploring claimants' transferable skills; challenging unrealistic job goals, ensuring claimants' commitment to particular courses of action etc. More negatively, some advisers failed to question claimants adequately and missed key pieces of information, or made judgements about claimants' skills or job goals with little evidence to substantiate their reasons for doing so. Some advisers were more reliant on the JSAg structure or the LMS screens to guide them through WFIs and were less confident about having an exploratory discussion with claimants about barriers to work and skills needs.

There are no simple explanations of positive adviser behaviour in relation to skills and skills screening: some 'good' advisers are experienced Jobcentre Plus advisers, some are new Jobcentre Plus advisers, some worked in IES trial offices, some did not. Advisers who displayed more effective techniques in relation to skills screening seemed self-motivated but, more importantly, they approached each WFI with an open mind, and had used the techniques associated with best practice<sup>4</sup> to elicit information from claimants about their skills and to identify skills gaps. During the research, it also appeared as though some offices had a better approach than others and these tended to be offices with low staff turnover, which facilitated (in part) the exchange of good practice.

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<sup>4</sup> Including drawing on the Work-Targeted Interview (WTI) structure, which consists of six elements: Preparation; Introduction; Goal definition; Evaluation; Exploration; and Planning (PIGEEP).

### Conclusions and recommendations

The overriding conclusion from this piece of research is that Jobcentre Plus advisers can and do understand skills, and that can and they do screen claimants for skills needs and make appropriate referrals to training and other provision to overcome these needs. Moreover, these activities are embedded in WFIs. What is interesting though, is that advisers do not use these words to describe what they are doing in WFIs, instead they report that they are overcoming 'barriers to work'. Although advisers can and do screen for skills needs, it remains that not all advisers do this as well as they might, nor as systematically as they might. The key recommendations coming from this study are:

- Define (or redefine) skills needs and skills groups simply and clearly so that advisers have a 'checklist' against which their screening activity can be undertaken.
- Make the purpose of, and responsibility for, skills screening more explicit as part of the WFI, using language that advisers can understand. It is important that advisers know (and are able to articulate) why skills screening is critical.
- Ensure that advisers have time to, and do, use the PIGEEP structure effectively: advisory services managers and office managers need to drive performance up by monitoring adherence to this structure.
- Identify and provide 'best practice' examples of how skills screening can be done and encourage advisers within offices (and between offices within districts) to share good practice. Managers should facilitate peer support within and between offices.
- Maintain close working relationships with providers, including Next Step, to ensure that referrals are appropriate and meet the skills needs of individuals and employers.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Context for the research

The identification of skills and skills needs, to enable a claimant to move into employment, has long been a feature of government employment services and this is currently delivered through Work-Focused Interviews (WFIs) conducted by Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers (PAs). The role of skills identification has acquired greater prominence through the integrated approach to employment and skills embodied by the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials, which ran in 12 areas in England between September 2008 and August 2010, and a new system of Enhanced Joint Working (EJW), which was introduced in non-trial areas. Like the IES trials, EJW was intended to identify claimants' skills needs through enhanced screening processes within Jobcentre Plus and, where appropriate, direct them towards support from Next Step<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to work-preparation assistance, claimants identified by a Jobcentre Plus adviser as needing skills support or careers advice can be referred directly to training provision or to a specialist careers advice and skills guidance service delivered by the Next Step adult careers service. Jobcentre Plus interviews act as gateways to a range of skills programmes and funding, and the role of skills-screening tools and processes in gathering evidence to inform referral decision making and advise claimants is ever more important.

The coalition government has announced their commitment to reform the welfare system and introduce the new Work Programme, which aims to create a system that treats people as individuals and allows providers greater freedom to tailor the right support to the individual needs of each claimant. Alongside the Work Programme, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) plans to deliver, through the Jobcentre Plus offer, a more flexible advisory service, giving local offices more control, and allowing them to deliver services in a way that is responsive to local needs and offers personalised support to claimants. From April 2011, Jobcentre Plus managers and advisers have the flexibility to judge which interventions will help individual claimants most cost effectively. This research seeks to inform the new flexible framework by looking at existing processes. Until the new framework is in place, Jobcentre Plus claimants claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) will continue to receive support through the Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND).

### 1.1.1 Jobcentre Plus skills screening processes

Current Jobcentre Plus guidance<sup>6</sup> shows that there are a range of skills screening and profiling processes and tools which are intended to be used by advisers during the JRFND customer journey, primarily:

- initial skills screening;
- in-depth skills screening (including the Fast-Track screening tool); and
- the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT).

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<sup>5</sup> In August 2010, the Careers Advice Service, which provided online and telephone careers advice to adults, and nextstep, which provided face-to-face advice and guidance, came together under the one Next Step brand as a single integrated adult careers service. Jobcentre Plus advisers are now able to signpost and refer claimants to a wider careers advice service than previously.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix A for further details of the Jobcentre Plus approach to skills screening taken from Jobcentre Plus staff guidance.

Initial skills screening and in-depth skills screening processes identify skills and qualifications which would support a claimant to move into their desired job, or a job readily available in the local labour market. Where a claimant has identified a specific job and does not possess appropriate skills, this can be a ‘barrier’ to that claimant finding sustainable employment and this can be addressed through referral to appropriate skills provision. The CAT can support decision making through recording the outcomes of a WFI and generating a claimant profile based on a range of attributes, including skills.

These tools and processes are applied by Jobcentre Plus advisers within the context of a WFI, which is delivered through the Work-Targeted Interviewing (WTI) structure developed by Jobcentre Plus, the basic standard structure for all advisory interviews delivered by Jobcentre Plus advisers. Delivery of WTI is assessed through the Quality Assessment Framework (QAF)<sup>7</sup>.

### 1.1.2 Existing research

Following the Leitch Review of Skills, skills diagnostics and screening tools used by employment and skills services were re-examined. Part of this process of re-examination was a literature review conducted by Warwick University,<sup>8</sup> commissioned by DWP. The review provided an extensive overview of skills appraisal and screening methodologies, but did not identify a suitable ‘off the shelf’ assessment method for adult skills.

The evidence base on the operation of the current tools and processes by Jobcentre Plus advisers, particularly the initial skills screening and in-depth skills screening processes, is fairly limited. Some qualitative evidence has been reported, particularly as part of the evaluations of the IES trials<sup>9</sup> and the JRFND.<sup>10</sup> The evidence from the evaluation of the IES trials indicated that Jobcentre Plus advisers tended to view these processes as suitable and felt able to identify claimants requiring skills support, although delivery of the skills screening processes was seen to be variable.

## 1.2 Aims and objectives of this evaluation

In September 2010, the DWP and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to undertake research into how Jobcentre Plus advisers conduct skills screening and the capability of Jobcentre Plus advisers to identify claimants’ needs.

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<sup>7</sup> The QAF is designed to support the training that is provided by the Jobcentre Plus Learning Routeway. It helps to make sure that Jobcentre Plus’ advisory services are effective, efficient and of consistently high quality. The QAF focuses on using Preparation, Introduction, Goal Definition, Evaluation, Exploration and Planning (PIGEEP) and is an essential tool in driving performance up and adviser development. Evidence to compare with the QAF standards is gathered through interview observation by managers and discussion with individual advisers. After observing the interviews, the manager discusses how the adviser performed in comparison with the standards.

<sup>8</sup> DWP Research Report 459: *Skills Diagnostics and Screening Tools: A Literature Review* (2007) <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep459.pdf> .

<sup>9</sup> DWP Research Report 618: *Qualitative Evaluation of Integrated Employment and Skills Trials: Implementation Report* (2009) <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2009-2010/rrep618.pdf> .

<sup>10</sup> DWP Research Report 580: *Jobseekers Regime test site evaluation: Qualitative research* (2009) <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2009-2010/rrep580.pdf> .

In particular, the research project has aimed to:

- explore how ‘skills need’ is defined;
- examine how claimants’ skills needs are currently identified by Jobcentre Plus advisers and the context in which they are being discussed with claimants, including time constraints; and
- build an understanding of how the identification of skills needs can be embedded within the new Jobcentre Plus offer.

The key research questions for the study are listed below.

- How do Jobcentre Plus advisers define ‘skills need’?
- Do Jobcentre Plus advisers currently identify claimants’ skills needs in all instances? If not, why not / what are the barriers to these discussions? When advisers do identify skills needs, how do they do it (and what tools are used, if any)? How consistently is this done?
- How do Jobcentre Plus advisers make decisions on identifying skills needs and making referrals? Why do they take the action/inaction in specific circumstances both in using tools and making referrals? What are the drivers? Are there time constraints?
- What skills do Jobcentre Plus advisers need to help them to identify skills needs and make referral decisions? Can these skills be observed during interviews? What helps and what are the barriers to identifying skills needs and making referrals?
- How long do Jobcentre Plus advisers spend discussing and identifying skills needs? How does this compare with time spent on other issues within the interview?
- Do Jobcentre Plus advisers currently make referrals? Are these referrals appropriate? How do advisers know if they have made an effective referral? How would they define this?
- How important is adviser judgement in identifying a skills need and making a referral? Could the claimant have made this decision themselves, for example, based on a leaflet, web link, or self-assessment questionnaire?
- Do Jobcentre Plus advisers currently make referrals to skills advisers?<sup>11</sup> Do they know how to do this? How long does it take to make a referral? Is this done consistently? What are their intentions/expectations when making a referral?
- What is the effect of adviser confidence and experience on these processes?
- What information and training do advisers need to accurately identify claimants’ skills needs?
- How do current processes fit with future policy direction? What will need to be changed, improved etc?

Throughout the research, examples of best practice<sup>12</sup> and lessons learned have been sought.

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<sup>11</sup> Although signposting and referrals to the Next Step service were observed in this research, this report does not focus on Next Step. For more detail on how Jobcentre Plus worked with this service, please refer to DWP Research Report 749: *Access to work-related training*.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Best practice’ in this study refers to the most effective practices observed by researchers during the WFIs. This has necessarily involved a judgement on the part of the researchers based on listening to, and watching, the interaction between claimants and advisers and assessing whether the skills needs of claimants have been explored as fully as possible by advisers, in the time available, and whether and how the claimant was engaged in the process.

### 1.3 Methodology

The methodology selected for this research comprised of observations of WFIs between PAs and claimants and short, follow-up interviews with PAs.

A paper-based, data collection tool was used to record the following types of information for each WFI observed:

- Type of interview – Stage 1 (New Jobseeker Interview), Stage 2 (13 weeks since the JSA claim began) or Stage 3 (26 weeks after the JSA claim began).
- Interview length and time devoted to particular subjects; e.g. qualifications and work history, domestic situation/demographics, benefit claim, skills needs and skills screening.
- Adviser interview style – for example, challenging, directive, responsive, flexible, engaged, processed or claimant-focused.<sup>13</sup>
- Claimants' response – for example, passive, active, engaged, disengaged etc.
- Adviser handling/management of skills-related discussions including referrals.
- Flow of interview.
- Use of 'tools' and other 'props', for example screening tools, Labour Market System (LMS), vacancy print-outs, leaflets, and how these are introduced.

This research has been particularly concerned with the emphasis placed on skills and skills screening within WFIs or the absence of it and reasons for this. Researchers have observed when a discussion about skills may have been appropriate although not carried out; for example, when a claimant reported that they did not have the skills required for a particular job that they wanted to do but which was not followed up by the adviser. The main purpose of the follow-up interviews with advisers was to understand more fully why they took particular courses of action and conversely, why they did not. It was important that researchers did not influence the behaviour of advisers or prompt them to use particular words or phrases to describe their activities, and it is for this reason that no specific mention was made of 'skills' or 'skills screening' when setting up the observations or initially in the follow-up interviews with advisers. At no point did researchers assess the WFIs against any Jobcentre Plus procedural guidance or structures. The intention was to observe and report adviser behaviours and practice as they happen in the normal working environment. Researchers sat to one side of the adviser during the WFIs, out of immediate eye-line, in order to minimise any research effect, which was perceived to be minimal, if not non-existent. Claimants were not consulted as part of this research per se, but permission to observe the WFIs was sought and gained from them beforehand, with an explanation of the purpose of the research (that is, to observe advisers' behaviour and actions).

A very short pilot was undertaken at the beginning of the research project to ensure that the observational tools and discussion guide for adviser follow-up interviews were able to meet the research aims and gathered as much information as possible.

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<sup>13</sup> DWP Research Report 633: *A study of language and communication between advisers and claimants in Work Focused Interview* (2010): <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/reports2009-2010/rrep633.pdf>.

Fieldwork for this study was carried out in ten Jobcentre Plus districts between September and November 2010 and aimed to observe two PAs undertaking two interviews at Stages 1, 2 and 3 of JRFND in each district (Table 1.1 illustrates the approach taken). The aim of the study was to undertake 120 observations in total (i.e. 12 observations per district), although in practice the research fell short by eight observations due to high fail-to-attend levels in two districts. It was important, wherever possible, to observe two PAs at each stage in each district to identify any different styles of advisory interview, and also to observe two interviews per adviser to allow researchers to observe whether advisers used different techniques according to different claimants' circumstances, characteristics and needs. This target was achieved in all but two districts, which experienced high fail-to-attend levels on the days researchers were undertaking the observations.

**Table 1.1 Fieldwork approach**

District	Number of PAs	Number of observations		
		Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
District A	6	4	4	4
District B	6	4	4	4
District C	6	3	5	5
District D	4	2	3	1
District E	6	7	3	6
District F	6	5	2	3
District G	6	4	4	5
District H	6	4	4	2
District I	6	5	2	6
District J	5	1	2	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>40</b>

The characteristics of the advisers themselves differed significantly<sup>14</sup>: some had worked for Jobcentre Plus for many years while others were relatively recent recruits or had returned following a career break. Advisers were selected to take part in the observations by researchers, in large part, according to the interviews that had been booked on the days they were visiting Jobcentre Plus offices.

The ten districts selected for fieldwork were spread across all Jobcentre Plus regions in England to give a comprehensive picture of advisory techniques across the country as a whole. Local offices within districts were subsequently chosen to ensure a diverse cross-section in terms of geography (urban and rural), socio-demographic characteristics (for example, areas with high and low ethnic minority populations) and labour markets (such as service-sector dominated or more mixed economies). Five of the districts had been IES trial areas.

The approach taken for this study has been entirely qualitative and while the findings are indicative, they are not representative of all WFIs and adviser interventions; they are, however, based on a large sample of observations and interviews.

<sup>14</sup> Information on adviser characteristics was not gathered systematically during the research (for example, demographic information, career history, training received from Jobcentre Plus), as there was only limited time available in the follow-up interviews. However, observations were undertaken with 57 advisers, over ten areas, providing a rich source of data from a wide range of advisers.

### 1.3.1 Additional evidence

This study also draws on two additional sources of evidence:

- findings from the Access to Work-Related Training (AWRT) study, also conducted by the Institute for Employment Studies and commissioned by DWP and BIS; and
- a range of stakeholder interviews undertaken by DWP researchers.

The AWRT study builds on earlier rounds of research to evaluate the IES trials<sup>15</sup> and aimed to explore whether and how claimants were accessing appropriate work-related training provision through Jobcentre Plus and Next Step in IES trial areas or those operating the EJW processes.<sup>16</sup> The AWRT study involved in-depth qualitative interviews in five Jobcentre Plus districts (three IES trial areas and two EJW areas). Interviews were carried out with: Jobcentre Plus advisers (15 interviews) and managers (11 interviews); Next Step advisers (eight interviews) and managers (four interviews); providers (21 interviews); and claimants (35 interviews).

The findings from the interviews carried out for the AWRT study provide further evidence for this study. However, it is important to remember that the sample size for the AWRT research was smaller and the operational context in these areas was different: respondents were working in areas with a much greater emphasis on the integration of employment and skills activities to those visited in this study. Their views are not necessarily typical of those held by respondents in other areas.

The stakeholder study undertaken by DWP researchers aimed to explore stakeholder views on the identification of skills needs in the context of Jobcentre Plus delivery and to examine current and developing policy on identifying skills needs. DWP researchers conducted 15 in-depth interviews with selected employment and skills stakeholders from:

- DWP;
- Jobcentre Plus;
- BIS;
- Skills Funding Agency; and
- UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES).

Stakeholders were performing strategy, policy or operational policy roles on employment and skills at the time of their interview.

The findings from additional sources of evidence are presented in boxed paragraphs to differentiate them from the main body of evidence, and are offered as additional context; however, they do not directly inform the conclusions or recommendations coming out of this research.

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<sup>15</sup> DWP Research Report 618: *Qualitative Evaluation of Integrated Employment and Skills Trials: Implementation Report* (2009) <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2009-2010/rrep618.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> The key difference between the IES trials and EJW related to implementation activity: there was a staggered roll-out period for the IES trials, including staff training, which did not happen with EJW and also much greater co-location of Next Step advisers in Jobcentre Plus offices in IES trials areas, which was not the case in EJW areas. EJW was intended to increase the number of referrals of claimants to both careers advice and training provision.

## 1.4 Structure of report

The structure of this report is as follows:

- Chapter 2 identifies how advisers approach skills and screen for skills needs.
- Chapter 3 explores what happens after skills screening, particularly in relation to referring claimants for training and other provision.
- Chapter 4 looks at the barriers to skills screening and onward referral.
- Chapter 5 discusses the main drivers of adviser behaviour in relation to skills screening.
- Chapter 6 offers some conclusions and recommendations arising from the research.

## 2 Screening for skills

This chapter begins by discussing the ways in which Personal Advisers (PAs) approached the issue of skills – how they defined skills and how they identified any skills needs of the claimants they interviewed. It then categorises and defines the different skills groups that were covered during Work-Focused Interviews (WFIs) and discusses the main skills screening methods adopted by advisers. Finally, the chapter considers the role of skills screening at the different stages of the Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) and explores how long advisers spent discussing and identifying skills and skills gaps during WFIs.

### 2.1 Adviser approach to skills and defining skills needs

Discussions about skills and the identification of skills needs are intended to be integral to, and embedded within, WFIs.<sup>17</sup> The overall impression gained from both the observations and follow-up interviews with advisers was that a range of skills issues were covered to some extent in all WFIs at all stages of the JRFND regime. Before looking at how advisers defined skills and how they identified skills needs, it is worth discussing the common features of the WFIs observed. These were:

- An introduction to the interview during which time the purpose of the WFI and the anticipated outcomes were explained; that is, helping to get claimants into work.
- Recording (if claimants were being interviewed for the first time) or checking (if claimants were receiving a second or subsequent WFI) claimants' education, employment history/CVs, (normally immediate) job goals, and recent job-search activity.
- Identifying 'barriers' to work such as health problems, criminal records, substance abuse, caring responsibilities, and lapsed/lack of licences to practise, and skills-related barriers.
- Going through job-search techniques with claimants, which might involve:
  - checking that CVs are up to date;
  - discussing potential recruitment agencies and media; and
  - explaining how to use the Jobpoints<sup>18</sup> (if a new claimant).
- Matching claimants to job vacancies using the Labour Market System (LMS) (usually at the end of the interview).
- Creating or updating the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) and explaining benefit conditionality, rights and obligations associated with the JSAg to claimants (in other words, the need to be actively seeking work, the requirement to apply for X number of jobs per week, not to restrict their job search after a particular period of time, and to use X sources to look for work). Less frequently, advisers used time in the WFI explaining benefit conditionality, rights and obligations associated with the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime.

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<sup>17</sup> From Jobcentre Plus guidance on the elements of a good-quality WFIs.

<sup>18</sup> Job vacancies are displayed on Jobpoints in local Jobcentre Plus offices. Job seekers can use the Jobpoint touch screen to search by location and category and print out the details of the jobs they want to apply for.



The content of the WFI was dominated by a discussion of what job(s) claimants had done before and/or what type of job they were looking for now. In the follow-up interviews with advisers, it was noticeable that they did not explicitly perceive a purpose of the WFI as an opportunity to screen for 'skills' and 'skills needs' without being prompted<sup>19</sup>: advisers did not generally use phrases or language like skills needs or skills screening to describe what they did during WFIs. PAs were much more likely to report that WFIs helped them to identify claimants' 'barriers to work', to overcome them and get people back into a job. Skills screening was generally guided by and specific to claimants' work or job goals as recorded on the JSAg.

When reflecting further on their role in the follow-up interviews, advisers generally did not make any reference to different types of skills or skills groups although they were observed, by and large, engaging in skills screening activities across a range of different skills groups during the WFIs (see Section 2.2). Essentially, advisers did not, or could not, articulate what they did in relation to skills screening with any confidence or clarity during the follow-up interviews.

Advisers taking part in the Access to Work-Related Training (AWRT) study appeared more confident discussing skills and screening for skills, and they generally used this type of language to describe their activities (although interviewers used these terms when framing questions for this research and this may have influenced the language used in adviser responses). These advisers, at all stages of the JRFND process, reported that their skills-screening activity was specifically framed in relation to the claimants' job goals listed on their JSAg. Skills, therefore, tended to be assessed in the interviews in terms of whether they presented a barrier to work, and in particular to a specific job goal listed on their JSAg. Advisers in the AWRT study reported that the discussion of skills generally followed on quite naturally from the agreement, or reviewing, of job goals on the JSAg. So for example, when reviewing the job goals with claimants they would make an assessment of whether there were any skills needs which made a job goal unrealistic.

## 2.2 Skills groups and screening methods used

The skills that advisers covered during WFIs were numerous, but tended to fall into a number of categories or groups:

- basic skills;
- basic IT skills ;
- job-search skills;
- employability skills;
- vocational skills; and
- up-to-date certification.

These groups are discussed in some detail below. The methods that advisers use to screen for these skills and to identify skills gaps are also explored.

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix A for further details of the Jobcentre Plus approach to skills screening taken from Jobcentre Plus guidance.

### 2.2.1 Basic skills

Basic skills are typically defined as literacy and numeracy skills and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). No single or systematic approach to basic skills screening was observed during the research, in any of the Jobcentre Plus districts visited. Instead, a variety of different approaches to assessment were adopted.

One approach – the light-touch ‘eyes and ears’ approach – was often used to check literacy needs; for example, claimants were directed to read the LMS screen and if PAs observed them experiencing some difficulty, a basic skills need was identified and a referral to a training provider was suggested. In some cases, claimants were questioned directly about basic skills needs following a prompt from the LMS screen.<sup>20</sup> In these instances, advisers tended to ask claimants outright if they had a problem with reading or maths, or they were asked to read a box on the screen asking them a similar question. If claimants replied that they did have a problem, a basic skills need would be identified and a referral made to an appropriate provider. If claimants said that they did not have a basic skills problem or advisers (using a light-touch ‘eyes and ears’ approach) perceived no basic skills needs, no further action was taken. One problem with the light-touch ‘eyes and ears’ screening approach to basic skills needs is that it relies on claimants disclosing difficulties or having very obvious difficulties, which may not always be the case. The use of the fast track basic skills assessment tool was observed on only a couple of occasions (this is discussed further in Section 2.4).

While literacy needs were more clearly observable during interviews, because difficulties were more apparent, numeracy issues were much harder to identify through observation and were rarely discussed. Numeracy needs did not appear to be checked and, therefore, would remain undetected.

Claimants’ previous education and qualifications history was usually recorded at Stage 1 of the JRFND (the new claims stage), and claimants were asked directly about the highest qualifications they had achieved. If a record was already held on LMS for people who had claimed before, these details were checked to ensure they were still accurate. Advisers reported that they tended to regard qualifications, such as General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) or higher-level qualifications, as a proxy for adequate basic skills, which would then require no further checking (although, in reality, the possession of formal qualifications does not necessarily mean there are no basic skills needs).

ESOL needs were generally picked up during WFIs through a light-touch ‘eyes and ears’ screening of a claimant’s competence in speaking and understanding English. At one office, a high percentage of claimants had language barriers, which were likely to impact on their chances of gaining employment. Advisers did not report any difficulties with identifying ESOL needs by first observing a difficulty, asking claimants for verification of that difficulty and making referrals to providers. Having said this, one observation illustrated that a light-touch ‘eyes and ears’ screen of language skills may not always be adequate: in one office, a claimant (a European national with a degree who was interested in accessing higher-level employment) asked to be referred for an ESOL course to improve his job prospects. The adviser was reluctant to do this as he thought the claimant’s spoken English was ‘good enough’ to secure an entry-level job. However, the claimant was dissatisfied, feeling that his own assessment of his language competence was not being taken into account and he demanded an interview with the manager. He felt his job prospects were severely restricted with his existing command of the English language and wanted more help.

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<sup>20</sup> Skills screening prompts are part of the LMS and require advisers to record outcomes from skills-screening activity.

### 2.2.2 Basic IT skills

Basic IT skills were seen by many advisers as crucial to effective job-search activity and job applications. Although claimants' IT skills were not routinely or formally assessed during the interviews observed, many advisers asked claimants about their IT skills and their access to IT and the internet, to assess the extent to which this could be a barrier to their job search. Advisers often asked claimants whether they had access to the internet and knew which were the key job vacancy websites; whether they had an email account; and whether they had adequate word-processing skills to produce and upload an up-to-date CV and covering letters for job vacancies.

In one district, a Jobcentre Plus manager referred to the growing emphasis on the use of digital methods of job seeking, for example through games consoles and mobile phones as well as the internet, which was likely to lead to even greater importance being placed on IT skills. This point was reinforced by an adviser at the same office, who commented that a lack of IT skills was fairly common among older claimants: a lot of their claimants were manual workers who had been in the same job for a number of years, but had recently been made redundant. These claimants usually needed support in building up their skills and confidence in using IT, to improve their ability to job search.

### 2.2.3 Job-search skills

The term 'job search' could cover a range of skills including the claimant's ability to:

- establish clear and realistic job goals;
- employ a range of job-seeking methods, including: using the Jobcentre Plus job points, accessing job vacancy websites, answering newspaper advertisements, 'cold calling' employers and developing personal networks; and
- 'sell themselves' to a prospective employer through an effective CV and good self-presentation skills and interview techniques.

Claimants' job-search skills were routinely discussed in most of the interviews observed for this research.<sup>21</sup> For example:

- Advisers usually requested evidence from claimants that they had been undertaking job-search activities and checked on the main job-search methods they used. This discussion often highlighted if the claimant needed help to improve their job-search or IT skills.
- It was considered important to encourage claimants to be realistic about their job search, for example, widening the scope of their job search if their experience was in a specialised area, or if there were few jobs available in their usual area of work.
- Advisers frequently checked on whether claimants had an up-to-date CV and whether they needed support with this. In fact, asking claimants if they had a CV was the most common screening question noted during the observations. If there was a problem with the CV, advisers might give guidance to claimants themselves on how to make improvements or, more commonly, would signpost them to local providers, including Next Step, or drop-in centres who would be able to help them.

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<sup>21</sup> Wherever possible, job-search skills and provision related to job-search skills have been separated out from other skills groups.

### 2.2.4 Employability skills

This term is generally used to cover a range of generic soft skills which employers look for at the recruitment stage.<sup>22</sup> Employability skills can include: a positive attitude to work; good communication and interpersonal skills; confidence; motivation; flexibility and the ability to work with others.

The assessment of claimants' employability skills was more likely to be carried out through a light-touch 'eyes and ears' approach or general discussion with the claimant, rather than through other screening methods (see Section 2.3). For example, at one office, consecutive interviews were observed with the same adviser with two Stage 3 claimants, both of whom had criminal records. During the follow-up interviews, the adviser reported that one claimant was more likely to get a job because he had displayed more confidence, motivation and better self-presentation skills during the WFI. On the other hand, he felt the other claimant would require more support to build up his employability skills, and particularly his confidence and motivation as these appeared low during the WFI, and he planned to work more closely with this claimant on these issues, for example by helping him to identify transferable skills gained in previous jobs.

When interviewed, advisers often referred to claimants' lack of self-confidence as a potential barrier to work; for example, some claimants had poor body language, were unable to hold eye contact with advisers and spoke very negatively about their abilities and skills, and this was sometimes given as a reason for referring individuals on to training or a work placement. Employability skills were commonly assessed by advisers during the course of the WFI.

### 2.2.5 Vocational skills

Vocational skills were typically considered by advisers within the context of the specific job goals articulated by the claimant and recorded on the JSAG. The most common approach to screening vocational skills, used by many advisers, was to conduct a 'reality check', by matching the requirements of specific jobs against claimants' characteristics and experience.

Some advisers demonstrated their knowledge about the specific skills required in certain jobs and occupations and were, therefore, able to probe for skills gaps in greater depth. For example, this was observed in discussions with claimants about their work experience in hairdressing or electronics by asking questions about whether claimants had served apprenticeships and received formal accreditation or not. Other examples included asking people who wanted to work in social care if they had manual handling experience/training.

### 2.2.6 Up-to-date certification

Although not strictly a skills group, up-to-date certification was routinely considered and checked by advisers for claimants looking for work in specific occupations, such as: construction work (which requires a Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) card); security work (a Security Industry Association (SIA) licence); some warehouse occupations (a fork-lift truck licence) and driving jobs (requiring clean, Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) or Large Goods Vehicle (LGV) licences). Many of the claimants observed were seeking employment in these sectors and advisers always questioned claimants about whether or not they had up-to-date certification.

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<sup>22</sup> See for example: <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs/summary.php?id=emplblty>; <http://www.ukces.org.uk/employability-skills-project>; [http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/policy/employability\\_policy/what-are-employability-skills/](http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/policy/employability_policy/what-are-employability-skills/) .

In the research carried out by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), similar skills were mentioned by stakeholders, although up-to-date certification was not discussed. Many stakeholders felt that claimants' previous work experiences were important when assessing skills. Although there were some exceptions for particular occupations, some stakeholders believed that employers valued work experience over formal qualifications and if a claimant had no qualifications but they had a good work history then they should not be defined as having a skills need as they are likely to find work. Some stakeholders acknowledged that qualifications could be used as a proxy for competence, however, some others felt this did not necessarily mean that they had the softer skills valued by employers.

## 2.3 Use of screening tools

Skills screening tools are available for use by Jobcentre Plus advisers at all stages of the JRFND regime. These include:

- The Fast Track assessment tool, which is a short, paper-based test of the claimant's reading, writing and numeracy skills.<sup>23</sup>
- The Customer Assessment Tool (CAT). This was designed by Jobcentre Plus to help advisers to record the outcomes from the WFI to identify the main barriers faced by claimants when looking for work and is intended to be used with claimants from Stage 2. The CAT is held on LMS and covers a number of issues against which claimants' positions are ranked; for example, in relation to their work-related skills (from very good to very poor), their confidence and motivation, and their relationship with previous employers.

During the research, very limited use of screening tools was observed across all districts: the use of the Fast Track assessment tool was observed on two occasions and the CAT only once. This low level of usage was confirmed in interviews with advisers, with some reporting that they did not use the tools at all or were not familiar with them.

There was variable evidence of advisers using the Fast Track assessment tool. For example, some advisers said they felt comfortable using the tool; however, there was some confusion about who to screen and when, or what to do with highly-qualified claimants who failed the test. A few advisers said they only made use of the assessment tool to demonstrate to claimants that they had basic skills needs and if they thought claimants would fail the test. This was observed in one case where the claimant failed the assessment and the adviser explained during the follow-up interview that the purpose had been to discourage the individual from asking for further training until he had addressed his basic skills needs. There was no evidence that the Fast Track assessment tool was being used systematically or routinely to identify basic skills needs by any advisers in any of the offices visited.

Some advisers commented that they did not need the assessment tools to screen for skills needs as most were identifiable through a light-touch, eyes and ears approach. Some advisers also felt there was not enough time to use the screening tools to assess claimants' skills needs unless the need was very apparent.

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<sup>23</sup> During the fieldwork period, the Fast Track assessment tool was intended to be used at all JRFND Stage 2 1st/2nd Targeted Reviews (JRFND Phase 1 Districts only); 26 week Restart or six month/JRFND Stage 3 Initial Review interviews, except where previously undertaken and recorded within the current claim.

Advisers reported relatively little use of the CAT or the Fast Track assessment tool for basic skills in the AWRT research. In general, Stage 2 and Stage 3 advisers were somewhat more likely to report using these tools, partly because they had more time available and partly because skills issues were more prevalent at these stages, but even among these advisers their use was far from universal. The reasons given by advisers for not using these tools in this study included not yet having been trained in their use, and because of the amount of time they took in an interview. For example, one adviser working at Stage 3 reported not using the fast-track tool because he felt that basic skills could be assessed more quickly using qualifications as a proxy, combined with observation.

Stakeholders participating in the DWP research also described a range of techniques in relation to skills screening including observation, direct questioning techniques, and the use of screening tools. One stakeholder also described the Preparation, Introduction, Goal Definition, Evaluation, Exploration and Planning (PIGEEP) structure itself as a tool to screen for skills needs (see Section 5.2 for a discussion of the PIGEEP structure). Views on the screening tools differed with some stakeholders questioning their usefulness.

## 2.4 Timing of skills screening

The research has sought to establish if, and how, skills screening differs according to the duration of the claim for JSA, either in relation to how skills screening is carried out or whether advisers screen for different types of skills at different stages.

### 2.4.1 Stage 1

The skills screening that has been observed during Stage 1 WFIs has included:

- recording/checking the claimant's education, qualifications and employment history;
- identifying basic skills or ESOL needs;
- making an initial assessment of any other barriers to work (e.g. childcare, health barriers, substance abuse problems, and assessing if claimants needed any particular support with these barriers);
- assessing job goals against the local labour-market context and checking for up-to-date certification; and
- assessing the claimant's ability to conduct their job search. There tended to be a particularly strong focus on job-search skills and techniques at Stage 1 when the JSAg was first completed.

One adviser summarised the main purpose of the Stage 1 interview as an opportunity to 'size the customer up' and to assess how clear or realistic they were about their job goals. She reported that she generally used the light touch, 'eyes and ears' approach to skills screening but also asked claimants directly if they had any problems with basic skills. This appeared to be a fairly typical view and practice among Stage 1 advisers.

Some advisers commented that Stage 1 interviews could be very process-driven and the focus at this stage was on ensuring that claimants were meeting the benefit requirements; there was not much flexibility to engage with claimants about their skills in much depth. One adviser regarded Stage 1 as more of an 'information-gathering exercise', it was 'not the time for explorative interviews' (see Section 4.1.1 on time and process barriers to skills screening). There was also a considerable amount of information that claimants were required to take in at the initial interview (for example, about their rights and obligations, and benefit conditionality) and claimants who were new to Jobcentre Plus often appeared overwhelmed or confused by the new claims process.

### 2.4.2 Stages 2 and 3

During Stages 2 and 3, advisers were more likely to explore and discuss claimants' barriers to work, including skills, in more depth than at Stage 1. A general increase in skills screening activity and referrals was observed as the duration of the JSA claim lengthened.

In Stages 2 and 3, advisers:

- looked closely at claimants' job goals and checked if their experience and qualifications and vocational skills matched these. Up-to-date certification was usually discussed at these stages;
- engaged in discussions about job-search methods, checking how claimants had got on with looking for work since they had first claimed and checking their job-search skills;
- continued to screen (in a light-touch way) basic skills and ESOL needs, sometimes following up previous referrals for training in these areas or identifying a need to do so;
- assessed claimants' employability skills, for example, by observing and gauging self-confidence and motivation;
- provided information to claimants about locally-available provision and signposted local providers. For example, some claimants were signposted to Next Step for help with CVs or to look at training options in the area. Referrals to provision from Stages 2 and 3 were more common to meet identified skills needs than at Stage 1; and
- had in-depth discussions on additional (non-skills related) issues and barriers to work such as health problems, criminal records, substance abuse and caring responsibilities.

It was also more common at these later stages of JRFND for advisers to challenge claimants' expectations and assumptions about the local labour market, particularly if they thought that claimants had unrealistic job goals or needed to widen the scope of their job search. Several advisers were observed asking questions like 'things don't seem to be working, let's look at why?'

During the DWP research, some stakeholders described the process of identifying skill needs as a timeline or series of interviews. Some focused on an initial meeting (some specifying the New Jobseeker Interview) while others also talked about further interviews, with some specifying a timescale of 13 weeks and 26 weeks. Stakeholders differed in their opinions of whether the approach to identifying skills needs changed over time. Some stakeholders characterised the skills screening approach taken by Jobcentre Plus advisers in the later stages of the customer journey as becoming more 'in-depth' or 'formal'. This could mean when the Fast Track assessment tool was used, or simply that more time was available for exploring skills needs, or because caseloading for claimants was being used. However, another stakeholder said the approach was 'all at a very high level, light touch' throughout the process, although they did say that some different procedures were expected at particular stages.

In terms of improving the current system, several stakeholders in the DWP research discussed the importance of targeting limited face-to-face adviser time towards those claimants who were unable to help themselves and promoting the use of digital services to claimants who were more able to help themselves, although some stakeholders pointed out the risks associated with digital services: information may not get through to the adviser in time for a face-to-face meeting and basic skills needs may not be picked up as claimants would not be observed filling in forms.

## 2.5 Time spent on skills screening

As discussed in Section 2.1, skills screening is intended to be an integral part of the WFI and is firmly embedded within it rather than forming a discrete part of the interview. As a result, it has been difficult to offer precise calculations of the average time spent on skills screening across all the skills groups during the interviews observed. Much of the skills screening that was observed to have taken place happened over the course of the whole interview; for example, advisers were observing claimants throughout the interview and picking up on basic skills needs or employability needs (for example, help with motivation, self presentation etc.). Discussions about job goals and local job opportunities and the match or fit of these with claimants' experience and vocational skills were a part of most of the WFIs observed, although advisers appeared to have more time to engage claimants in these sorts of discussions in interviews observed at Stages 2 and 3 than in Stage 1. However, depending on the other issues that were raised in the WFI, advisers may have only had a limited time to spend on this sort of screening activity.

The amount of time spent on skills screening overall was very variable, partly because of individual claimant's needs: advisers were observed spending more or less time on skills screening depending on the claimant. For example, an adviser undertaking Stage 2 interviews was estimated to have spent approximately 40 per cent of one interview discussing skills (in the round) compared to 70 per cent of the next interview. During some of the observations, advisers were recorded as spending as little as ten per cent of the interview time discussing skills issues and identifying skills needs while in others the proportion was much higher at around 60 to 70 per cent. These sorts of variations in time spent on skills screening were very common and much depended on the issues that the claimant brought to the WFI; for example, much of the interview could be taken up on benefit queries or discussions of in-work benefits or the claimant's background. Depending on the stage at which the WFI was taking place, the opportunity for further skills screening may not arise for several weeks unless the adviser has the flexibility to book the claimant for a subsequent appointment. Interviews with people from professional backgrounds or with higher levels of qualifications may not have required a lot of skills screening-related activity and so the emphasis here may have been on broadening job-search activity or job goals, or challenging claimants' wage requirements.



# 3 Referrals from screening

A referral to training provision was one of the key outcomes from the Work-Focused Interviews (WFIs) observed (along with referrals to jobs and completed or revised Jobseeker's Agreements (JSAGs)) and these would follow on from interactions between advisers and claimants to screen for, and identify gaps in, claimants' skills and capabilities. This chapter looks at the processes by which advisers decide and make referrals to training provision. It also explores the availability of provision and the appropriateness of referrals.

## 3.1 Reasons for referrals

The processes by which advisers screen for skills were discussed in Chapter 2. A direct result of some of this screening activity was a referral to an external provider for further training.<sup>24</sup> As seen in Chapter 2, due in part to the length of time available to advisers, most referrals observed during this research occurred in WFIs in Stages 2 and 3 of the Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND), when advisers had more time to spend with claimants, discussing skills issues and other barriers to work.

Advisers were observed approaching referrals in different ways, namely:

- Some advisers were observed discussing referral options at the beginning of the WFI, telling claimants that a range of options was available; for example, to help with their job search or improving CVs, or to provide vocationally-specific training. In these cases, the need for training and external help or provision had not been established through any screening activity before it was raised as an option for the claimant.
- Some advisers explored barriers to work, screened for skills needs across a range of skills areas, including basic, vocational and employability skills, and then discussed referral options with the claimant according to the need identified. In these cases, claimants' needs had been established before recourse to, and mention of, provision.
- Some advisers also discussed barriers to work and screened for skills needs during the WFI and then went on to attempt to meet some of these needs themselves in the interview, in addition to referring to external provision if required. These advisers tended to offer help and advice on CV preparation and job-search skills, and employability skills; for example, working with claimants to improve their motivation and self-confidence. In these examples, advisers saw their role as being to motivate and coach claimants as well to refer them to external providers.

Advisers did not report making referrals because of any specific targets to do so, although for a small number of advisers it seemed that they were referring out of habit or culture. Some advisers reported that they 'just knew' if someone needed a particular sort of help (most often help with job-search skills or employability skills) and they had made a judgement based on this 'knowledge'. In these instances, no evidence had been gathered to support these assertions. For example, advisers did not report undertaking a light-touch 'eyes and ears' approach to screening and neither had they undertaken skills assessments using the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT) or Fast Track tools.

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<sup>24</sup> In many offices, referrals were observed to other Jobcentre Plus services, such as the teams for 18–24 year olds and Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs), indicating more specialist treatment of particular claimant groups (i.e. for young people or people with health problems and disabilities) to overcome barriers not necessarily linked to skills needs.

The research found that claimants were sometimes signposted to provision; that is, advised to get in touch with providers themselves rather than being referred directly by Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers (PAs), and particularly so at the earlier stages of the JRFND regime before barriers to work and skills needs had been explored in depth. Some advisers discussed Next Step with claimants and signposted to it in order that claimants could access help with preparing CVs and get careers advice. This was not common among the advisers observed however, and some reported that they did not really know what Next Step did and so did not signpost to the service.<sup>25</sup> This highlights a more general problem, that PAs do not always know what provision exists and, therefore, are unable to signpost or refer to it. Another related example was a Stage 1 adviser who did not refer an ex-Incapacity Benefit claimant to training because she did not know that she had the option to fast-track him to provision from Stage 1. In short, PAs are not always aware of the provision that is available, nor the eligibility criteria that apply, and so are unable to make referrals.

Advisers tended to place much greater emphasis on getting claimants into ‘work first’ and very few referrals were made, for example to Next Step, to help claimants with long-term career planning. Moreover, referrals to skills provision were made, by and large, for short training courses in response to skills needs related to the attainment of immediate job goals: advisers were not observed discussing longer-term training options or courses with claimants.

Some advisers taking part in the Access to Work-Related Training (AWRT) study thought that advisory services managers (ASMs) could help to improve communication about what provision was available in the local area to help with decision making, and also to help advisers with skills-screening activities. When considering how the employment and skills systems were working together, one adviser in this study reported that:

*‘...the component parts are there...It needs constantly reviewing in terms of provision and what’s available [and] obviously, that’s got to change with the labour market...It’s just getting it working efficiently together...and that comes through communication...The advisory teams... have got to work together and make sure we’re sharing our knowledge really, of provision and good practices...and the success stories and stuff.’*

In addition to being aware of provision, another factor that seems to influence referral decisions is the physical proximity, and visibility, of providers to the Jobcentre Plus office. For example, at one of the offices visited for this research, advisers were often observed referring claimants to an employability skills provider who was located across the road. This suggests that providers who are visible to and uppermost in the minds of advisers (and whose premises are seen every day) may be favoured when decisions about where to refer claimants are made. Advisers generally referred claimants to providers who were close by in order that they did not have to travel too far but they rarely mentioned this as the main driver for referral decisions in the follow-up interviews.

Referrals for training were not always initiated by advisers. In a small number of cases, claimants themselves requested a referral to a particular type of provision. For example, some claimants wanted to explore a new line of work and asked specifically to be referred to appropriate vocational training; several of these claimants wanted help to become self-employed. Advisers did not agree to any of these requests without first exploring the reasons for wanting training and additional help, and checking that claimants were eligible for it.

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<sup>25</sup> See DWP Research Report 749: *Access to work-related training*, which has a particular focus on whether and how claimants get access to work-related skills training via a Jobcentre Plus or Next Step referral.

Initially, some stakeholders in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) research made little distinction between identifying a skills need and referring someone to skills services. The assumption here tended to be that once a skills need was identified claimants should be referred to Next Step and/or training provision. However, stakeholders usually added caveats, or gave exceptions such as:

- making sure that the referral would help the claimant into work;
- referrals to training that was expensive or linked to unrealistic aspirations; or
- if the claimant could fund the training themselves.

Other stakeholders made a distinction about referral depending upon the type of skills need identified. Most of these stakeholders believed that claimants with basic skills needs should be referred to provision, with many saying claimants should simply be referred directly to a training provider to meet these needs. Others thought that claimants should be referred to both Next Step and a (basic skills) training provider to meet these needs.

Views differed among stakeholders on referrals for other skills needs: some stakeholders thought that referrals for all other types of skills needs ought to be at the adviser's discretion, that is they should be free to determine where to refer the claimant to; some stakeholders thought that a referral to Next Step should be made for any type of skills need. Some stakeholders explicitly differentiated between a referral to Next Step and one to a training provider depending on how sure they were about whether there was a skills need: one stakeholder thought that if a 'potential skills need' was identified then Jobcentre Plus advisers should refer claimants to Next Step for a more in-depth diagnosis, while if an 'actual skills need' was identified advisers should refer directly to a training provider to meet the need. Another stakeholder went further and suggested that a referral to Next Step should be the default option for all Jobcentre Plus claimants, and that advisers should have to justify any deviation from this position.

## 3.2 Availability of provision

In the observations undertaken for this research, the type of provision<sup>26</sup> that claimants were referred to during WFIs included:

- careers information, advice and guidance (IAG);
- job-search provision, including CV writing;
- basic skills provision;
- employability skills provision to help with motivation, self-presentation, interview skills;
- support for self-employment; and
- vocational training that was specific to particular occupations and/or sectors, including licence-to-practise-related certification.

<sup>26</sup> Funding for provision for job seekers comes from a variety of sources and for many types of training courses and programmes. The methodology for this research did not allow for an in-depth exploration of funding sources as it focused on observations of WFIs and short follow-up interviews with advisers. Where funding sources are known, they are included in the text.

At the time of the research, several advisers reported that some Jobcentre Plus-funded training provision, particularly vocational courses (for example, fork-lift truck (FLT) training) and those resulting in up-to-date certification (such as Security Industry Association (SIA) and Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) provision), had been suspended pending funding or contracting decisions. In these examples, advisers usually told claimants that provision was normally available, but that referrals were not possible at the present time. Advisers reported that this position would be reviewed the next time the claimant attended for another WFI.

Some advisers perceived that there was a relative lack of all provision available for 25+ claimants, compared to the 18 to 24 age group, which they believed restricted their referral options. There were various examples observed of young people being ‘fast-tracked’ to Stage 3 to take advantage of initiatives such as the Future Jobs Fund,<sup>27</sup> or receiving additional support from a designated adviser. Availability of funding and support for claimants over 25, on the other hand, was believed by advisers to be more limited and so, while advisers may have identified a skills need, they sometimes felt unable to meet that need because of a reported lack of training provision. Some advisers also expressed their frustration about the lack of training available to claimants who had been unemployed for less than six months, which restricted referral options at Stage 1 and Stage 2.

Some advisers also commented that there was little (Jobcentre Plus or Skills Funding Agency-funded) provision specifically aimed at job seekers with professional or executive backgrounds, other than that available to all job seekers (for example, basic skills provision), although many professional job seekers were observed receiving WFIs during this research. This was perceived as problematic by some advisers as they reported that there was ‘very little we can do for these job seekers’. However, other advisers reported that professional job seekers already had the vocational and employability skills that would eventually enable them to re-enter the labour market. More importantly, professional job seekers were considered by many advisers to be able to take control of their own professional development and training. One adviser, for example, argued that there was relatively less support available for people from professional backgrounds, but that there were graduate and specialist websites and agencies so that for these job seekers ‘a lot of it is about signposting’.

The type of provision to which claimants were referred was also influenced by eligibility criteria; for example, some vocational courses were only available to claimants who had been unemployed for six months or more and so referrals from earlier stages in the JRFND regime were not possible. Conversely, some claimants were eligible to be fast-tracked to provision in particular circumstances. One example was a claimant at Stage 1 who was moving from Incapacity Benefit (IB) to Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA). He needed an SIA licence to get back into security work and was eligible for a referral to this sort of training immediately.

### 3.3 Appropriateness of referrals

As discussed earlier, the majority of decisions about referrals to provision were observed after some skills-screening activity during the WFI and, in the majority of cases the referral appeared, at least, to fit with the needs identified; for example, a referral for basic skills training when poor literacy skills had been identified, or a referral for help to become self-employed if the claimant said they wanted to do so but did not know how to go about it. There were some exceptions to this however. For example, one claimant clearly stated early on in his WFI that he was interested in becoming a self-employed handyman and wanted some help with this, but the adviser referred him for help with his CV and job search instead. He omitted to refer the claimant to a self-employment provider

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<sup>27</sup> Some of these initiatives may have been temporary and specific measures introduced in response to the recession, rather than a part of the Jobseekers Regime per se.

and when asked why he had taken this decision, the adviser replied that there was ‘no way [the claimant] *would have become self-employed*’. Another example was a claimant who wanted to become a nursery nurse but who could not afford the time or the cost associated with training as one: her adviser suggested self-employment as an option as training related to this was free, although the claimant had at no time during the interview expressed any interest in becoming self-employed.

The AWRT study found that the majority of referrals that providers received from Jobcentre Plus were appropriate. Providers taking part in the AWRT study reported that referrals had always been good or that they had improved over time and as the relationship between providers and Jobcentre Plus had developed. One provider reported that they had done more promotional work with Jobcentre Plus (for example, providing paper-based information on courses, visiting Jobcentre Plus offices and talking to staff and claimants about the content of their provision) and this had resulted in an increase in the appropriateness of referrals from approximately 40 per cent of all referrals to 80–85 per cent. Providers in the AWRT study said that when referrals were inappropriate it was usually for one of three main reasons: firstly because claimants’ basic skills were poor and they required additional help with basic skills before they could start other courses; secondly, because claimants wanted to do a different course to the one they had been referred for; or thirdly, because claimants wanted to undertake courses that did not match the demands of the local labour market and, therefore, would not improve their chances of finding work.

Many advisers reported that they had access to online databases of providers, which they thought provided a wealth of information about the training available in the local area. In one office, for example, advisers had access to an online database of providers offering work-focused training grouped by claimants’ levels of existing skills: (1) no skills, (2) medium skills and (3) professionals. Other offices used paper-based folders listing the provision available and these were often organised by type of training, for example, employability skills or vocational skills.

When selecting which providers to refer claimants to, advisers were generally observed following one of two options:

- giving claimants the information they needed to make the decision themselves, such as provider name and address, list of provision and training available; or
- selecting a provider on behalf of the claimant based on their own knowledge of the provision.

Jobcentre Plus advisers usually took the second approach and selected a provider on behalf of the claimant, although in some cases only one provider was offering particular training courses and so no decision was necessary.

In the AWRT study, advisers also reported that they tended to be quite instructive about what a claimant should do, and when they identified a skills need they were likely to suggest a particular provision to a claimant and refer them to a specific provider. Claimants generally found that the way that they were referred from Jobcentre Plus to the training provider worked well. Claimants liked that Jobcentre Plus advisers routinely rang up training providers during the WFI, booked them in for an initial appointment with the training provider and gave them written information about the appointments.

Advisers reported that they tended to use ‘tried and tested’ providers, those they had used in the past and who they felt confident would provide what the claimant needed. Advisers tended to make decisions on the quality of the provision based on what claimants reported back and the information they received about training providers from their colleagues. Advisers’ awareness and knowledge of the various types of available provision, including training provision and support from Next Step, was important in selecting providers and organisations to help claimants with multiple skill needs. For example, in one observation of a Stage 2 WFI, an adviser identified that the claimant would benefit from at least three different types of referral: for a CSCS card (for construction workers); IT skills to improve his job search; and to Business Link for advice/support to become self-employed. The adviser was required to prioritise these referrals (some provision was not available until the claimant reached Stage 3) and source different providers to meet the individual claimant’s needs. Local practice may also influence referral decisions; for example, an adviser in a different office reported that they were only allowed to refer claimants for one work-related training course and so overcoming multiple skills needs was difficult, which may impact on a claimant’s ability to find work. In this example, claimants were usually able to access basic skills training (if this was required) but were then restricted to just one work-related course if this met a skills need, however, further training was not possible. Some advisers were knowledgeable about websites and on-line resources that claimants could access outside of the Jobcentre Plus network, and directed claimants to these sources to use in their own time.

## 4 Barriers to skills screening and onward referral

This chapter considers the various barriers encountered by advisers in relation to identifying, screening and meeting claimants' skills needs. It also discusses barriers to subsequent action, for example, in terms of referring claimants to training or other forms of provision. The research found examples of better and poorer practice in relation to skills screening and onward referrals, and the skills of advisers themselves are discussed in Chapter 5.

### 4.1 Barriers to identifying and screening claimants' skills needs

#### 4.1.1 Time and process barriers

Some advisers admitted that they often felt subject to time pressures due to the 'process-driven' nature of the Work-Focused Interview (WFI) and this could contribute to them spending less time on addressing claimants' skills issues than they might otherwise. This was particularly the case at Stage 1, which, according to some advisers, did not allow sufficient time for more 'exploratory' interviewing, in part because of the amount of information that must be given to the new claimant and also because of the amount of information that was required to be gathered and entered or checked on the Labour Market System (LMS). This sense of feeling under pressure to complete the new claims process within an allocated time was apparent during many of the observations: advisers sometimes spoke very fast, rushed through the various stages of the interview and used Jobcentre Plus jargon (for example, telling claimants that some actions were 'mandatory', and receipt of benefits was 'conditional'). Although the use of jargon was not confined to Stage 1 interviews, it is potentially more problematic for claimants at this early stage as advisers have less time to explain the meaning of some of these terms than in subsequent dealings with Jobcentre Plus. This appeared, in some instances to lead to confusion for new claimants, particularly when they were given a lot of paperwork (for example the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg), signing instructions, jobsearch record). Under these circumstances, skills screening could appear rather perfunctory with advisers asking questions such as 'Can you do this?' or 'Have you got that?'. Such time pressures were less apparent at Stages 2 and 3, when advisers generally had more opportunity to explore skills and training issues during longer interviews.

Some advisers reported that they could offer more skills-related advice and support to claimants but were prevented from doing so because of lack of time. For example, Stage 1 advisers at one office said they would like to have the chance to give claimants advice about their CVs but routinely referred them to Next Step instead: *'Next Step will give them the advice that we can't because we are so busy. We see so many people.'*

Managers and advisers participating in the Access to Work-Related Training (AWRT) study also identified time pressures as a major constraint to effective skills screening, caused by the amount that they had to fit into their interviews. Managers and advisers alike noted that there are lots of other tasks to complete in an interview, which constrain the amount of time available for skills screening. This applies particularly at Stage 1 where advisers must draw up the JSAg and collect lots of demographic information from the claimant to set up the claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

The impact of time pressures during WFIs was also acknowledged by some stakeholders in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) research. One example was the requirement to see all new job seekers within three days of becoming unemployed; if there were a lot of claimants coming through to Jobcentre Plus at any one time, there could be implications for the time available in New Jobseeker Interviews (NJIs) to identify skills needs. The same stakeholder also highlighted the number of 'transactions' required in an NJI, stating there were some 'really huge time pressures' there. Another stakeholder thought advisers might perceive that they were constrained by time when, in effect, they may not be taking advantage of flexibilities available to them.

In many of the interviews observed, advisers allowed the discussion to be steered by the JSAg structure on LMS rather than through an exploratory (albeit work-focused) discussion with the claimant. Focusing on the JSAg enabled advisers to ensure that they had all the necessary LMS fields completed (thus meeting quality assurance standards), but meant that there was often little chance for claimants to speak at length about their job goals or personal circumstances. This provides another illustration of how the WFI appeared to be driven by the process rather than the needs of the individual claimant, and particularly so at Stage 1. Advisers who did not use the LMS screens to structure interviews appeared more confident in drawing out information from claimants (for example, about their skills, their job goals and job-seeking activities) during the WFI and then filling in the relevant details on screen once the information had been gathered and evaluated. This generally required good IT skills, and memory, to be able to type the information quickly and accurately without disrupting the 'flow' of the interview.

The time available for discussion and the quality of WFIs was adversely affected by the poor keyboard and/or IT skills displayed by some advisers. This often led to the adviser focusing more on the computer screen and correcting poor typing/spelling mistakes for a significant proportion of the interview – rather than on looking at, and engaging with, the claimant.

#### **4.1.2 Lack of continuity**

Some advisers expressed frustration that they could not caseload claimants and see them on a regular basis, particularly at Stages 1 and 2, which would allow them to follow through with skills issues they had begun to identify. At one office, the advisers had just been reorganised into teams which enabled them to caseload the same claimants from Stage 1 onwards.<sup>28</sup> This allowed for increased adviser discretion and flexibility, as advisers could call claimants in for additional sessions at any stage if they thought it appropriate. All the advisers interviewed felt very positive about this development: they appreciated the increased flexibility with their workloads, as well as greater continuity of contact with individual claimants. By seeing the same claimant on more than one occasion advisers were able to build a relationship with claimants and spend longer exploring skills

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<sup>28</sup> It should also be noted that from January 2010, all 18- to 24-year-old JSA claimants have been allocated a Personal Adviser (PA) from the first day of their claim, although this was not observed in all districts participating in this research.



issues with them in-depth, which they reported improved the level of service they could provide. However, they faced the new challenge of having to extend their knowledge of the types of support and provision available for different groups of claimants at the different stages. They were addressing this mainly through ‘peer support’ and sharing of knowledge and expertise across the teams.

### **4.1.3 Addressing the needs of claimants with language barriers**

At one office visited, advisers reported a high percentage of claimants whose first language was not English, and this raised issues about the needs of this particular client group and the quality of their interviews with advisers. For example, some advisers reported that they had experienced difficulties using informal interpreters – usually a friend or family member – whose English might not be much better than that of the claimant and who might be inclined to add their own information to what the adviser was saying. More formal interpreting, for example through Language Line<sup>29</sup>, could also be problematic, in that such interviews, conducted by telephone, could be lengthy (adding to advisers’ time pressures) and logistically more difficult. No extra time was allocated to these interviews if the language barrier was only discovered when the claimant attended the interview. Observations at this and other offices highlighted other potential problems related to assessing skills needs among this claimant group. It was not just a question of picking up that there was an English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) need and referring the claimant on to a provider. There were also issues about how claimants’ previous education and work history were recorded, what kind of support they might need in getting their overseas qualifications recognised, or the extent to which their language competence matched up to the types of jobs they were looking for. As with other skills needs, there appeared to be no systematic approach among advisers to assessing more complex language needs of this type. These issues were common across different offices with varying numbers of non-English speaking claimants, but advisers in offices with a high percentage of claimants whose first language was not English demonstrated more knowledge of local ESOL provision as this was used more frequently.

### **4.1.4 Clarity of purpose and missing skills needs**

The research has shown that advisers are screening for skills needs, but they are rarely able to talk with clarity and confidence about this element of their role, and this applied to all advisers, even those advisers displaying better practice (see Section 5.1). Advisers did not, for example, say that they were ‘skills screening’ or ‘checking claimants’ skills’, or use any of this sort of language to describe what they were doing during WFIs. Instead, advisers summed up their activities as checking for, and overcoming claimants’ ‘barriers to work’, or submitting claimants to jobs. However, the observations undertaken during this research found that advisers were often engaged in screening activities; for example, checking claimants’ literacy skills or matching people’s work experience and aptitudes (vocational skills) against their job goals to identify any gaps and to establish if there was a need for training. This suggests that skills screening is not a process that advisers recognise and acknowledge as a separate part of the WFI per se but it is a process they are engaged in.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A telephone interpreting service.

<sup>30</sup> As discussed in Section 2.1, advisers taking part in the AWRT study appeared more confident discussing skills and screening for skills and they generally used this type of language to describe their activities. However, interviewers used these terms when framing questions for this research and this may have influenced the language used in adviser responses.

The observations have also highlighted that advisers are screening for skills needs and gaps across a range of skills 'groups'; however, again, advisers do not approach this in any systematic way, for example, they have no 'checklist' of skills areas to guide them through the process, which meant that some skills areas could be missed. On a small number of occasions, advisers were observed not picking up on skills needs. For example, one claimant reported at an NJI that they would like to update their IT skills, but the adviser did not recommend or signpost IT courses or online support services. In another example, an adviser failed to probe for employability/job-search skills needs after a claimant reported that he often got through to the interview stage for jobs but got no further. Other examples where advisers failed to make a referral to a provider following the identification of a skills need included a number of advisers who did not refer claimants to an enterprise provider although that claimant was interested in self-employment. When questioned subsequently, advisers had often simply forgotten to pick up on issues raised in the WFI or had forgotten to refer claimants when the interview came to an end. In one example, after questioning by a researcher, the adviser went after the claimant before he left the office to make a referral to training provision.

Some advisers also missed the information offered by claimants during the WFI, or failed to follow up particular issues with claimants; for example, they did not ask to see a copy of the claimant's CV, and were quite surprised when researchers picked up on these issues in the brief follow-up interviews. In these examples, it appeared as if advisers had just not heard what claimants were saying, or they had been too busy entering information onto LMS to probe on skills-related issues, which may have identified gaps requiring follow-up action. In a small number of cases, advisers also appeared to ignore what claimants told them, for example a desire to become self-employed or to follow a particular training course. When questioned subsequently, advisers reported that they did not believe claimants were serious or were capable of these options and so had steered the interview in a different direction, or put off a more in-depth discussion until the 'next time'.

If skills groups were articulated more explicitly, and skills screening was widely recognised and overtly discussed as an activity within a WFI to be carried out across all skills groups, advisers may miss fewer needs.

A few advisers participating in the AWRT study thought that some of the difficulty and reasons for missing skills needs lay in the amount of provision available: *'There is quite a lot of provision out there and you sometimes get lost in it all. And when you're talking to a customer, it might not be until they've gone that you think, actually perhaps I should've done that instead of that.'*

Although some stakeholders felt there was a problem about the lack of suitable training places being available to claimants when they needed them, a few saw the wide range of training options to be a problem: *'...it's got so complicated...with a huge number of things they can refer to...I think it's really difficult.'*

### 4.1.5 Perceived lack of support

Several advisers reported that they knew that they were supposed to ‘screen for skills’ but that they ‘don’t know how to do it’ and a few advisers said that their managers knew how to screen for skills but that they did not share this knowledge with them, which suggests a lack of managerial and senior support.<sup>31</sup> From the follow-up discussions with advisers, it appeared within some offices that management priorities about what should be covered during the WFIs, particularly in relation to skills needs, were unclear. For example, at one office, there was no clear office policy on using the Fast Track assessment tool, whereas there was a strong emphasis on all claimants completing data consent forms. Without leadership and direction ‘from the top’, it can be difficult for advisers to recognise and understand the importance of skills and skills screening, and their place within the WFI.

A range of stakeholders in the DWP research talked about the need to ensure that Jobcentre Plus advisers are incentivised to make appropriate skills referrals. However, they talked about these incentives in terms of a skills referral being appreciated by their managers as a positive outcome or that valuing skills would help their careers, rather than having targets for numbers of referrals. Others thought it was just a matter of management being clearer on the value of skills and clear on their expectations on what skills needs should lead to a referral and about what should happen in particular circumstances.

## 4.2 Barriers to onward referral

### 4.2.1 Lack of experience and knowledge

Lack of experience and/or knowledge of local provision could be an issue for some advisers, for example, if they were new to the job or their role had changed to include a wider range of claimants (as discussed above), which may explain why some advisers did not follow up on some identified skills needs. One adviser had only started working for Jobcentre Plus a few months previously as an 18–24 adviser, but was now also seeing older claimants. He admitted he was still learning about the range of provision available to the 25+ age group. If he was unsure about the right course of action for a particular claimant, he tended to be honest with them about this, inviting them back a couple of weeks later when he had done some research or consulted more experienced colleagues. This illustrates the extent to which advisers gain such knowledge and experience ‘on the job’ and also raises the question of what kind of support they receive in this aspect of their training and development, and what support they receive from their managers to fill gaps in their knowledge. Another example of this was an office where all advisers had recently changed from doing a mix of interviews at all stages and for claimants of all ages to becoming specialist advisers in Stage 1, Stage 2 and Stage 3 interviews by age group. This meant that all the advisers had to learn more about their new specialism and the provision available for their claimant group. While this new system enabled advisers to build focused and in-depth knowledge and expertise in one area, a disadvantage was when interviews were booked to the wrong adviser or when covering for staff absences, other advisers did not necessarily have the required level of knowledge of local provision for the claimant group they were seeing.

<sup>31</sup> The QAF is designed to support the training that is provided by the Jobcentre Plus Learning Routeway. It helps to make sure that Jobcentre Plus’ advisory services are effective, efficient and of consistently high quality. The QAF focuses on using PIGEEP and is an essential tool in driving performance up and adviser development. Evidence to compare with the QAF standards is gathered through interview observation by managers and discussion with individual advisers. After observing the interviews, the manager discusses how the adviser performed in comparison with the standards.

### 4.2.2 Reduction in provision and support

In addition to a reported lack of provision for certain types of claimants (reported in Section 3.2), advisers at some offices commented that, since the introduction of the JRFND, there had been a move away from DWP contracted provision and, although there was a reasonable amount of provision available within the districts, much of this was non-contracted. This meant that there was less adviser 'control' over the referral process, since non-contracted providers were not necessarily obliged to take on Jobcentre Plus claimants or provide feedback on their progress.<sup>32</sup> This type of provision was also less attractive to advisers because they felt they could not be sure of its quality.

Some advisers also reported that they had lost (or were in the process of losing) various forms of support they had previously been able to offer to claimants. This included the Adviser Discretionary Fund (ADF), which advisers had found useful in the past for funding short training courses or accessing other types of support for claimants. At some offices, advisers commented that they were now no longer able to offer work trials, which had provided valuable work experience, helped improve claimants' self-confidence and, in many cases, had proved to be a useful route into employment.<sup>33</sup>

### 4.2.3 Complex needs of claimants

During the study, claimants were observed to have many other barriers to work, over and above those relating to the skills needs and skills groups discussed earlier. Some examples of these barriers include:

- drug and alcohol dependency;
- criminal records;
- relationship breakdown;
- bankruptcy;
- homelessness;
- caring responsibilities;
- lone parenthood;
- physical health problems; and
- mental health problems, particularly depression and anxiety.

Several claimants were observed to have multiple barriers to work from the list above; for example, an ex-heroin addict with a criminal record and Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO), living in temporary accommodation and caring informally for a friend who self-harmed. This claimant was already following a basic skills course (started while in prison) and needed help with his CV. He was also actively working with the probation service to help him to find employment, but was restricted on where he could work because of the ASBO currently in place. Several claimants had spent time in prison and their criminal record posed a significant barrier to finding work. Many other claimants had health problems, which had an impact on the type of work they were able to do, with some also reporting homelessness or temporary accommodation as an additional barrier to work. Advisers are often faced with an array of issues, and skills are only part of the problem for some people trying to get back into the labour market.

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<sup>32</sup> This excludes Skills Funding Agency-funded provision for Jobcentre Plus.

<sup>33</sup> During the recession ADF and Work Trials had day-one eligibility and ADF could be used for short training courses. These measures had ceased when the research was carried out.

It is not only 'hard' barriers to work that advisers routinely come across in their interventions with claimants; a number of advisers reported 'soft' barriers to work<sup>34</sup>, for example, people's attitudes to work which can act as a significant hurdle. While attitude to work may be classified as an employability skills issue, the seriousness and difficulty in overcoming such barriers should not be underestimated. Several claimants were observed attending interviews and 'filibustering': seemingly engaged in the interview, but presenting barriers to work such as being unable to do shift work because of the interruption to sleep patterns, stating they were actively looking for work but unable to travel, or experience of doing particular types of work in the past but not wanting to do them anymore. On occasions, it was very difficult for advisers to engage some of these claimants, regardless of their experience or the effectiveness of their skills screening techniques.

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<sup>34</sup> For more information on soft skills see Dewson *et al.*, (2000), *Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled: A Review of Current Practice*, DfEE.

# 5 Drivers of adviser behaviour

This chapter presents the findings on the key factors that appear to drive and influence adviser behaviour during Work-Focused Interviews (WFIs). The first section reports on the skills and capabilities of the advisers observed in their interactions with claimants. The chapter then moves on to look at the structure of the WFIs and the role of the Labour Market System (LMS) in shaping the interviews.

## 5.1 Advisers' skills and capabilities

As discussed earlier, there were significant variations observed among adviser styles and in their interactions with claimants. Some displayed a range of interpersonal skills and positive behaviours in their interactions with claimants during the WFIs. The best practice<sup>35</sup> observed in relation to advisers' interviewing skills included:

- using **probing questions** into claimants' skills and work experience to identify gaps and barriers, for example, gaining a full picture of qualifications and subjects studied, jobs undertaken and probing on the responsibilities and key tasks held and skills and abilities gained, and cross-referencing these to job goals, job vacancies or occupations sought;
- discussing with claimants the content of their CVs and **identifying transferable skills and experience**, such as problem-solving ability, team-working skills, ability to prioritise tasks and time management, good interpersonal skills and customer care skills;
- **showing empathy** with personal problems and barriers and **using motivational language** to build up claimants' confidence and to encourage them, for example, acknowledging a lack of confidence brought about by redundancy, but getting claimants to think about the skills they possessed, some of which they may not immediately recognise, for example, time-keeping, or ability to meet deadlines;
- **good body language**, looking at claimants and using non-verbal methods to acknowledge their responses to questions, such as nodding, and **maintaining eye contact** with claimants rather than focusing on the LMS screen;
- **offering clear explanations** about obligations, responsibilities, procedures and actions taken without using jargon and ensuring that claimants understand these;
- **challenging** unrealistic job goals **showing sensitivity**, for example, acknowledging claimants' job goals but getting claimants to realise that these may require a long period of training or formal qualifications, or significant expenditure to buy appropriate tools, or showing claimants on LMS that jobs of that nature were not available locally, and getting claimants to accept that their goals were not realistic (for right now) and that sights needed to be altered/lowered;
- **being proactive** by calling up providers during the interview and referring or signposting claimants to provision on the spot, rather than waiting until subsequent appointments;

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<sup>35</sup> 'Best practice' in this study refers to the most effective practices observed by researchers during the WFIs. This has necessarily involved a judgement on the part of the researchers based on listening to, and watching, the interaction between claimants and adviser, and assessing whether the skills needs of claimants have been explored as fully as possible by advisers, in the time available, and whether and how the claimant was engaged in the process.

- **knowing their own limitations**, and when to refer a claimant on to a provider and when it was better to handle the claimant's issue 'in-house', for example, claimants with very low self-esteem may benefit from longer-term help with an employability skills provider, whilst claimants who need to identify transferable skills might be helped by an adviser during an arranged WFI (see also Section 3.1);
- **ensuring claimants' commitment** to certain actions, for example, to attend training or to apply for a job vacancy, and promoting the idea of adviser and claimant working together in partnership; and
- **displaying in-depth knowledge** of the local labour market, of occupations and an understanding of the training provision available.

More negatively, some advisers appeared to quickly form a judgement about the claimant's situation and their skills needs, and rarely used open and probing questions to determine the existence of skills gaps. As discussed earlier, some advisers reported in follow-up interviews that they 'just knew' what skills-related barriers claimants were facing without screening or probing during the interview, which could lead to incorrect assumptions being made about the claimant and skills needs being missed. The skills needs that advisers most commonly judged (without testing their assumptions) related to basic skills, employability skills, and/or claimants' unrealistic job goals. While these judgements may often be accurate, the best practice examples observed as part of this research illustrated how some claimants were themselves able to identify key barriers to work and acknowledge their own skills needs when advisers worked with them more obviously and overtly through direct questioning or challenging assumptions.

An example of effective adviser behaviour was observed during a Stage 3 WFI with a claimant who had a criminal record, a disabling physical injury and little work experience. The claimant initially rejected the idea of training to gain some skills, but the adviser tried to re-introduce the idea in a more engaging and innovative way and managed to secure the claimant's commitment to seriously consider upskilling:

*'I have a wacky idea for you'. [Shows claimant a leaflet outlining some training options]...It's 16 hours on a work-related area. It's not maths or physics. You can do any qualification, say in warehousing...It's a good one, career-wise. All these are voluntary. It's up to you but I think that it would be daft not to take an NVQ opportunity and have your benefits. You normally wouldn't receive benefits.'*

(Personal Adviser)

The claimant in this example responded positively to the suggestion and a referral was made. In another example, an adviser was seeing a young claimant at a Stage 3 follow-up interview. The claimant had brought along a completed job application for an administrative post and the adviser immediately identified that the claimant had not written enough about her skills and work experience. The claimant appeared confused and the adviser responded by asking her questions about her previous employment and her job role: *'Think about everything that you did in this role'*. The claimant was able to recall and to write down some of this previous experience. As the claimant had no experience of taking minutes at meetings, the adviser also suggested she tried to gain some relevant experience at the charity where she was currently doing some voluntary work. Effective advisers engaged with claimants and challenged them to think differently about their skills and job goals.

Some Stage 2 and 3 advisers reported that they saw themselves as ‘motivators’, particularly with claimants who appeared to be losing confidence or becoming demoralised because of their lack of success in finding employment. A few advisers saw themselves as ‘coaches’, for example, by encouraging claimants to recognise and develop their own skills. Advisers adopting this ‘coaching role’ with claimants were also more likely to ask exploratory questions about their previous work experience, thus ‘teasing out’ from claimants their latent skills and aptitudes, such as time-planning, working to deadlines and financial management, and encouraging them to recognise their own transferable skills. These advisers often had a lengthy history of working as (New Deal) advisers and had developed the skills needed to motivate claimants, although less experienced advisers also demonstrated these skills.

Some advisers, however, appeared to be more process-driven than others, spending most of their time looking at the LMS screens, reviewing and completing the Jobseeker’s Agreement (JSAG) and updating the LMS system, which seemed to reduce the amount of time they could spend openly discussing skills and screening for skills needs: some advisers cited time pressures as the main reason for not engaging more with claimants on these issues while others were impeded by poor keyboard skills (see Section 4.1.1).

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the content and flow of the WFIs were also influenced by the issues that claimants raised. For example, there were some claimants who would arrive at the interview with a different agenda to that of the adviser, such as having concerns about housing, benefits, money and debt, health and/or family problems, which may have negated a discussion on skills. As some advisers pointed out, they were seeing a variety of claimants on a daily basis and from interview to interview they had to be ready to deal with claimants’ different needs and expectations. Flexibility was key to the adviser role.

Essentially, some advisers displayed very effective questioning techniques and interpersonal skills; using open questioning techniques to probe claimants on their barriers to work and skills-related issues to elicit a comprehensive picture of claimants’ circumstances. These advisers tended to be able to engage claimants, to get them to reflect on their strengths and transferable skills and also to arrive at an assessment, or agreement, of their key barriers to work, or to take steps towards this end. Rather than sharing particular characteristics, these advisers came from a range of backgrounds: some were very experienced Jobcentre Plus staff, many of whom had worked in different parts of the organisation (for example, on vacancy handling, employer engagement as well as advisory services); and some were fairly new recruits with experience of working with training provider organisations or recruitment consultancies; some were working in Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials offices and some were not. Some advisers displaying effective interview techniques had no (directly relevant) work experience and some were new graduates in their first jobs since university.

The most common factor observed among effective advisers, or advisers displaying effective behaviours rather than having a particular background or level of experience or confidence, appears to be their own desire, in their own words, to ‘do a good job’ and to ‘do the best for claimants’: these advisers were self-motivated and seemed to get job satisfaction from doing their job well. However, effective advisers also approached each claimant with an open mind in that they did not pre-judge claimants’ circumstances or skills needs. Rather, effective advisers employed the techniques described earlier to determine claimants’ needs, which informed their subsequent (referral) actions. Taking such a ‘fresh’ approach to each claimant can be difficult in the advisory role, particularly when advisers can regularly see up to ten people every day; however, it appears that it is this neutral yet motivated approach, combined with effective interview techniques and interpersonal skills (and peer support from colleagues and managers) that can make a difference.



A few offices also appeared to benefit from an effective ‘office-approach’ to engaging with claimants; in other words, all advisers observed within an office seemed to display better practice in their dealings with claimants than in other offices. These tended to be in areas where office staff turnover (advisers and managers) and claimant counts were relatively low, and those with smaller, contained labour markets: the exchange of good practice and good working relationships were (in part at least) facilitated by these characteristics. Interestingly, some of the offices displaying effective office-approaches to skills screening were in Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials areas but some were not.

In the Access to Work-Related Training (AWRT) study, advisers and managers also reported that the quality and consistency of skills screening was variable. In particular, Jobcentre Plus district-level staff felt it was often done more effectively by experienced advisers than by newer members of staff. For one district manager this meant that the screening at the Stage 1 New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) was often the weakest, as newer advisers tend to work on earlier claim stages. However, another district manager felt the quality was variable across all the stages, with the ability and confidence of advisers to do effective skills screening differing widely. There were also differences among the advisers interviewed for this study in how confident they felt in their own abilities to accurately diagnose skills needs, with some much more confident in their own techniques than others. Overall, the main enablers to effective skills screening were felt by Jobcentre Plus managers and advisers alike to be the personal communication skills, and particularly the experience, of the adviser.

### 5.1.1 Adviser training

Staff training was not covered in detail in this study as the focus was primarily on the content of WFIs and advisers’ approaches to skills screening and the time spent interviewing the advisers was limited. Personal Advisers (PAs) follow specific Jobcentre Plus Learning Routeway training and have guidance to help them with all aspects of the advisory role. Satisfaction with the general training was reported by advisers to be good.

Jobcentre Plus advisers taking part in the AWRT research reported that they had followed the standard Learning Routeway training, which covers questioning techniques (such as asking open questions to identify claimants’ barriers to work, including skills-related barriers) and that they had shadowed other colleagues (on-the-job training), but they did not report receiving any additional or specific training on skills screening methods. Advisers were generally happy with the Learning Routeway, and most thought that it enabled them to engage with claimants and find out about any skills needs.

*‘I think, in terms of questioning and getting the customer to identify what issues they have...I don’t think there’s probably anything additional that’s needed.’*

(Jobcentre Plus Adviser)

A couple of advisers also mentioned that they had undertaken enhanced or advanced advisory skills training, which provided (among other things) more in-depth training on how to get claimants to reflect on their own skills, expertise and experience, and how to build these skills into their job-search activities and JSAg, and encouraging claimants to use these skills also to market themselves to potential employers. Advisers who had received this training had found it very worthwhile, although the training was not specific to skills screening per se. Some advisers mentioned that more training on specific occupations would be helpful, including visits to employers to see what different jobs entailed, to be able to screen claimants’ existing skills against the actual rather than perceived demands of the job more rigorously.

## 5.2 Infrastructure

The organisational framework within which advisers operate is also important when assessing the drivers of adviser behaviour. First of all, there is the formalised Work-Targeted Interview (WTI) structure, which the WFI should follow. This is organised around the PIGEEP structure:

- Preparation
- Introduction
- Goal Definition
- Evaluation
- Exploration
- Planning.

This structure is designed to be followed at each interview, to help the adviser focus on the key aim of moving the claimant closer to employment.

The observations indicated that the earlier stages of the WFI structure (Preparation and Introduction) were generally covered well by advisers. Prior to seeing each claimant, most advisers would spend a few minutes on the LMS familiarising themselves with the particularities and current situation of the claimants they were about to see. As expected, advisers spent more time preparing to see claimants for the first time at Stage 1. During the preparation stage, wherever possible, advisers would put together all paperwork to be signed to have more time during their face-to-face interaction with the claimant. The introduction to the WFI was often lengthier for new claims as advisers had to explain in some detail the benefit obligations and procedures associated with claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and completing the JSAg. During Stage 2 and Stage 3 interviews, advisers were more likely to begin the interviews by asking how claimants were getting on with their job search.

Defining job goals and entering these onto LMS to guide job-search activities and populate the JSAg were an integral part of most interviews. However, there was often less time spent on the Exploration and Evaluation of these goals and their associated skill requirements.

It was at the Exploration and Evaluation stages of the WFI process where differences between advisers became more apparent. For example, the advisers who demonstrated best practice (as described in Section 5.1) were observed to explore and evaluate claimants' skills – across the skills groups discussed earlier – and previous experience throughout the WFI to arrive at an assessment of the job goal; was it realistic and achievable, did the claimant already possess the skills they needed or did they need additional help to achieve the goal? In these examples, advisers were able to identify if a referral to other provision was necessary, or whether claimants needed additional help with their CVs or job-search methods to secure employment. However, in other cases, and particularly where advisers were observed to be more driven by the process and the LMS screens, there was very little evidence that advisers were exploring and evaluating claimants' abilities and skills against their job goals until the adviser was conducting a job search, which usually came at the end of the WFI. Some advisers were observed spending a significant proportion of the interview updating and checking the information on the JSAg (often with poor typing skills which meant that entering data onto LMS was time-consuming) and as a result, had little time for the evaluation, exploration and planning stages of the WTI structure. As a result, some barriers to work and skills needs were not addressed by advisers as there was no time to do so: follow-up interviews were necessary for many claimants in these examples. In other instances, advisers were observed changing the job goals on the JSAg rather than addressing the skills needs or barriers that had been identified as they had run out of time to do so.

# 6 Conclusions and recommendations

## 6.1 Conclusions

This study set out to explore how ‘skills need’ is defined by Jobcentre Plus advisers, how claimants’ skills needs are currently identified and to arrive at an understanding of how the identification of skills needs can be embedded within the new Jobcentre Plus offer.

The research found that, by-and-large, Jobcentre Plus advisers were actively engaged in assessing claimants’ existing skills and identifying skills gaps that were blocking or impeding their chances of finding work. All of this activity was usually undertaken within the context of claimants’ immediate job goals, and was embedded within the Work-Focused Interview (WFI). What has been particularly interesting is that, although advisers were exploring skills with claimants and screening for needs, when unprompted, they did not articulate their activities as such: they did not commonly use phrases like ‘identifying skills needs’ and ‘skills screening’ to describe what they were doing.

A range of skills groups were identified in the research and advisers tended to screen for skills needs within these groups. Screening techniques were usually informal and did not rely on tools, such as the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT) or the Fast Track assessment tool. Advisers, instead, used questioning techniques to elicit information from claimants about their previous work experience, their current job goals and the match between these and their existing skills levels. Importantly though, advisers were also engaged in identifying other barriers to work, such as health and housing problems, requiring them to be responsive and flexible in their interview styles to a broader range of needs.

Some advisers appeared more able in relation to skills screening; they had effective interpersonal skills and were positively engaged in the interaction with claimants and their subsequent actions, for example, referrals or signposting to provision were clearly linked to discussions they had had around skills. Other advisers did not approach skills and skills screening in the same way; some appeared to make judgements about claimants’ skills needs and made referrals to provision that did not seem to relate to the discussions in the WFI, or they missed signals and information from claimants, leaving skills needs unexplored. When identifying the factors associated with positive and effective adviser approaches to skills screening and identifying needs, it seems that experience may have some influence, but this is only partial: some advisers displaying best practice are not experienced either within Jobcentre Plus or even within work. Advisers’ interpersonal skills are important but what really seems to make a difference to screening activity (and, therefore, outcomes from the WFI) is an open mind: approaching each WFI as a blank sheet of paper and using the techniques (delivered via the Learning Routeway adviser training) to identify skills gaps and referring to provision, including Next Step for more in-depth diagnostic activity, as appropriate. It was not only the skills of individual advisers that were important though, as some offices seemed to have more effective and comprehensive (whole office) approaches to skills screening than others, regardless of whether they had been involved in the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials. This suggests that the management role in influencing adviser behaviour and driving up the quality of WFIs can be particularly influential. Certainly the research found examples of poorer practice in offices where management support for advisers was reputedly low.

The evidence on referrals to training provision by Jobcentre Plus advisers suggests that they were generally appropriate and improvements had been observed over time (in related research studies) as relationships between Jobcentre Plus and providers strengthened. A number of factors appeared to influence the appropriateness of provision, not least that it met the skills needs of claimants, but was also rooted in the demands of the labour market.

### 6.2 Recommendations

A number of recommendations have come from this research to assist with the formulation of policy to embed the identification of skills needs within the Jobcentre Plus offer. These are:

- Define (or redefine) skills groups simply and clearly so that advisers have a ‘checklist’ against which their screening activity can be undertaken. This should make skills-screening activity more thorough as advisers can check they have covered all skills groups during the course of the WFI.
- Make the purpose of, and responsibility for, skills screening more explicit as part of the WFI, using language that advisers can understand. It is important that advisers know (and are able to articulate) why skills screening is critical: effective skills screening can overcome skills needs and lead to more sustainable job outcomes. Making this a clear and explicit purpose of the WFI, and encouraging advisers to use skills-related language, should improve the quality of screening activity and onward referrals.
- Ensure that advisers have the time to, and do, use the Preparation, Introduction, Goal Definition, Evaluation, Exploration and Planning (PIGEEP) structure effectively and monitor this: advisory services managers (ASMs) and office managers need to drive performance up by assessing advisers’ approaches to PIGEEP (use of open questioning techniques to explore and evaluate claimants’ job goals, neutral approaches to screening, and so on) and challenging poor advisory practice.
- Identify and provide best practice examples of how skills screening can be done, and when claimants should be handed over to other providers, such as Next Step, and encourage advisers within offices (and between offices within districts) to share good practice. This should drive up adviser confidence and expertise. Managers should facilitate peer support within and between offices.
- Maintain close working relationships with providers, including Next Step, to ensure that referrals are appropriate and meet the skills needs of individuals and employers.

# Appendix A

## Jobcentre Plus approach to skills screening

Initial skills screening:

- is an integrated part of a Work-Focused Interview (WFI) delivered by a Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser (PA);
- involves gathering evidence on skills, qualifications, previous training and work history to make informed decisions as part of developing the Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) to help customers achieve their job goals;
- is undertaken at the New Jobseekers Interview (NJI) and reviewed at 13 weeks;
- is used to determine if the customer has the relevant skills needed to move into their desired job or a job readily available in the local labour market; and
- does not involve the use of any screening tools, and is an established part of a WFI using techniques to identify specific barriers to the jobs that are being sought by the job seeker.

In-depth skills screening is a more detailed approach to gathering information on skills and specific barriers to the jobs being sought by the job seeker. In-depth skills screening must take place at:

- all Stage 2 Reviews; or
- 26-week Restart / Stage 3 Initial Review interviews, except where previously undertaken and recorded within the current claim.

Screening is based on information gathered as part of a WFI to determine if the customer has the skills needed to move into their desired job or a job readily available in the local labour market. In-depth screening involves:

- the use of the Fast-Track screening tools for basic skills;
- systematic evidence gathered using techniques covered in the adviser Learning Routeway training; and
- the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT).

The identification of skills and skills needs is a feature of government employment services and is delivered through Work-Focused Interviews (WFI) conducted by Jobcentre Plus personal advisers. In addition to helping people to prepare and look for work, personal advisers can refer claimants for training provision or careers advice if this is deemed necessary to make a return to the labour market.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to:

- undertake research to explore how 'skills need' is defined by Jobcentre Plus personal advisers;
- examine how claimants skills needs are identified by advisers at the present time; and
- build an understanding of how the identification of skills can be embedded within the Jobcentre Plus offer.

This research has been entirely qualitative and is based on observations of 112 WFIs conducted by 57 advisers across ten Jobcentre Plus districts. The collection of evidence included a series of short interviews with personal advisers to probe on key issues arising from the WFIs and the reasons for actions taken by advisers in relation to skills. Fieldwork for the study was carried out between September and November 2010.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please contact:  
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