



# The Jobcentre Plus Offer: Final evaluation summary

By Anna Bloch, Nick Coleman, Alice Coulter, Naomi Day, Sarah Hingley, Nicholas Howat and Dr Eleni Romanou

Launched in April 2011, the new Jobcentre Plus Offer was designed to change the way that Jobcentre Plus operates by placing an increased focus on outcomes rather than procedural targets. To achieve this there has been a move away from nationally mandated processes towards flexibility at the local level, with Jobcentre Plus staff given the flexibility to provide tailored support which will best move claimants towards paid work.

## Key findings

- From an organisational perspective the implementation and delivery of the Jobcentre Plus Offer has been successful. There has been a clear move away from a nationally-determined structure to more locally-determined processes focused on getting claimants back into work.
- Jobcentre Plus staff identified aspects of the Offer that could be improved; including greater evidence to understand how and why different delivery approaches could be made to work within local settings; further support for frontline staff to adapt to new ways of working, particularly coping with the sense of continual change and evolution of working practices; and addressing some of the ongoing gaps in provision, particularly for claimants with complex and/or multiple needs.
- There is evidence that the Offer is broadly successful in moving claimants who have general support needs into, or closer to, work and that resources are being targeted away from those who are the least in need.
- Most claimants gave a positive assessment of the support on offer by Jobcentre Plus. Three-fifths of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants agreed that Jobcentre Plus offered them the right amount of support, and that the advice and support they were offered matched their personal needs and circumstances.
- However, JSA claimants with specific constraints or who may face particular challenges, including those with a disability (particularly a mental health condition), together with ESA claimants looking for work do not always seem to discuss or receive the level of support they require and have less positive perceptions of the Offer.

## Background

The Jobcentre Plus Offer has been evaluated over a two-year period to find out how it has been implemented and delivered, as well as the effect it has had on staff and claimants. The evaluation involved two main strands. The first was a longitudinal survey of new JSA and ESA claimants, initially interviewed shortly after starting on the Offer and, then again, as they off-flowed in to employment, the Work Programme or another destination. In addition to this, separate cross-sectional surveys were conducted with claimants in a number of potentially 'disadvantaged' groups with specific challenges to moving into work (those with a criminal record, drug and/or alcohol problems

and the homeless) and lone parents on Income Support with a youngest child aged three or four, to examine their experiences in detail.

The second strand involved case studies in six Jobcentre Plus districts with ethnographic site visits and depth interviews with staff and claimants. These case studies aimed to assess how far flexibility had been devolved; how delivery was working on the ground; and how support was flowing for claimants, including how specific elements of the Offer were working and being used – core interventions, flexible adviser support and the flexible menu of back-to-work support (flexible menu).

## **How the Offer is working from an organisational perspective**

Ongoing changes and developments to working practices highlighted that flexibility had been embraced across the case study districts. Variations were observed in how the Offer was being delivered within and between districts, and these continued to evolve over the course of the two-year evaluation period. In particular, it was clear that senior managers were making the most of the increased flexibility to experiment with different ways of structuring support that provided the best outcomes. This resulted in a range of delivery models, comprising approaches that were either more or less structured for frontline staff. Over time, there appeared to be a slight shift in favour of more structured approaches within offices, underpinned by a stronger emphasis on monitoring claimant progress across the journey and focusing support at key off-flow milestones.

Alongside the variation in delivery of the Offer, it was clear that districts became increasingly focused on understanding and disseminating best practice. Managers cited a number of mechanisms for learning from the numerous pilots and initiatives taking place across the case study districts, although in practice this did not always filter down to frontline staff. There were also ongoing concerns about how well advisers

were adapting to new ways of working, and how they were coping with the sense of continual change and evolution of working practices. In particular, staff sought greater evidence to understand how and why practices could be made to work within local settings.

One of the key areas of change highlighted by staff was the effect of the Offer on flexible adviser support. Offices had experimented with a range of delivery models, suggesting that this is an area where managers have been able to tailor provision in order to meet off-flow targets. Whilst flexibility around format and duration of adviser support increased across offices and districts, decisions around claimant prioritisation were increasingly driven by the widespread use of cohort management tools to determine the nature and intensity of adviser contact.

The flexible menu provided a wide range of programmes to support more personalised provision. Staff identified the main benefit of the new menu as being the reduction in restrictions around when claimants were eligible for different types of support. Over the course of the evaluation, the flexible menu became more strongly embedded in advisers' awareness and improvements were noted in relation to the delivery and operation of key support options. However, there remained a number of significant gaps in provision, particularly for claimants with complex and/or multiple needs (for example, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), basic numeracy/literacy, tailored 50+ support and information and communications technology (ICT) skills).

Overall, the Offer was viewed by staff as a positive shift towards greater flexibility and tailoring of support for claimants. It was assumed that the Offer had had a positive effect on off-flows, by allowing greater managerial freedom to make decisions about how best to structure support within a local context. However, there remained concerns that the extent to which flexibility had been devolved was constrained by a greater push at district level in implementing measures and

directives to meet targets and expectations (for example, off-flows and referrals to key support provision). There was also an ongoing concern that the Offer places an emphasis on mainstream JSA claimants to the detriment of more vulnerable groups, such as ESA claimants and people with more complex needs.

## **How the Offer is experienced by claimants**

The role of the Offer is to move claimants into, or closer to, the labour market, and in this it is broadly succeeding. As might be expected, benefit off-flow rates were significantly higher for JSA claimants than for ESA claimants, although rates were notably lower for claimants who described themselves as being '*nervous about the prospect of paid work*', and JSA claimants who were 'disadvantaged', had a physical or mental health condition or lacked qualifications.

Three-fifths of all JSA claimants and five per cent of ESA claimants stopped claiming benefit in order to start a job. Entry into employment was more common for claimants who required less assistance from Jobcentre Plus (those aged 25-49 or who had higher qualifications). Such claimants received little support from the Offer, suggesting that Jobcentre Plus resources are being effectively allocated rather than being directed at those with little need for them.

In general, the motivation of JSA claimants who were still claiming after 12 months remained high, but confidence that they would actually find work declined. In contrast to this, among ESA claimants looking for work there were positive attitudinal shifts during their time on the Offer across all key aspects of job search, and just as importantly, a reduction in anxiety about the thought of being in paid work.

Perceptions of the Offer varied by claimants' contact with, and views of, the advisers they met. Around three-quarters of ESA claimants and three-fifths of JSA claimants saw the same adviser every time, and the dominant view

amongst both types of claimant was that it did not matter which adviser they saw, although many added the proviso that the adviser they met with should know something about their circumstances so that they would not need to keep explaining these. This requirement seemed to become more important over the course of their claim and matter more to claimants with a disability or health condition.

The majority of claimants felt that the time they spent with advisers was about right, although it is worth noting that amongst ESA claimants looking for work there was a shift in perceptions as their claim progressed, with more reflecting that they did not have enough time with their adviser later into their claim.

Most claimants gave a positive assessment of the support on offer by Jobcentre Plus. Three-fifths of claimants agreed that Jobcentre Plus offered them the right amount of support, and that the advice and support they were offered matched their personal needs and circumstances.

The offer of any support from the flexible menu significantly influenced claimants' perception of the Offer. Claimants who had been offered support were more likely to be satisfied with the service provided by Jobcentre Plus in helping them find employment, more likely to agree that Jobcentre Plus offered them the right amount of support, and more likely to feel that the advice and support they were offered matched their personal needs and circumstances. On the whole, this suggests that support options are generally being used for the right people at the right time.

Of the many options on offer, work experience seemed to be particularly successful in helping claimants progress towards work. Claimants who had attended work experience placements felt that these had contributed to them having a better understanding of what a job might entail, therefore, increasing their confidence. JSA claimants who succeeded in finding work were more likely to say that they got their job

'through Jobcentre Plus' if they had taken up a work experience opportunity, while claimants who had been offered or taken up a work experience option but did not manage to find employment experienced positive attitudinal shifts during the course of their claim, both in terms of being less nervous about the prospect of paid work and in their confidence that they can do well in interviews

The offer and take up of the various support options varied according to claimants' circumstances, their awareness of what Jobcentre Plus could offer them, and the specific constraints they faced in moving into the labour market. Younger JSA claimants had a good awareness of the provision available to them, and were offered a range of support, possibly stemming from recent policy changes such as the introduction of the Youth Contract. Their perceptions of the Offer were, accordingly, more positive than those of other claimants, with many reporting that the support felt tailored to their personal circumstances.

ESA claimants who were looking for work, disadvantaged JSA claimants, and JSA claimants with a disability (particularly those with a mental health condition) were less likely than other claimants to feel that the support on offer was tailored to their requirements. A future area of development for the Offer may, therefore, lie in addressing the particular needs of these claimants.

## Recommendations

- While there have been improvements in sharing best practice within and between districts, the evaluation findings suggest staff would benefit from more concrete evidence and monitoring of new processes and initiatives, particularly in relation to how they could be made to work in different local contexts.
- Further adviser support would help to meet the needs of ESA claimants looking for work, to ensure they are being signposted and referred to appropriate support to help them into employment. It would be beneficial to implement specific monitoring to identify advisers who are struggling in this area as simple off-flow metrics will not work in identifying where this is the case.
- The delivery of the Offer has seen gains from increased flexibility at a local level and enabling practices that are more tailored to local conditions. There is currently uncertainty around how upcoming changes to the benefit system will impact both on claimants and Jobcentre Plus office working practices. It is important that the successes of the Offer are sustained in the new world of welfare reform, particularly in light of the introduction of Universal Credit.

© Crown copyright 2013.

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 909532 85 4. Research Report 852. November 2013).

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

Other report summaries in the research series are also available from the website above.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please email: [Socialresearch@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Socialresearch@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)