Feasibility study for the future Jobcentre Plus Customer Satisfaction Survey

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Until recently, Jobcentre Plus conducted a biennial customer survey and follow-up qualitative study to monitor levels of customer satisfaction with the service and identify potential areas for improvement. However, there are a number of factors which mean that it is necessary to explore alternatives to this approach.

Firstly, there is the need for Jobcentre Plus to ensure that the measures used in the survey are able to report on the key indicators of Departmental Strategic Objective Seven (DSO7). The current study has taken account of the need to capture these indicators but in the future it is planned that the Jobcentre Plus Customer Survey will be able to be used alongside the new Pension, Disability and Carers Service (PDCS) customer survey to report on DSO7 for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as whole. Secondly, within Jobcentre Plus there is a desire to move towards a more frequent reporting of results to enable operational changes to be implemented faster.

British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) were commissioned by Jobcentre Plus to conduct a feasibility study exploring potential design options for a new Customer Satisfaction measure. This feasibility study had three key elements:

- *Scoping study* – This assessed the measure in its current form with respect to three factors: stakeholders' requirements; other surveys used by DWP to measure the DSO7 indicators; and methodological considerations.
- *Developmental stage* – New survey questions were designed and cognitively tested among a small selection of Jobcentre Plus customers, and various ways of adapting the current research design were assessed as part of the developmental stage.
- *Pilot survey* – This was used to test the newly formulated questionnaire among a sizeable, randomly-selected sample of Jobcentre Plus customers. This took place in late January and February of 2010.

These elements were designed to identify the optimal study design for the new customer measure both in terms of stakeholder requirements and practical considerations. In turn they looked at issues relating to the questionnaire, survey frequency, sample design, reporting and additional design consideration including the role of qualitative research and the mode of data collection.

Questionnaire

The stakeholder consultations revealed an appetite within Jobcentre Plus for exploring customer attitudes and areas of customer service that had not received attention in the 2009 Customer Satisfaction Survey. Questions were designed to meet these new requirements and, after a round of testing in the cognitive interviewing exercise, were re-assessed and finalised in consultation with Jobcentre Plus.

One of the key issues to address in the development of the questionnaire was the type of rating scale which should be used for overall satisfaction. After discussion with Jobcentre Plus, the decision was made to use the 'Overall Satisfaction' question used in the current PDCS customer survey. This is a four point verbal scale with the following response codes: Very Satisfied; Fairly Satisfied; Fairly Dissatisfied; Very Dissatisfied. Using the same scale as the PDCS customer survey will enable DWP to report satisfaction levels across its main customer facing businesses. While in theory the change of scale from the previous Jobcentre Plus customer surveys means that some trend data would be lost, in practice other changes to the questionnaire structure would quite probably have led to comparisons being potentially misleading in any case.

Another change to the design of the questionnaire was to focus the interview around the history of an individual transaction, rather than just looking at experiences with different contact channels. This was a change that operational stakeholders favoured as it would make it easier to pinpoint where improvements to the service are necessary by providing contextual information about different types of enquiry. The cognitive testing showed that rather than following the most recent transaction a customer had with Jobcentre Plus, it was better to prioritise those which involved the most interaction with the service. This was largely a result of the fact that the most recent transaction for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers tended to have been to 'sign on' and this is an enquiry with very little interaction with staff or services.

One proposed innovation to the design of the questionnaire suggested by stakeholders was provision for a guest module within the survey. The guest module could address policy issues in the customer survey even when they are not part of the core questionnaire. Already there have been suggestions for modules on the levels of fraud and error, online transactions and the move from Incapacity Benefit (IB) to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and JSA. In addition to this, the module can also be used to look at areas such as diversity-related issues which may not change every six months, but which need to be monitored over the medium to long term.

Survey frequency

The previous customer survey was conducted every two years and Jobcentre Plus was aware that this was a source of discontent for some of those who wish to use the data. These concerns were voiced during the stakeholder consultation and relate to the fact that by the time the biennial results reached publication they were felt to be already out of date. This was particularly problematic when there were periods of rapid change, such as the recent economic downturn and the rise in unemployment. It was also felt that the current frequency was not suited to driving continuous improvement as action plans formed on the basis of published results were at risk of being left by the wayside as more urgent issues arose over the two year period.

In order to address these concerns it is recommended that the new survey be conducted every six months. There was some consideration given to conducting the survey quarterly, but it was felt that it would be difficult to meaningfully act on results in the time period between surveys if they were conducted that frequently.

Sample design

The proposed sample size for the new customer measure is 4,000 interviews annually. With this number of interviews it would be possible to identify significant differences on individual items with changes of two per cent annually or three per cent six-monthly.

The stakeholder consultation identified a number of key customer groups that it would be important for the new customer survey to be able to report on: customers with a disability; Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) customers;

recipients of different benefit types; young people (18-24); 'New' customers[1]; and carers. Initial analysis indicates that the national sample would provide sufficient numbers for most of these groups to allow for reporting on an annual basis. The one exception could be BME customers. If these customers were to be analysed together as one group then there would be sufficient numbers for reporting. However, if there was a requirement to look at the results of the individual groups separately (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, Black African, etc.) then the survey would require the sample to be skewed to achieve sufficient numbers.

Reporting

It is envisaged that there would be two levels of reporting and analysis of results in the new customer survey. The first level of reporting would be every six months and would involve topline results and limited sub-group analysis. The intention would be to provide results quickly with headline *weighted* figures available within a week of fieldwork ending and a presentation of findings within two to four weeks. The second level of reporting would be conducted annually and would involve in-depth sub group reporting and multivariate analysis to identify the key drivers of customer satisfaction.

Most stakeholders expressed a desire to see results reported at the district level. It was felt by some stakeholders that the data 'doesn't seem real' until it means something for individual district managers. However, reporting at a district level would require a significant step-up in the scale of the survey with over a fourfold increase in the proposed overall sample size. This in turn would have considerable implications for both costs and timings.

The practical and budgetary requirements involved in collecting district level data were recognised by stakeholders, who acknowledged that this may not be possible within a national survey. As such, most stakeholders agreed that reporting at a regional level was appropriate for the new survey. However, it is recommended that reporting at the regional level be limited to annual rather than six-monthly as there would be increased volatility if the smaller six-monthly sample sizes were used.

Additional design considerations

Previously the Jobcentre Plus customer research included qualitative follow-up interviews with respondents. In 2009 this was a substantial exercise and also incorporated interviews with staff. It was felt that with the move to a six-monthly survey frequency, qualitative research would now best be utilised on an ad-hoc basis with small numbers of depth interviews to follow up issues of interest from the quantitative survey.

The Jobcentre Plus customer survey has previously been conducted primarily over the telephone and it is envisioned that this will continue in the new survey. While this approach has the potential to exclude customers without a telephone or with hearing difficulties, providing postal questionnaires (as has been the practice previously) will seek to alleviate this. The possibility of administering the survey face-to-face was considered but the geographical dispersal of the population meant that this approach would have significant drawbacks in terms of costs and timings. The possibility of conducting the survey online was also suggested but not embraced by stakeholders due to concerns about take up.

[1] These were referred to as white collar or professional customers by some stakeholders but were also considered to include those who had been employed for a significant period of time before their current period of unemployment as a result of the economic downturn.

Design recommendations: a summary

A critical element of the feasibility study was to gather together stakeholders' suggestions on how the survey could serve as a more useful and effective tool for their needs. We have weighed up their requirements against basic practical considerations and would recommend the following, subject to the availability of funding:

- Continuing to provide national-level and regional-level data only, but increasing the survey frequency to six months.
- Conducting 4,000 interviews annually – 2,000 interviews per wave.
- To ensure minimum numbers for analysis the annual sample will be skewed to include additional Black Caribbean, Black African, Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi customers.
- Adopting a modular format for the questionnaire. This would involve the regular addition at every wave of a 'guest' module containing questions on a particular theme of interest; and the occasional addition of a module of questions addressed only to a subset of respondents to measure the impact of local initiatives.
- The use of a four point verbal scale for the overall satisfaction measure which will be aligned with the PDCS overall measure.
- Changing the structure of the questionnaire, so that respondents answer questions with regard to a specific type of transaction which they recently undertook.
- Introducing an ad-hoc program of qualitative research, with small numbers of depth interviews brought into play as issues of interest emerge from the quantitative survey.
- Setting aside the option of face-to-face interviews and the addition of a longitudinal element to this particular strand of customer satisfaction research.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 807 2. Research Report 681. August 2010).

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

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