

Research report

Employment, Partnership and Skills

by Joy Oakley, Beth Foley and Jim Hillage

Department for Work and Pensions

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Joy Oakley, Beth Foley and Jim Hillage

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Glossary of terms

Basic skills	Literacy, numeracy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) as well as basic IT skills
Caseloading	Managing adviser time to achieve regular contacts between a claimant and a specific personal adviser
Conditionality	Criteria set by regulations that claimants must meet to continue to receive full benefit
Employability skills	Include communication, problem solving, team working skills, timekeeping, confidence and motivation
Job search skills	Effective job applications, interview techniques
Off flows	The end of a claim of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits
Sanction	Full or partial withdrawal of benefit applied to claimants who fail to take up support given them or do not properly look for work
Vocational skills	Skills related to a specific type of occupation or sector; including up-to-date certification

Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASB	Adult Skills Budget
ASD	Autistic spectrum disorders
ATM	Adviser Team Manager
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CAT	Claimant Assessment Tool
CSCS	Construction Skills Certification Scheme
DMA	Decision Maker
DPT	District Provision Tool
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ECDL	European Computer Driving Licence
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
ESF	European Social Fund
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FJR	Fortnightly Jobsearch Review
FSF	Flexible Support Fund
FTA	Failure to attend
GBW	Get Britain Working
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
IES	Institute for Employment Studies
JCP	Jobcentre Plus
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
LA	Local authority
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LMI	Labour Market Information
LMS	Labour Market System
LVP	Low Value Procurement
NAS	National Apprenticeship Service
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training

NJI	New Jobseeker Interview
PA	Personal Adviser
RAG	Red, amber, green
RDA	Regional Development Agencies
sbwa	sector-based work academy
SHC	Skills Health Check
TLMS	Transforming Labour Market Services
WP	Work Programme

Summary

This evaluation aimed to see how well the new skills and employment policies, and systems were being implemented by Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and skills providers (colleges and training organisations). In particular it focused on how aligned the employment and skills systems were; how well local partnerships were working; the claimant experience and how mandating claimants to skill development was working in practice. The study was based on two waves of interviews and other qualitative research with Jobcentre and National Careers Service staff as well as providers, employers and claimants. In all, some 389 interviews were undertaken.

Partnership working

Some of the areas covered by the study were struggling to adjust both to the introduction of new local stakeholders, such as Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), and to changes within existing bodies, such as the Skills Funding Agency. In some cases, this had created initial communication difficulties, a lack of understanding of respective roles and confusion over who should take strategic leadership.

Partnership working between Jobcentres and providers increased during the course of the study, as a result of the introduction of the Adult Skills Budget (ASB), providers' new freedoms and flexibilities and the introduction of the new pre-Work Programme Jobcentre Plus Offer. This resulted in more sharing of local labour market intelligence and more proactive working together. Providers are increasingly networking and collaborating with each other as well, sharing knowledge of new funding opportunities and processes. As a result, some providers were beginning to focus more attention on delivering employability and other programmes designed to help unemployed people into jobs. Partnership working was improved where relevant organisations employed staff whose role was dedicated to building and maintaining relationships.

Employer facing Jobcentre staff were proactive in building relationships with employers, but it is an increasingly crowded field with providers and other local agencies looking to build relationships with employers too.

Local arrangements for employment and skills

The new freedoms and flexibilities for Jobcentres were viewed positively. Although some Jobcentre staff were taking time to adjust to the new arrangements, they were generally thought to give advisers more discretion to provide claimants with the support they required. Providers have also gained new flexibilities, such as greater discretion to use the ASB to offer provision for the unemployed. This was broadly welcomed, although some providers expressed concerns that the move placed increased pressures on their, already stretched, ASBs.

As intended, local Jobcentres used their new freedoms differently, to adapt to local needs, but this did mean that providers found some difficulties coping with variations in processes and funding rules between offices. Some Jobcentres had introduced dedicated skills advisers or teams, although the effectiveness of this approach was reported to be mixed, particularly where the division of responsibilities between skills advisers and other Jobcentre staff was unclear.

The relationship between Jobcentre Plus and National Careers Service staff improved throughout the course of the study, although in some areas there were still difficulties in Jobcentre Advisers understanding of what the National Careers Service could offer. Co-location had broken down

barriers between Jobcentre Plus and National Careers Service staff. Its effectiveness relied on staff from each organisation making an effort to talk to each other, instituting communication processes such as regular meetings and sharing information. Where deepening co-location pilots were operating, co-operation between the two services was further improved.

Skills screening and referrals

Skills screening in Jobcentres uses a 'light touch' informal process. Some Jobcentre Advisers used the Claimant Assessment Tool (CAT) to screen for basic needs, but this was not widespread and most relied on what they could pick up through general conversation or observing form filling. This was viewed as a more effective and efficient means of identifying obvious issues. However, there were questions raised about the effectiveness of the screening that advisers are able to carry out, particularly those who are operating under tight time constraints.

The National Careers Service used a range of interview techniques and have the option to use the Skills Health Check, a recently developed assessment tool. This does not screen for basic skills needs, but helps participants to match their interests and experience to careers. Relatively few National Careers Service Advisers used the Skills Health Check tool to identify skills needs, tending to rely on more conversation-based approaches

Colleges and training organisations were more consistent in their use of skills assessments, both in terms of the frequency with which they assessed claimants and the methods used. Almost all claimants referred to them undertook literacy and numeracy assessments.

Jobcentre and National Careers Service Advisers felt constrained in referring claimants to provision because of a lack of knowledge about what was on offer. The District Provision Tools did contain local training supply information, but providers and Jobcentre Advisers often complained it was not always up-to-date.

Claimants who went on training courses tended to fall into three groups: those who went largely at the suggestion of, or having been mandated by, Jobcentre staff; those who initiated a discussion about skills training with their Jobcentre Adviser and attended training on their own initiative; and those who had found a training place themselves, without the help of Jobcentre Plus.

Skills conditionality

Skills conditionality, whereby individuals claiming active benefits can be required to attend training, was introduced in August 2011. Many interviewees found the initial introduction problematic because the implementation was rushed; guidance was lacking; responsibilities between Jobcentres and providers were unclear; and the timing, during the summer months, was difficult. During the course of the study progress had been made on these initial issues as advisers became more familiar with the process, more advice was provided, more appropriate provision was made available and relationships between Jobcentre Advisers and providers improved. However even at the end of the study, there was a general consensus amongst interviewees that the policy was not always being applied correctly or consistently.

Skills conditionality was applied more frequently to claimants with basic skills gaps and in some districts linked to a general 'skills conditionality' courses. It was less often applied to those with vocational skills needs. There was no clear evidence that sanctions were effective in reducing the numbers of claimants failing to attend training.

National Careers Service staff thought that skills conditionality had increased the number of referrals, but were concerned about the impact on their relationship with clients. Providers were also concerned that it generated unwilling learners, but thought it had brought about a closer working relationship with Jobcentres. Jobcentre Advisers have found skills conditionality challenging, both in terms of the criteria for deciding on mandation and staying up-to-date with the training available in their area.

Overall, Jobcentre, National Career Service and provider staff thought the premise behind skills conditionality was positive and necessary, and had brought about closer working relationships. However, it had resulted in greater administrative costs all round and different interpretations of the policy in different areas had led providers to question the appropriateness of referrals.

Provision

Most of the training to which Jobcentre Plus claimants were referred was fairly generic rather than particularly vocational. Longer term and full qualification-based vocational training was a rarer option and claimants who took this option often self-referred and even paid for themselves. In addition, Jobcentre Advisers organised work experience placements, particularly for claimants with a limited work history.

Sector-based work academies (sbwas) took two main forms: employer-based models, where an employer was setting up a new operation and worked with a Jobcentre and a training provider to prepare a stream of job applicants; and provider-based models, where providers sought to prepare candidates for a range of vacancies across a sector. Sbwases varied with the number and form of the vacancies available, but generally lasted for about six weeks and involved varying proportions of work experience, training and, in all cases, a job interview. They were largely viewed positively as a means of directly or indirectly offering claimants a real chance of work, but could prove resource intensive for Jobcentres. Some of the areas had encountered difficulties setting effective sbwas due to problems identifying employers with a sufficient number of vacancies; generating enough good quality candidates; the capacity of providers to support the candidates; clarifying roles and responsibilities and ensuring there was sufficient time to set everything up.

The most commonly identified gaps in provision included pre-entry English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and basic skills (literacy and numeracy) courses, Construction Scheme Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards, and high-level skills courses. The Flexible Support Fund (FSF) had been used to fill some of these gaps and meet claimants' specific needs. There was also felt to be a shortage of work experience in manufacturing and smaller workplaces.

Approach to supporting young people

In most areas, partnerships had been established with local authorities (LAs) and others to tackle youth unemployment, for example through establishing learning agreements and pre-apprenticeship learning opportunities. The most commonly identified needs among young people were for employability skills; establishing realistic career expectations; maintaining their confidence and motivation; understanding the world at work; and improving basic maths and English.

The most common measure that was organised for young people was work experience (including mandatory four-week placements brought in under the Get Britain Working measures) as they were felt to be very receptive to it and it helped them develop their CV. Work experience took place before, or sometimes alongside, basic skills training.

Conclusion

Overall there were a number of signs of progress towards a greater integration between skills provision and employment services. Where it works well claimants and employers report considerable benefits. Job seekers liked the opportunity to add qualifications to their CV and gain the confidence and skills they need to find work. Employers fill vacancies with motivated and skilled employees. However, there is still scope for further progress across both systems.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The importance of skills to the UK's prospects for economic growth and social inclusion is well documented. The Coalition Government launched its skills strategy, 'Skills for Sustainable Growth' and 'Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth', in a context of fiscal deficit reduction and a drive to decentralise the delivery of public services. These documents signalled a significant change to the delivery of employment and skills, by promoting an expectation of shared responsibility and partnership working. Employers would have a central role in working with colleges and universities to deliver internships, work experience, integrated workplace training and through Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in defining the strategy for growth at a local level. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) training providers and the National Careers Service were also expected to work more collaboratively to meet local skills and employment needs, building on previous initiatives to create a more integrated employment and skills system. The strategy presaged a move towards a more flexible, locally determined and needs-led approach in both the skills system and the employment service.

In April 2011, the new pre-Work Programme Jobcentre Plus Offer came into operation. This created a framework for increased flexibility in which staff could focus on outcomes for claimants rather than centrally prescribed activity and processes. This meant that advisers were able to select from a menu of provision the option that they feel is most appropriate for individual claimants. Advisers were to be able to take a needs-led approach rather than focusing on interventions at a particular point in the claim. The menu of support includes access to the Flexible Support Fund (FSF); access to training, including training funded by the Skills Funding Agency; Get Britain Working Measures (GBW), including sector-based work academies (sbwas); European Social Fund (ESF) provision; and careers advice through the National Careers Service. Skills conditionality was introduced in England from August 2011 enabling Jobcentre Advisers to mandate Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants and those in the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) Work Related Activity Group to undertake activities which address an identified skills need and increase their chances of finding suitable employment. The aim of the policy is to ensure that those claimants on active benefits who have a skills need preventing them from getting and keeping a job, take the necessary steps to address that need as part of their journey back to work.

From August 2011, there were also a series of changes to the skills system giving colleges and training organisations more freedoms and flexibilities to deliver programmes that are appropriate for local needs, including a new simplified funding system. Allied to this, there is an expectation of greater local accountability and encouragement of partnership working with local partners including LEPs and DWP. The aim is to create more effective local markets in training and encourage providers to be more accountable to local customers, including Jobcentres.

The Skills Funding Agency introduced a new single Adult Skills Budget (ASB) as part of the approach to simplification, to enable colleges and training organisations to make choices about the provision they deliver that best meets the needs of their local communities. Unemployed people were identified as a priority for investment. In February 2012, the Agency announced the approach for the academic year 2012/13; where a learner on active benefits leaves skills training to start work before his or her learning episode has been completed, the provider will be paid achievement funding of ten per cent of the learning aim rate. This compares to funding of 20 per cent of the learning aim/framework rate if the learner achieves their learning aim.

The new National Careers Service was launched on 5 April 2012 to replace Next Step. The new service combines face-to-face advice with a new interactive website and telephone support. Furthermore, there have been other changes to the landscape that have had, and will continue to have, an impact on the agencies involved in skills provision and providing employment services in local areas. For example, a number of local authorities (LAs) have projects such as: Local Area Partnerships, Troubled Families and Total Place Initiatives (being replaced by Community Budgets). These projects rely heavily on partnership working between various skills and employment services, agencies and providers.

Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) have been abolished and LEPs established. The local growth White Paper in 2010, set out the Government's expectations for the LEPs to build support from business and LAs, and to focus on the local economic geography with interventions that would lead to increased confidence and growth in local areas. LEPs are still in their infancy; the first 24 successful bids were announced in late 2010, there are currently 39 approved LEPs. The expectation set out in the White Paper is that they will work with DWP and LAs, though their focus will not always encompass Jobcentre Plus claimants and their coverage is often not coterminous with DWP or LA boundaries. The role of the LEP will be crucial in involving local employers in identifying labour market needs and working with providers to give opportunities to both the employed and the unemployed to train and work.

Further to these changes to the skills and employment services landscape, in 2013 the Universal Credit system will be launched by DWP. Universal Credit is a new single system of means-tested support for working-age people who are in or out of work. The aims of the new Universal Credit system include making it easier for people to transition into and out of work and improve work incentives.

1.2 Aims and objectives

Partnership has become one of the fundamental principles in policymaking and implementation in advanced economies in recent years. In a shifting employment and skills landscape there is an increased expectation of shared responsibility and partnership working. This research has sought to understand the ways in which Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and skills providers (colleges and training organisations) are responding to such a challenge.

This evaluation aimed to see how well the new policies and systems were being implemented by Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and skills providers. In order to achieve this broad aim, the evaluation had a number of research objectives:

- How aligned are the employment and skills systems – in processes, services and provision?
- How well local partnerships are working and what local arrangements are in place, including LEPs, employers and others?
- What is the claimant experience and the impact of the new system on the quality of the claimant experience?
- How does mandating claimants to skill development work in practice?

1.3 Method

In September 2011, DWP and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to conduct an evaluation of the new policy and how employment and skills partnerships were developing in practice.

The evaluation method involved two waves of intensive qualitative fieldwork, clustered in five Jobcentre Plus districts: one per English region. A number of factors were taken into account when considering districts to visit, including other activities or pilots taking place and achieving a cross section of districts according to geography (urban and rural), socio demographic characteristics, labour markets, and performance (referral rates, job outcomes etc). Within each district, interviews were conducted with representatives of: one Jobcentre Plus district office; one Jobcentre; one National Careers Service contract holder, and four providers. Where possible, researchers conducted observations of National Careers Service sessions and at colleges and training organisations. A number of claimants, employers and local stakeholders were interviewed in each district. In total, researchers carried out 389 interviews over two waves.

Table 1.1 sets out the number of interviews achieved over the two waves.

Table 1.1 Summary of interviews undertaken

Job Role	Achieved
DWP national stakeholders	3
National Careers Service telephone team	1
Jobcentre district managers and staff	38
Jobcentre local office managers and advisers	53
Local Skills Funding Agency Area Relationship Managers	13
Local National Careers Service managers and advisers	36
Skills providers	76
Claimants	134
Employers	17
Wider stakeholders	18
Total	389

Source: IES 2012

The evaluation started with an inception phase, during which the sampling approach was finalised, the topic guides devised, and key figures in DWP and BIS gave members of the research team, policy briefings. Policy briefings were repeated at the start of the second wave of fieldwork to ensure that the research remained on track and that the research team were up-to-date with the latest policy steer from DWP and BIS.

1.3.1 Fieldwork

Topic guides were devised for each different interview type to enable tailoring of topics and delve into the issues that were relevant to each interviewee.

The two waves of fieldwork took place between November 2011 and January 2012, and between March and May 2012. The aim of the two waves of research was to see how the new employment and skills systems became bedded down over time. The two waves of fieldwork provided the flexibility to adapt research tools and focus on new issues that arose over the research period, and also enabled longitudinal interviews to be carried out, interviewing claimants in wave 1 and following up their progress at wave 2. Interim findings were presented to DWP and BIS in January 2012. This final report represents the summary of all of the findings from waves 1 and 2.

Employers

The approach to sampling employers changed between wave 1 and 2 of the research. The original sample from DWP included a number of contact details for employers who had very little contact with Jobcentre Plus (ie had used them for one or two recruits over the past couple of years); a number of local employers who did not deal with recruitment themselves (rather it was handled by Head Office); and a very large number of people directly working on the 'shop floor' as opposed to relevant individuals/ departments. This latter issue resulted in employers being less willing to participate in interviews, or only committing very little time to them. In order to overcome this, in wave 2 case studies were conducted. The aim of this was to draw out as much learning as possible on recent partnership working between employers, providers and Jobcentres. Case studies consisted of three to four interviews with Jobcentre staff, employers, providers and, where relevant, centred on sbwas.

1.3.2 Analysis and reporting

The team conducted analysis by district; the focus was district level reports. The reports were derived from recordings of the interviews using a structured template based on the key research questions agreed with DWP and BIS. Each researcher had carried out the fieldwork in one area so that they could present a comprehensive picture and understand how employment and skills partnership working was happening in their locality.

The rest of this report is set out according to the major themes identified in the analysis and research aims:

Chapter 2 – Local Partnerships – focuses on the roles of the Skills Funding Agency, LEPs and colleges and training organisations, and how they work in partnership with Jobcentre Plus and each other.

Chapter 3 – Local arrangements for employment and skills – looks at the impact that increased freedoms and flexibilities have had within Jobcentre Plus and the skills system, also the National Careers Service practices and the relationship with Jobcentre Plus.

Chapter 4 – Screening and referral by Jobcentre staff and the National Careers Service – examines the approach to skills screening taken by Jobcentre staff, the National Careers Service and providers, and the way this is used to determine referrals.

Chapter 5 – Skills conditionality – looks at how the policy, that individuals claiming active benefits can be required to attend training if their Jobcentre Adviser views a skills gap as their main barrier to finding employment, works in practice.

Chapter 6 – Provision – explores the training and other skill development provision to which Jobcentre Plus claimants were referred, including sbwas.

Chapter 7 – looks at the approach adopted to supporting young people into work.

Chapter 8 – draws out some conclusions from the study.

2 Local partnerships

Key findings

- Some of the areas covered by the study were initially struggling to adjust to the introduction of new local stakeholders, such as Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and to changes within existing bodies, such as the Skills Funding Agency. In some cases this had created initial communication difficulties, a lack of understanding of each other's roles and confusion over who should take strategic leadership.
- Partnership working between Jobcentres and providers increased during the course of the study, as a result of the introduction of the Adult Skills Budget (ASB), providers' new freedoms and flexibilities and the introduction of the new pre-Work Programme Offer. This resulted in more sharing of local labour market intelligence and more proactive working together.
- Providers are increasingly networking and collaborating with each other, sharing knowledge of new funding opportunities and processes. As a result some colleges and training organisations were beginning to focus more attention on delivering employability and other programmes designed to help unemployed people into jobs.
- Partnership working was improved where the relevant organisations employed staff whose role was dedicated to building and maintaining relationships.
- Employer facing Jobcentre staff were proactive in building relationships with employers, but it is an increasingly crowded field with providers and other local agencies looking to build relationships with employers too.

This chapter looks at the role of the different partners who are working together in the local employment and skills systems; focusing on the roles of the Skills Funding Agency, LEPs, providers and employers, and their relationship with Jobcentres.

There had been a number of staff changes and structural reorganisations within many of the partner organisations interviewed at the same time as new policies were introduced. As a result, at the first wave of the research, there was quite a lot of bedding down as everyone tried to work more closely together in response to the new agendas. By wave 2, relationships had been forged and strengthened as people became settled in their roles and new ways of working developed.

2.1 Role of Skills Funding Agency, LEP and other stakeholders

As with many of the stakeholders in this research, the Skills Funding Agency had recently been through a period of change – in September 2011, the Agency created a new post of Area Relationship Manager to replace the previous role of Contract Manager. At the time of the first wave of fieldwork, Skills Funding Agency Relationship Managers were just starting to make contact with providers. By the second wave of fieldwork, many of the Relationship Managers had settled into a facilitative role liaising with district level Jobcentre staff, the National Careers Service, colleges and training organisations. The Agency also liaised with provider networks, but did not take a leadership role. They helped solve problems and encouraged new provision such as employability courses with vocational elements and sector-based work academies (sbwas), rather than manage individual providers and contracts. Some areas were struggling to adjust to the new role of the Skills Funding Agency at the local level. Interviewees attributed this to:

- a lack of communication between the Agency and Jobcentre staff

‘When Skills Funding Agency let their contracts, they don’t ever ask us whether we have a skills gap in that area.’

(Jobcentre Senior External Relations Manager)

- a lack of understanding of each other’s roles, for example the Skills Funding Agency’s Relationship Manager role, connecting via provider networks, is much less tangible than a Contract Manager role.
- confusion over who should take the strategic lead.

‘At a strategic level it doesn’t work brilliantly at present, and we get a myriad of programmes rather than any strategic approach.’

(Skills Provider)

The LEPs were at an embryonic stage at the time of the start of the study and, as a result, were not included in the first wave of the research. LEPs have a remit to focus on the perceived skills needs of their local area. In this way they will operate and have different roles in different areas of the country. As described in Section 1.1, the LEPs will have a role in developing interventions that will lead to increased confidence and economic growth in local areas. Most had built on previous Employment and Skills Boards to create new skills groups with a remit for developing a new skills strategy for growth. These new groups encompassed the public sector representatives who had been involved in the previous Employment and Skills Boards and brought in representatives from universities and business to make them more employer led. Members of the LEP were starting to meet with external organisations such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Skills Funding Agency and provider networks to look at the worklessness agenda and promoting skills development.

Local authorities (LAs) have experienced reductions in funding that have meant that within some district and borough councils there was no longer a person with a dedicated remit for employment and skills. Where there was an Employment and Skills Officer, they provided the link with Jobcentre staff and providers. Economic development teams within LAs saw employment and skills as a key remit of councils and that working with employers, Jobcentres and providers could help to promote growth in a tough economic climate. However, LAs had little strategic influence over skills development provision in their area. They had no local commissioning role, no influence over colleges and so were reliant on others such as the Skills Funding Agency to broker relationships. The LAs had previously been able to fund some provision through the Working Neighbourhood Fund, but the funding had come to an end in October 2011 and much of the provision and the posts that had been funded through this source had come to an end.

Some areas had strong provider partnerships or networking organisations to bring together local colleges and training organisations. The provider network shared information about policy changes, guidance, funding, new provision, Labour Market Information (LMI) and vacancy information. Some also ran workshops to look at how providers can work together and meet local skills needs.

2.2 Partnership working between Jobcentres and providers

A number of changes to the skills system around summer 2011 served to increase partnership working between Jobcentres and providers. These include the single ASB, new freedoms and flexibilities for colleges and training organisations and changes within the employment system such as the introduction of the new pre-Work Programme Jobcentre Plus Offer and skills conditionality.

Some Jobcentre staff reported that providers inundated them with calls in August 2011 to begin partnership working and devise new training opportunities. Jobcentre staff said they had too many approaches to cope with; one district had 55 providers, including 15 colleges. Many providers had welcomed the ability to work with new customer groups and the opportunity to diversify. There were few new contracts available, however, due to a policy to reduce the number of contracts overall and as the Agency became less likely to contract for specific provision. Therefore providers with ASB budgets could subcontract to other providers. Possibly due to the numerous organisational changes, there were delays in the Skills Funding Agency's provision of lists of ASB funded providers to Jobcentre staff and some Jobcentres devised strategies to manage the approaches – such as only dealing with main contract holders and asking providers to complete standardised stencils giving details of their provision and main contract holder. This busy period made it hard for new providers to gain access to Jobcentre Plus as they already had more approaches than they could handle.

'There's a lot of small ones [providers] really keen to get involved with Jobcentre Plus's work, but they [Jobcentre Plus] just haven't got the capacity to manage them all.'

(Skills Funding Agency Area Relationship Manager)

Partnerships with Jobcentre staff and providers were often reliant on good working relationships; particular individuals and recent job/staff changes had a negative effect on partnership working in some areas at wave 1 of this study. The situation had improved by wave 2 as people had settled into their new roles. Staff in training organisations and colleges perceived that the new skills agenda was brokering stronger partnerships, as there were more shared goals. However, this would take some time to come to fruition.

'With other providers, there's still a bit of a way to go, but there's more of a recognition now that working with the unemployed is the future, basically, that's where the funding is ... It's a big mindset change for colleges.'

(Skills Funding Agency Area Relationship Manager)

In most areas, Jobcentre Plus had Partnership Managers at district level who were dedicated to one geographical area or attached to one or more Jobcentres. They bore much of the responsibility for forging and maintaining partnerships externally: with the National Careers Service, colleges and training organisations and other stakeholders such as LAs or provider networks. These partnerships had usually been existing for some time, although some were more developed than others.

Jobcentre staff at a managerial/district level were sharing information on monthly unemployment and vacancies figures with colleges and training organisations and the National Careers Service. They also shared some information about employers moving into the area. Provider staff stressed the importance of keeping abreast of LMI; to ensure there is a labour market need for their courses.

However, colleges and training organisations would like more information from Jobcentres – for example, on changes to policy and benefit rules. Some providers receive briefing notes from the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) and the Agency which detail updates to guidance. One stakeholder, who was the manager of a provider network, reported that the providers would like more clarity how different training can impact on eligibility for benefits. The 16-hour rule means that in the first six months of a claim people studying for more than 16 hours a week in most circumstances will not be eligible for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). This rule can be a barrier for providers recruiting people on JSA to their courses. Some providers had heard that this particular rule no longer applied due to changes relating to skills conditionality, but as Jobcentre staff do not routinely send out briefing notes they were left confused.

'This year we've had a lot of initiatives and we still don't have some of the guidance we need from Jobcentre Plus to be able to be more clear – like the 16-hour rule still seems to have inconsistent interpretations.'

(Stakeholder)

It was useful for providers to have a dedicated point of contact at each Jobcentre to manage queries on referrals and maintain good relationships between providers and Jobcentres. Providers reported that they received more referrals when they were more 'visible' to Jobcentre Advisers. Many providers had made considerable effort to make Jobcentre Advisers aware of their provision and to make data sharing easier. They also found that relationships got stronger when they had 'proved' themselves and demonstrated to Jobcentre staff that they could help claimants. However, the relationships that colleges and training organisations had with Jobcentres could vary between local offices. They found it difficult to have a consistent approach now that Jobcentres have local discretion in how they operate.

'They've moved from a centralised approach to a lot more local flexibilities, so where we have had blueprints and ways of working that were consistent, we've now got districts and offices all acting in different ways, and you assume that's to be locally responsive, but it creates difficulties as well because it's inconsistent.'

(Skills Funding Agency Area Relationship Manager)

The relationship between Jobcentres and providers changed between waves 1 and 2, with Jobcentre staff more focused on negotiation and encouragement, rather than on dictating to providers.

'Over the summer [2011] it all became clear how it sits together.'

(Skills Provider)

Both providers and Jobcentre staff said that the other had been more proactive – demonstrated by a keenness to meet and willingness to share strategic information at district level. Relationships have, in the main, improved over time. Over the course of the study it was felt there was a greater synergy between skills and employment policies, and more overtly shared goals between Jobcentre Plus and colleges and training organisations, for example, getting people into work and tackling young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

'We refer their customers there and they'll filter customers into appropriate provision for them. They'll work around us ...'

(Jobcentre manager (young people lead))

In all areas, there were providers that had become more responsive to the needs of their local community and unemployed people in their area. This had led to more roll on, roll off and short courses and greater understanding of Jobcentre Plus' requirements on issues such as attendance monitoring.

'It's fantastic to think that agendas are joining up.'

(Skills Provider)

2.3 Provider partnerships

An increasing feature of employment and skills systems is provider partnerships, that is, providers networking and working in collaboration with each other. One of the key relationships at the centre of this study was that between the provider networks, Jobcentre Plus and the Skills Funding Agency.

At Jobcentre Plus managerial/strategic level there was sharing of information about vacancies and what types of work claimants are looking for, and employers moving into the area. Providers shared information at network meetings about what provision they offer. These meetings also acted as a forum for stakeholders to work out what the local training needs were and arrange which providers would lead on meeting these needs. When there were people with a dedicated role for partnership working in each organisation, the relationship was easier as they could act as a focal point for disseminating information. For example, in one area the provider network employed a manager who had responsibility for organising meetings of the partnership and represented the providers at other local strategy meetings.

Other organisations that providers cited as partners included housing associations, charities, local authorities/councils, National Apprenticeship Service, Children's Centres and Connexions. Provider networks also ran workshops, which acted as a forum for sharing information and good practice, provided policy information and guidance on how to use the ASB effectively and had a particular focus on employment and skills.

There was evidence that colleges and training organisations were diversifying because of the introduction of freedoms and flexibilities and many attributed this to changes to the ASB; for example, apprenticeship providers were starting to deliver to benefit recipients and colleges were starting to expand their work with benefit recipients. Some providers thought that in the past, providers were often split by those who focused on skills and qualifications (colleges) and those who mainly delivered employability programmes and intensive jobsearch (training organisations). The introduction of capacity building towards job outcome incentive payments had begun to bring these two camps together as they had shared goals. Some thought the refinement of the incentive policy would detract from the work that had been done up to February 2012.

'it's a bit disheartening really I don't see what the incentive is for the colleges ... a damp squib I feel, it's a bit disappointing.'

(Skills Funding Agency Area Relationship Manager)

Several of the colleges and training providers perceived a greater policy emphasis on increasing apprenticeships, particularly through the Skills Strategy and the Skills Funding Agency. However, some providers thought that the apprenticeship route was not always appropriate to help unemployed people – particularly due to low wages associated with apprenticeships in some instances. In principle, apprentices over the age of 19 could be paid the National Minimum Wage for apprentices, which is £2.65 for the first year, thereafter they will receive the National Minimum Wage.

Some partnership working came about because of the model for delivery of the Work Programme; this required more collaborative working between 'primes' and subcontractors. However, some providers had a negative experience in the Work Programme and were less willing to share good practice. A lack of employment opportunities hampered partnership working, as did changes in staffing, in particular redundancies in local authorities, and an increasingly competitive market for providers. In some areas there appeared to be little clear guidance on who should take responsibility for developing and maintaining partnerships, since none of the parties had been offered additional resources to do this.

2.4 Employer engagement

Jobcentres had many different approaches to engagement with employers. Employer facing staff were being very creative in how they approached employer engagement, in the context of reduced staffing in their teams. Methods found during this study included Employment Advisers:

- driving round trading estates and looking in shop windows for vacancies;
- identifying and brokering new work experience opportunities;
- undertaking marketing exercises and visiting local industrial/business parks to publicise what Jobcentre Plus could do;
- attending employer networking meetings (particularly if they were free of charge); and
- running a fortnightly clinic at a new business hub as a way for Jobcentre Plus to offer recruitment solutions to employers.

Relationship building with individual employers was particularly important as they no longer had a general marketing budget. Some employer-facing staff felt that they were at a disadvantage to private organisations due to a lack of marketing materials and subsidies. There was a perception from a number of respondents of increased competition around engaging with employers, with many different organisations, including providers, housing associations, Work Programme providers and Jobcentre Plus, trying to work with a limited number of employers who were recruiting in their area. In one area, providers had started to ‘trade’ employer vacancies that they were aware of with other organisations looking to place unemployed people.

In a fairly flat labour market, much engagement with employers was focused on securing work experience. However, recent negative publicity around work experience had made it more difficult for employer-facing staff to work with employers on this scheme, but the publicity had also made more employers aware of the scheme and new employers came on board.

As well as employer-facing staff from Jobcentres engaging with employers, providers were also engaging with employers; they reported that local employers and employer partners informed them when there was demand for sector skills/employability training. Some employers got involved in devising training, such as for sector-based work academies (sbwas) (see Chapter 6).

3 Patterns of working, income and expenditure

Key findings

- The new freedoms and flexibilities for Jobcentres and providers were generally viewed positively, although some Jobcentre staff were taking time to adjust to the new arrangements, they were thought to give advisers more discretion to provide claimants with the support they required.
- Providers have also gained new flexibilities, such as greater discretion to use the Adult Skills Budget (ASB) to offer provision for the unemployed. This was broadly welcomed, although some providers expressed concerns that the move placed increased pressures on their already stretched ASBs.
- As intended, local Jobcentres used their new freedoms differently, to adapt to local needs, but providers found some difficulties coping with variations in processes and funding rules between offices.
- Some Jobcentres had introduced dedicated skills advisers or teams, although the effectiveness of this approach was reported to be mixed, particularly where the division of responsibilities between skills advisers and other Jobcentre staff was unclear.
- In some Jobcentre Plus districts there were still difficulties in Jobcentre Advisers understanding what the National Careers Service could offer. Co-location has broken down barriers between Jobcentre Plus and National Careers Service staff; but its effectiveness relied on staff from each organisation making an effort to talk to each other, instituting communication processes such as regular meetings and sharing information. The effectiveness varied between different offices, sometimes depending on the size of the Jobcentre. Where deepening co-location pilots were operating, co-operation between the two services was further improved.

This chapter looks at the impact that increased freedoms and flexibilities are having within Jobcentre Plus and the skills system, it also looks at National Careers Service practices and their relationship with Jobcentre Plus. Overall relationships appear to have improved over the course of the study, with co-location of Jobcentre and National Careers Service Advisers helping to break down barriers between the two.

3.1 Impact of freedom and flexibility

From August 2011, a series of freedoms and flexibilities have been introduced both within Jobcentre Plus and among colleges and training providers. For Jobcentre staff this resulted in changes to the allocation of work: such as diary flexibilities, discretion at local office level to decide on adviser specialism and caseloading. It had also meant that advisers have the freedom to be able to help a claimant with training needs at any point of their claim and decide this in conjunction with the claimant, rather than wait for a 'trigger point'.

While most local Jobcentre Advisers had discretion to try flexible diaries of different length appointments and not strictly diarised appointment slots, large caseloads meant that this had not led to the prioritisation of different claimants. Caseloads differed greatly amongst Jobcentre Advisers: some had caseloads of less than 100 claimants while others had in excess of 160, with advisers in large urban offices generally having the larger caseloads. Advisers with the smaller

caseloads tended to be more enthusiastic about the policy changes. Adviser Team Managers (ATMs) had introduced case conferencing to ensure that claimants were getting the support they required or to discuss suitable provision.

Some examples of Jobcentres responding flexibly to the needs of their claimants included putting on workshops run by Jobcentre staff in Jobcentres covering topics such as confidence building, CV writing and interview techniques. Some planned to have personal computers available to use with claimants for job applications.

'Advisers will have the flexibility to book an appointment with a customer to do applications ... Staff are really positive about it.'

(Jobcentre Adviser)

3.1.1 Impact on screening

Some Jobcentres seemed to be more flexible than others, for example, early diagnostic interviews were unscripted, with few advisers using the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT) instead relying on the dialogue with claimants to identify barriers to work. In other areas, the approach was much more systematic and all advisers used similar forms/questionnaires in the diagnostic interview and were more likely to make use of the CAT. The use of tools by Jobcentre Advisers is discussed further in 4.1.1.

3.1.2 Flexible Support Fund

The administration of the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) had improved over time; the speed of approvals increased and staff had become more familiar with procedures. Jobcentre Advisers were given more responsibility to make decisions themselves. Advisers were given a remit to authorise payments of up to £300 in most areas, although advisers reported that there were considerable checks to ensure that they are accountable for such payments.

'I'm confident using it and I like the fact that I have control ... that I can make the decision and that I don't have to go to management.'

(Jobcentre Adviser)

During the first wave of this evaluation, the use of FSF across districts was variable and some Jobcentre staff reported that the guidance on FSF was weak and late, leading to a fair amount of misunderstanding. As is the policy intention, Jobcentre staff also use FSF differently in different areas according to local need. Some districts were using FSF to put on additional training courses with non-ASB holders, for example, for European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), whilst others worked with ASB funded providers to put on additional training either using ASB funds or FSF. Some Jobcentres used the funding for Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards while others did not. Jobcentre staff can use FSF for small items, but in some areas, claimants must have a job offer before they could get any help from FSF for clothes, tools or transport.

3.1.3 Local skills teams

Local discretion for each Jobcentre has resulted in a lack of consistency for providers who worked with a number of different local offices; with some local offices having dedicated skills advisers, each office having a different process for handling referral forms and different levels of awareness of provision. One district had introduced dedicated 'skills teams' into local offices – a group of advisers with knowledge of local provision and the ability to coordinate between advisers and providers. The effectiveness of this strategy was thought to be mixed; there were some issues around communication on the responsibilities of the teams and coordination between district and

local level staff. The Jobcentre Advisers said that the skills team's responsibilities were not clear. For example, the skills team would tell the advisers that their claimants' forms were missing, where advisers thought it should be the team's responsibility to track forms and source missing documents themselves. ATMs generally thought it had not really made the system run smoother, but it was hoped that this would change as the new structure bedded in.

3.1.4 Innovative thinking

During the first wave of the research it was found that while it was taking time for longstanding Jobcentre Advisers to adjust to the changed arrangements most advisers welcomed the new freedoms and flexibilities they were given and reported greater job satisfaction as a result. One interviewee reported that advisers 'love it'. Jobcentre managers had been keen to encourage all staff to think creatively about how they could help to meet the needs of their claimants. The research picked up examples of good local practice; for example:

- Administrative staff identified the need for a specific training course as a result of the requirements listed in employer vacancies,
- Employer-facing staff identified job vacancies and also identified and brokered new work experience opportunities.

However, some Jobcentre staff found the new freedoms and flexibility more difficult to manage, for example, preferring firm processes, set interview times and the same patterns of attendance for all claimants. Managers were working with these staff to help them with the change in working culture, but it was not clear that everyone would be able to adapt to the new way of working. Staff in wave 2 reported that any shift in culture would take a long time.

3.1.5 Colleges and training organisations

Alongside the freedoms and flexibilities within Jobcentre Plus, there were greater freedoms and flexibilities for colleges and training organisations. They had a remit to be more innovative, responsive and accountable to the needs of individuals and businesses. This was represented by the single ASB and was demonstrated through greater engagement with external parties such as Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Jobcentre Plus and other partnership organisations and through the changing nature of the relationship with the Skills Funding Agency as the role of Relationship Manager became established.

3.2 National Careers Service working practices

In April 2012, the new National Careers Service replaced Next Step. The change did not present a great deal of change to the services that they delivered for benefit recipients. Some changes to the way the service operated had already been introduced because of the new pre-Work Programme Offer and the introduction of skills conditionality.

The National Careers Service has a potentially pivotal role in skills conditionality. If a Jobcentre Adviser is unsure about the claimant's skills, they can mandate a claimant to attend an appointment with a National Careers Service Adviser. The National Careers Service Adviser can then make recommendations to Jobcentre Plus about the appropriate course of action for the claimant. The Jobcentre Adviser can then mandate the claimant to attend the training if they feel that is appropriate. This process is managed through a referral form – the Ref2. Some National Careers Service Advisers reported feeling constrained by not being able to make referrals to training for claimants who had been mandated to them under skills conditionality as they had been told they could only make recommendations. Conversely, they would routinely refer non-mandated

claimants to training. National Careers Service Advisers reported that they would also like more feedback from Jobcentres as to whether recommendations for training were appropriate, whether it was something that Jobcentre Plus or the Skills Funding Agency would approve or fund and whether the recommendation had been taken up. This would support improvement in the quality of recommendations over time.

'It would be helpful to know which courses Jobcentre Plus thinks are appropriate for their clients. If they want to maintain control over referring to provision that's fine, but we need to know which courses they'd be happy to fund.'

(National Careers Service Manager)

Some National Careers Service providers had adapted how they operate to meet the needs of working with Jobcentre Plus; by delivering workshops rather than just one-to-one sessions and made journeys to pick up Ref2s to make sure they pass securely between the two organisations. One area is proposing to implement a type of 'drop box' software so the National Careers Service can drop claimant information into this (like the CVs they have supported claimants to write) and Jobcentre Advisers can access these files from their office.

3.3 Co-location

The National Careers Service and Jobcentre Plus reported that the two services were co-located in almost every Jobcentre in each of the five districts. Lower footfall or lack of space meant that co-location was still not always feasible in all Jobcentres in all areas. The National Careers Service (and former adult careers services) had been co-located in some Jobcentres for some time following on from the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials and enhanced joint working. These trials had sought to bring together the services of the then nextstep careers advice service with Jobcentre Plus to identify and meet the skills needs of benefit claimants. Both Jobcentre and National Careers Service staff reported that co-location broke down barriers between the two services; this, however, was reliant on staff from each organisation making an effort to talk to each other and varied between different offices, sometimes depending on the size of the Jobcentre.

'Since I've been here I've been quite lost. I don't know exactly the process, exactly what they've wanted from us.'

(National Careers Service Adviser)

'Where the adviser is regularly co-located and has the time to build relationships it works very well, but in a busy office where there is less time to communicate with advisers, it's very different.'

(National Careers Service Manager)

Jobcentres in which the National Careers Service had more recently co-located experienced similar barriers to those Jobcentres that had long established co-location of career advice services. In all of the cases of co-location, both organisations had to manage staffing changes over time within both services. In the longer established co-located districts, however, relationships at a managerial or district level were better established at the time of this study than in non-IES trial areas.

In all but one district in this research, there was no access to broadband connections or printers in Jobcentres for the National Careers Service due to the secure nature of the IT infrastructure; the National Careers Service Advisers used laptops with mobile broadband. In one district National Careers Service Advisers had access to reliable internet connections and, therefore, National Careers Service web-based systems. The National Careers Service Advisers found this invaluable in supporting their activities with claimants and would have liked more access, for example, to printers.

In some other areas, career advice services had the same limited access to IT in the Jobcentre during the IES trials, but this had been taken away at the end of the trial. There are currently arrangements in place to install broadband in every Jobcentre where the National Careers Service have a presence to allow advisers to have better internet access.

3.3.1 Deepening co-location pilots

Deepened co-location pilots were running in three of the five districts and directly in one of the offices that was visited. The pilots were generally viewed positively. Although it had taken time to sort out practical issues, such as branding and IT, the early signs were that sharing facilities and more regular contact has further improved the mutual understanding of the role of Jobcentre and National Careers Service Advisers.

‘You do more having a cup of tea in the staff room than you would with any number of meetings.’

(National Careers Service Manager)

Local initiatives undertaken as a result of the pilots include National Careers Service Information Advisers acting as ‘floor walkers’ in Jobcentres which helped to successfully engage claimants and bettered the understanding of Jobcentre staff. In one area, the National Careers Service had extended co-location to other partners; advisers now work within Hull College, probation services and the local Work Programme provider.

One reservation, expressed by a National Careers Service Adviser, was about preserving the distinction between the National Careers Service and Jobcentre staff. National Careers Service staff are keen to maintain their identity as an impartial service, without the power to sanction claimants. This was felt to create a more open conversation between advisers and claimants.

3.4 Relationships between Jobcentre Plus and National Careers Service at local level

Generally, Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service reported that relationships between the organisations had continued to improve, although in some districts there were still difficulties in Jobcentre Advisers’ understanding what the National Careers Service could offer other than CV writing, but this was getting better in most areas. Managers and advisers in both organisations agreed that the relationship with Jobcentre Plus relied on the National Careers Service ‘doing a lot of the running’ (National Careers Service Adviser). The emphasis of the relationship was on ensuring that Jobcentre Advisers fully understood the role and offer of the National Careers Service as this is where understanding typically fell down.

In both waves of the research, the National Careers Service expressed concerns that Jobcentre staff treated them solely as a CV service, rather than a source of careers advice in some areas, up to 50 per cent of referrals by Jobcentre Plus to the National Careers Service in one area were for CV support. One reason for Jobcentre staff referring to the National Careers Service rather than other CV support provision, proposed by a National Careers Service Adviser, was their familiarity with the National Careers Service referral process and ease of co-location for claimants.

The National Careers Service staff see their organisation’s role as not just providing independent careers advice in isolation, they also identify claimants’ transferable skills, discuss the fit of these to labour market/job opportunities in the local area and as necessary, signpost to relevant training provision. Many National Careers Service Advisers did in fact provide CV support for claimants who had been referred for that purpose from Jobcentre staff, in order to give the claimant what they had

been promised. One National Careers Service Adviser said that she really liked CV development as a way of getting to the skills that people have and need. The process of creating the CV covered topics in a relaxed way; basic skills, IT, vocational skills needs. She had found this more effective than going through using a diagnostic tool. As CV support is one part of what the National Careers Service offer it can be difficult for Jobcentre Advisers to see beyond this and the whole offer can be more difficult for Jobcentre Advisers to explain to claimants.

‘CVs are easy for them [Jobcentre Advisers] to explain to clients, and it’s more nebulous, some of the other services we offer.’

(National Careers Service Manager)

Jobcentre staff do use the National Careers Service for CVs and some were aware of other services that they can provide such as in depth diagnostic interviews in addition to CV support. Some referred to the National Careers Service when they were unsure of what else they could help the claimant with after they had exhausted other options or to help the claimant decide what other jobs they could do and identify transferable skills. In some cases Jobcentre staff saw that the careers adviser and training broker role as something Jobcentre Advisers could and should do and so referred to the National Careers Service for CVs, which they had not been trained to do. Where the relationship is better and co-location works well, Jobcentre Advisers saw the National Careers Service as an additional support to their work with claimants.

‘Two brains are better than one’

(Jobcentre Adviser)

In two districts Jobcentre Advisers were less likely to refer to the National Careers Service for CVs, but this appeared to be due to a breakdown in the relationship with the National Careers Service.

‘I would question, if that’s what the customer needs in order for him to progress in his career, that’s what he needs. If you can’t deliver that we’ll go somewhere that can deliver it. That’s my concern in the longer term. We will stop using National Careers Service unless they can turn their service around to meet the needs of our customers’

(Jobcentre Partnerships Manager)

The partnership with Jobcentre Plus had become the National Careers Service’s most important relationship and Jobcentre Plus was a main source of referral (see Section 4.2.1). While many National Careers Service staff believed they were more of a ‘friendly, less intimidating’ (National Careers Service Adviser) service than Jobcentre Plus, some mentioned that they had recently begun to ‘talk the same language’ as Jobcentre Plus, and that the service had moved away from holistic advice on careers and confidence issues, and towards a more focused approach around facilitating the transition to employment. Some National Careers Service Advisers and local managers (usually the more experienced) were quite frustrated at moving away from the traditional careers service model towards skills conditionality and employment outcomes and a few thought their service was becoming ‘tick boxy’ rather than focused on careers advice and guidance according to claimants needs and interests.

Within the same district Jobcentre staff reported that relationships with different National Careers Service contract holders varied, with some responding better to the requirements of working with Jobcentre Plus. As the relationship between the two services was often dependent on personal relationships at adviser level, how well the two services worked together could also vary between Jobcentres. In the main, regional and district staff well understood partnership working and skills conditionality, but working practices at an individual adviser level could fall down due to a lack of communication. The National Careers Service and Jobcentre Plus tried different methods to address these issues:

- Regular contact and meetings – including meetings with Partnership Managers at the district level and information sessions with advisers. Jobcentres invited the National Careers Service to present to Jobcentre Advisers at ‘huddles’.
- Dedicated personnel – one district had recruited a part-time liaison officer to improve communication between frontline staff at the National Careers Service and Jobcentres. This role has worked well, it has ‘helped hugely in terms of both parties understanding the services a bit more’ (Jobcentre Manager).
- Information sharing; the National Careers Service distributed a newsletter on National Careers Service activities in Jobcentres, which helped Jobcentre Advisers.

In some areas, there was a multitude of National Careers Service contract holders so it was difficult for Jobcentre staff to form relationships. Both the National Careers Service and Jobcentre Advisers reported that it could be difficult to form relationships in busy offices. National Careers Service staff reported that they would prefer to have more meetings with the Jobcentres so that both parties can understand each other’s services better.

National Careers Service Advisers reported that they would also like more information with the referral from Jobcentre staff – in one area Jobcentre Advisers had tried adding extra information sheets to the referral form for the National Careers Service. There was some frustration on both sides (the National Careers Service and Jobcentre Plus) that there was not a clear national system for sharing data between the two partners.

4 Skills screening and referrals

Key findings

- Skills screening in Jobcentres uses a ‘light touch’ process. Some Jobcentre Advisers used the Claimant Assessment Tool (CAT) to screen for basic needs, but this was not widespread and most relied on what they could identify through general conversation or observing form filling. This was viewed as a more efficient means of identifying obvious issues. However, there were questions raised about the effectiveness of the screening that advisers are able to carry out, particularly those who are operating under tight time constraints.
- The National Careers Service used a range of interview techniques and they also have the option to use the Skills Health Check, a recently developed assessment tool. This does not screen for basic skills needs, but helps participants to match their interests and experience to careers. Relatively few National Careers Service Advisers used the Skills Health Check tool to identify skills needs, tending to rely on more conversation-based approaches
- Colleges and training organisations had the most formal skills screening process, with almost all claimants referred to them undertaking literacy and numeracy assessments.
- Jobcentre and National Careers Service Advisers felt constrained in referring claimants to provision because of a lack of knowledge about what was on offer. The District Provision Tools did contain local training supply information, but providers and Jobcentre Advisers complained it was not always up-to-date.
- Claimants tended to fall into three groups: those who went to training largely at the suggestion of, or having been mandated by, Jobcentre staff; those who initiated a discussion about skills training with their Jobcentre Adviser and attended training on their own initiative; and those who had found a training place themselves, without the help of Jobcentre Plus.

This chapter examines the approach to skills screening taken by Jobcentres, The National Careers Service and providers and the way this is used to determine referrals. This process can be split into three stages: initial screening to identify a potential need (usually carried out by Jobcentres or the National Careers Service), assessment to identify the exact level the claimant is undertaken by providers and a diagnostic to identify any particular barriers or training needs to be addressed (usually carried out by providers or the National Careers Service). The process for screening within Jobcentres tended to be non-standardised and informal. National Careers Service Advisers used a range of formal and informal techniques, adapted to the individual being advised. This meant the methods adopted by individual advisers could be quite different across the five areas covered by the study.

4.1 Timing, methods and use of tools

4.1.1 Jobcentre Plus

As the first point of contact for claimants, Jobcentre staff provide an initial screen for skills gaps. Jobcentre advisors adopt an informal light touch approach to initial skills screening, using what they are able to pick up during the interview with the claimant. Some advisers based their basic skills screening on the CAT, but this was not widespread and several advisers believed it was not particularly useful. One felt that it ‘encourages snap judgements’ when claimants’ needs are likely to be more complex. Others were guided by the questions they follow to put together the Jobseekers’

Agreement, asking whether the claimant requires any help in areas relevant to the job search process like application forms or letter writing. Advisers use what they can gather from general conversation. In some cases they might ask a claimant to complete a sample application form to gauge reading and writing.

In four of the five districts, Jobcentres used the outcomes of any skills screening, plus knowledge of work experience and other potential barriers, to categorise new claimants against a loose RAG (red, amber, green) rating, with 'green' claimants considered most job ready. In one area, however, this RAG rating system had been scrapped as the system was considered too subjective. Advisers felt that 'one person's red is another's amber' and in some cases 'red' claimants had successfully completed programmes (such as sector-based work academies (sbwas)) which advisers were tending to reserve for amber or green claimants.

Advisers generally felt it was preferable to screen earlier rather than later, but time pressures during the initial diagnostic interview meant that many claimants were not screened until their second interview or later, which was normally at least one month into their claim. This meant there could be much variation around the point in a claim at which screening took place.

4.1.2 The National Careers Service

National Careers Service Advisers are trained careers guidance practitioners who use a variety of formal and informal interview techniques. The interview may be varied in response to the individual, but will involve exploring their circumstances and needs as well as the skills they have.

Advisers have the option of using the Skills Health Check (SHC) tool, although this is not designed for basic skills screening. The tool was designed to help individuals, especially the lower skilled, explore different areas of their skills, personality and preferences; so that they can identify a wider range of career options than they might otherwise. The tool was intended to be used both through a mediated intervention with advisers, but also wherever possible by individuals themselves over the internet. The tool consists of a series of online questionnaires designed to assess a claimant's skills, interests and motivations. The entire SHC takes up to an hour to complete.

The tool is designed to be used as a series of separate modules, which can be selected according to the needs and interests of the individual. However, advisers sometimes did not understand this and it was not always working in practice. While some advisers asked claimants to complete only key modules during an interview, others reported they were deterred by the length of the tool. In many cases, claimants were being asked to complete the tool in their own time. Since it is an online tool, advisers also pointed out that it was not appropriate for all claimants, particularly those without internet access or basic IT skills. It was therefore not widely used by advisers in the study. However, in one district, the National Careers Service was trying to expand its use by offering designated workshops at which clients are offered assistance in completing the tool online and can discuss their results with an adviser.

Generally, the National Careers Service Advisers tended to use a range of techniques to identify claimants' skills needs. Advisers mentioned that time constraints on appointments meant they often used a discussion around the claimant's CV, rather than the SHC.

'It [Skills Health Check] is certainly not appropriate for all people ... Often it's simply a conversation'

(National Careers Service Adviser)

4.1.3 Colleges and training organisations

Colleges and training organisations had the most formal skills screening process. Claimants referred to them usually undertook standard online tests in basic literacy and numeracy as part of an induction process, often followed by a one-to-one interview to discuss the results and the suitability of the course. This process appeared to work relatively well, from the point of view of both claimants and providers.

'You have to have a diagnostic assessment once you get to the course. Once you've had the diagnostic assessment done, they know your skills, they will help you to work on your skills ... They want to know exactly why you're there and exactly where you need help with your skills.'

(Claimant)

The main problem identified by providers was the consistently high failure to attend (FTA) rate – both for initial induction interviews and for those scheduled to start on training. National figures from August 2011 to May 2012 suggest that, of 132,590 initial provider interview referrals, there were only 47,130 initial provider interview starts – a conversion rate of around 40 per cent. This meant considerable wasted resources for providers, who do not receive any funding until a learner begins a course. Some providers had removed elements of their induction processes – such as one-to-one interviews – for this reason. It was hoped the introduction of skills conditionality would improve FTA rates, but little difference was found at wave 2 (discussed in more detail Chapter 5).

4.1.4 Basic skills screening

Basic skills screening refers to the evaluation of a claimant's literacy and numeracy skills to ensure they are sufficient to allow the claimant to function in a workplace setting (normally at Level 1 or above). Basic skills screening can also be used to identify English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or IT needs. Where basic skills gaps are identified, a claimant may be mandated to attend a suitable training course so that the problem does not create a barrier to employment. At present, initial basic skills screening is supposed to be carried out by Jobcentre Advisers.

Findings from this study confirmed that, in line with current policy, Jobcentre Advisers used informal and non-standardised methods to carry out skills screening. This tended to be based on a general conversation, possibly structured around putting together a Jobseekers' Agreement or CV. Advisers suggested they might give a claimant a sample application form to fill in if they suspected literacy problems, although there was variation in both the extent to which advisers undertook screening with claimants and the methods they used. There was little use of screening for vocational skills, although this was not identified as a problem by advisers, who felt such needs were straightforward to gauge through conversation. However, Jobcentre Advisers interviewed also identified several barriers to undertaking basic skills screening, discussed below.

4.2 Barriers to making a full assessment

Jobcentre Advisers identified two broad barriers to skills screening. The first was logistical; advisers felt that time pressures prevented them from carrying out effective screening. In several areas, initial diagnostic interviews had been reduced to just 20 minutes, which advisers felt was not enough time to draw up a Jobseekers' Agreement, cover benefit eligibility, job search criteria, work history and screen in a systematic way for any skills needs. Advisers also spoke of the importance of the initial interview in terms of gaining a claimant's trust and tackling any negative perceptions they might hold of Jobcentre Plus. This was considered particularly important to ensure they disclosed all issues which could affect their job search or training needs, such as mental or physical health problems, substance misuse or caring responsibilities.

'It's a lot to cover in a 20 minute diagnostic ... If you get everything right on day one, you've done all the hard work. If you had your diagnostic for, say, 50 minutes, you would get more quality and use less resources in the following weeks.'

(Jobcentre Adviser)

National Careers Service staff also raised similar time pressures in using the Skills Health Check tool, which usually required more time than that allocated for the interview. While it was intended that advisers should be selective in the modules of the questionnaire that claimants are asked to complete, this was not always reflected in interviews with advisers. Many reported that they preferred to avoid the SHC altogether and use a discussion structured around a claimant's CV to gauge any skills needs, as this was easier and quicker to complete in the interview.

In other cases, screening was avoided, either because it was not considered necessary or because advisers did not feel confident administering it. Some Jobcentre Advisers reported they would only consider possible skills needs with claimants who had less work experience. For a claimant who had been working recently, they might not look closely at skills and qualifications, but focus instead on a quick return to the labour market. Jobcentre Advisers also pointed out that they were not experts in skills screening and tended to rely on assessments carried out by the National Careers Service or providers (where claimants were initially referred to these organisations) to determine the most suitable course.

4.2.1 Referrals

Jobcentre Advisers used the diagnostic interview(s), initial skills screening and the claimant's RAG rating (in areas where this was used) to decide on appropriate referrals. 'Green' claimants were generally considered job ready, but 'red' or 'amber' claimants might be referred to skills provision if they had an obvious skills gap or to the National Careers Service if their skills gap was unclear. However, this system was not always running smoothly.

Referrals to the National Careers Service

National Careers Service Advisers felt that there had been an increase in referrals from Jobcentres following the introduction of skills conditionality and that they were receiving the large majority of their referrals via this route. Other referral routes included clients who came voluntarily or those referred by other organisations, such as probation services. However, managers and advisers continue to feel that not all of the referrals to the National Careers Service are appropriate (see Section 3.4).

The lack of a common understanding of the role of the National Careers Service had led to some confusion over which claimants were most appropriate for a referral to the National Careers Service. In some areas, National Careers Service Advisers felt they were being treated as a last resort, when Jobcentre Advisers did not know what to do with a claimant. In other areas, however, National Careers Service staff felt that claimants were often referred to them even when the training need was clear, and that they should be dealing instead with those claimants for whom provision was not obviously available. Generally, National Careers Service Advisers felt that they should be seeing claimants whose skills needs were in some way unclear relatively early in their claim – although this message was not consistent across all National Careers Service staff.

While in some areas there was limited understanding of the National Careers Service on the part of Jobcentre Advisers, there was also a need for the National Careers Service to ensure there was a clear message on their role given to their own staff. For example, there appeared to be some internal discrepancies between National Careers Service Advisers around which claimants

represented appropriate referrals. Advisers in some areas felt that it was inappropriate to refer the more 'problematic' claimants – such as those with criminal records, substance abuse issues, very low literacy skills or ESOL needs – to the National Careers Service. However, other advisers disagreed, arguing that all claimants could benefit from careers advice, regardless of their circumstances. This suggests some internal confusion over the target client group for the National Careers Service. If a clear message on appropriate referrals to the National Careers Service is to be sent to Jobcentres, it will be important to ensure all National Careers Service providers are clear on this initially.

Referrals for provision

If they considered a skills need to be clear, Jobcentre Advisers could refer direct to provision. Obvious basic skills gaps, as well as IT or ESOL needs, tended to be easier for Jobcentres to spot and refer to provision for. However, the informal, 'light touch' style of skills screening which takes place at Jobcentres suggests that gaps – particularly those which were less obvious, such as vocational skills – might not always be identified.

However, the effectiveness of the referral process to provision – at both Jobcentres and the National Careers Service – was hampered by the accessibility of information on the available skills offer. This was identified as an issue by providers, advisers and managers at the National Careers Service and at Jobcentres. The problem appeared linked to the wide diversity of different skills providers operating across districts (often more than 50); maintaining this number of relationships required significant investment, particularly from Jobcentre Plus, and some staff felt they had insufficient resources to do this. Regular changes to the Skills Funding Agency funding contracts held by providers created further complexity. Some claimants also noted that they did not feel their Jobcentre Adviser had a good grasp of available provision – especially for higher level skills.

Jobcentres attempted to centralise training supply information through the District Provision Tool (DPT). However, providers and advisers often complained this was not always up to date. Providers were unable to update their own details or check on the accuracy of the information held – they had to send information to Jobcentre Plus district offices who then updated the tool. Some providers complained this led to errors or obsolete information.

The National Careers Service did not have access to a similar centralised database for provision, and advisers tended to pick up information where they could – either by phoning individual providers or reading promotional material. Some contracted National Careers Service providers were also skills providers in their own right and other training providers raised questions about this, arguing that these National Careers Service Advisers would be more likely to refer to their own provision.

These issues meant that, at both the National Careers Service and Jobcentres, decisions on referrals might be based on advisers' personal familiarity with particular providers:

'I think that there are some advisers who keep referring to the same provision that they already know about ... I think it has a lot to do with the confidence of the individual advisers.'

(Jobcentre Plus District Manager)

In some cases, this can mean that an area is not always making the best use of the provision at its disposal. In one instance, a provider who did not have an established relationship with Jobcentre Plus found they had trouble filling places on a health and social care course, despite having an employer looking to hire in this sector. They felt the fact that Jobcentre Advisers were not familiar with the provider meant that they could not achieve the referral numbers needed.

'We felt like we were banging our head against a wall – we had jobs ready and waiting, and we weren't having people referred.'

(Skills provider)

Advisers, on the other hand, were concerned that they were ill equipped to keep up with changes to offers on provision and Skills Funding Agency contracts. Furthermore, there was no clear measure of the quality of provision to allow for comparison of the different offers – Jobcentre staff reported little systematic feedback on the outcomes of provision and advisers tended to rely on word of mouth from claimants. Therefore, the development of a ‘market’ for provision has been hampered by the lack of objective and accessible measures of training quality. Advisers were instead more likely to stick to provision they already knew.

‘You could have several providers offering similar courses and in the end advisers would choose the ones who are most successful – but it doesn’t work like that. You don’t get that feedback ... we don’t have that kind of information to help them make that decision.’

(Jobcentre Plus Partnerships manager)

Districts did appear to be making use of new flexibilities to determine referral patterns; in some areas, access to certain types of vocational provision, such as Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards or forklift licences, was being restricted to those claimants who held a guaranteed job offer which required this training, as it was felt too many claimants currently held these qualifications. However, this degree of coordination was not evident in all districts. In some areas, external bodies which had previously been involved in monitoring skills requirements in the local labour market (in one case coordinated by the local authority) had been disbanded due to funding pressures.

‘Traditionally people would look to the local authority for some strategic steer, but at this moment we’re not in a position to provide that ... There’s ambiguity across the board about who’s doing what at the moment’

(Local Authority Employment and Skills Manager)

The policy intention has been that this role would be taken up by Local Enterprise partnerships (LEPs); however, at the time of the research, the extent to which this was happening was limited (LEPs were still relatively new) and the extent to which they would be monitoring the skills needs of the unemployed remained unclear. There was therefore no single body with a clear responsibility for overseeing supply and demand around skills provision for the unemployed.

‘Provision isn’t always needs driven but funding availability driven, as the funding streams are not delivered in a coordinated and integrated way ... It would be better for all the stakeholders to sit down and map out across the piece what we’ve got, and what employers tell us they want.’

(Jobcentre Plus External Relations Manager)

Finally, there were questions raised around the effectiveness of the referral process in terms of securing actual course starts; staff in several areas felt the conversion rate was quite low. The fact that so many claimants were getting ‘lost’ in the referral system suggested continued inefficiencies and issues with the process. These appeared to be linked to the administrative and data sharing capacities of the organisations involved, with the Ref2 forms for skills conditionality referrals not always being effectively transferred between Jobcentres and providers, with Jobcentre Advisers therefore sometimes unable to follow up on non-attendance.

4.2.2 Claimant views

Claimant views on the screening and referral process were highly variable, and appeared to depend on their initial skill levels and their relationship with Jobcentre Plus. Given the ‘light touch’ approach adopted by Jobcentre Advisers, a consistent response was that claimants did not recall any screening taking place at Jobcentres. Those who had been referred to a training provider had normally undertaken online tests.

Claimants with higher level qualifications tended to be more dissatisfied with their initial contact with the Jobcentre and the lack of support available. Two claimants who held degrees reported that the Jobcentre offered them little help or advice initially. One felt that, because he was classed as 'job ready', the Jobcentre did not mention any opportunities for training. Another felt that the Jobcentre was initially unwilling to offer her advice on skills or job search:

'When I first went to the Jobcentre, I've got to admit, I was shocked. I was going there thinking they'll give me loads of things that I could do to help me find work ... I even had to ask them to give me a list of all the job agencies.'

(Claimant)

On referrals, claimants tended to fall into three groups:

- Those who went to training largely at the suggestion of Jobcentre staff, these included claimants who had been mandated to attend an employability skills course for example.

'If it hadn't have been for [my Jobcentre Adviser] I wouldn't have got onto this course.'

(Claimant)

- Those who initiated a discussion about skills training with their Jobcentre Adviser and/or felt they had only attended training due to their own initiative rather than at the suggestion of the Jobcentre: *'it was because I was saying "is there anything else I can do to help me find work?"' It wasn't because they volunteered the advice'.*
- Finally there was a third group who had found a training place themselves, without the help of the Jobcentre and attended largely on their own initiative. These courses tended to be more vocational in nature (such as learning to be a driving instructor or a taxi driver).

5 Skills conditionality

Key findings

- Skills conditionality, whereby individuals claiming active benefits can be required to attend training, was introduced in August 2011. Many interviewees found the initial introduction problematic because they felt the implementation was rushed; guidance was lacking; responsibilities between Jobcentres and providers were unclear; and the timing, during the summer months, was difficult.
- During the course of the study, progress had been made on these initial issues as advisers became more familiar with the process, more advice was provided, more appropriate provision was made available and relationships between Jobcentre Advisers and providers improved. However, even in wave 2 of the study, there was still a general consensus amongst interviewees at all levels that the policy was not always being applied correctly or consistently.
- Skills conditionality was applied more frequently to claimants with basic skills gaps and in some districts was linked to a general ‘skills conditionality’ course. It was less often applied to those with vocational skills needs.
- There was no clear evidence that sanctions were effective in reducing the numbers of claimants failing to attend training.
- National Careers Service staff thought that skills conditionality had increased the number of referrals, but were concerned about the impact on their relationship with clients. Providers were also concerned that it generated unwilling learners, but thought it had brought about a closer working relationship with Jobcentres. Jobcentre Advisers found skills conditionality challenging, both in terms of the criteria for deciding on mandation and staying up-to-date with the training available in their area.
- Overall, Jobcentre, National Career Service and provider staff thought the premise behind skills conditionality was positive and necessary and had brought about closer working relationships. However, it had resulted in greater administrative costs all round and different interpretations of the policy in different areas had led providers to question the appropriateness of referrals.

Since August 2011, individuals claiming active benefits in England can be required to undertake activity to address an identified skills need as a condition to receiving benefits if their Jobcentre Adviser views a skills gap as their main barrier to finding employment. This policy is referred to as skills conditionality and this chapter addresses how it worked across the five study areas.

Upon referring a claimant under skills conditionality, the adviser must explain the requirements to the claimant and fill in a Ref2 form, which is sent to the provider. At the first mandatory meeting, the provider assesses the claimant’s needs to make sure they are able to offer suitable provision. If this is the case, the provider sends the form with this information to the Jobcentre, who then mandates the claimant to attend training. If the claimant is removed from a course or stops attending, the provider must use a ‘doubt form’ to notify Jobcentre Plus and a benefit sanction may then be imposed. The policy was intended to ensure that job seekers would have to address any significant skill deficits, thus making it easier for them to move into the labour market.

This chapter begins by looking at the implementation of the policy and the developments which occurred between waves 1 and 2 of the study. It then sets out how the policy is being applied, the perceived appropriateness of this application and the continuing barriers to fully effective

implementation, including looking at some of the reasons for the difference between the number of referrals and the number of training starts. Finally, it addresses the impact of skills conditionality on Jobcentre Plus's relationships with both providers and the National Careers Service and reviews the policy's broad advantages and disadvantages.

5.1 Policy implementation

Many interviewees felt that the introduction and initial implementation of skills conditionality had been highly problematic for a number of reasons:

- The implementation of the policy was felt to be rushed, with guidance only issued very shortly before the policy became operational. One of the consequences was that the various parties involved (Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and skills providers) were not able to meet to gain a mutual understanding of the policy and criteria in advance. This has meant that, in many districts, guidance had to be re-issued later or problems addressed after the event.

'When it [skills conditionality] first came in, it was like 'this is going to happen', and the next day it happened ... We had a general overview, but then it was updated, and then it was updated again.'

(National Careers Service Adviser)

'We should have got all the key people round the table, before we started ... We were up and running and then we were unpicking all the problems.'

(Skills Provider Manager)

- Advisers and managers across Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service felt the guidance issued was lacking, with very little procedural guidance on the 'low level detail'. This led to a variety of different interpretations.

'There's a big difference between the message from a minister and turning that into an offer for our claimants.'

(Jobcentre Plus Partnerships Manager)

'The policy intent on skills conditionality was never clear. It was never made clear whether they wanted everybody to be mandated or whether it was just those people who weren't prepared to engage.'

(Jobcentre Plus Provision Manager)

- Responsibilities around implementing the policy were seen as unclear in some areas, with the changing role of the Skills Funding Agency taking time to be established. One Partnerships Manager at a Jobcentre felt that the service had lacked the resources and expertise to take on the majority of responsibility for policy implementation. She felt that liaising with providers was traditionally '*not Jobcentre Plus's forte*' and felt that the Agency might have been better placed to coordinate, given their closer relationships with providers. The area's Skills Funding Agency lead also acknowledged the problems: '*there's a lot of small providers really keen to get involved with Jobcentre Plus, but they [Jobcentre Plus] just haven't got the capacity to manage them all.*' While increased Agency involvement may not be appropriate, given skills conditionality is DWP policy, it appeared that clarity on responsibilities was still lacking in some areas.
- The timing of implementation coincided with most providers being less active over the summer period, which made it harder to get them involved at the early stages of preparation. In some districts, Jobcentre staff felt the full range of required provision was not available initially and that some providers had been reluctant to fully engage.

While all parties had worked to overcome the issues around the implementation of skills conditionality, the confusion created at the early stages meant the policy continued to lack a consistent interpretation and application. Some Jobcentre staff felt the guidance should be revisited with a clearer sense of policy purpose.

'I think a clear message now needs to come down from ministers as to exactly what it is they do want from it, and I think it does need reviewing.'

(Jobcentre Plus Provision Manager)

5.1.1 Developments between Waves 1 and 2

The first wave of interviews in this study were conducted during November and December 2011, only around three months after the implementation of skills conditionality. Many of the problems discussed above were therefore highlighted during this phase of the work. When the second wave of interviews was carried out in April and May 2012, some progress had been made on these initial issues, although there continued to be problems with the implementation of the policy.

Areas of progress include:

- Smoother process: By wave 2, the policy had had a chance to 'bed in' and advisers reported they were becoming more familiar with the process and more confident about applying the policy. However, the criteria for application apparently continued to vary between individual advisers at wave 2 and advisers continued to be deterred by the administrative demands of skills conditionality.
- More advice: In one area, Jobcentre Plus had implemented designated 'skills advisers' to help Jobcentre staff to navigate skills conditionality (discussed in Section 3.1.3). While advisers did not feel the shift had resolved all problems, other areas were considering trialling a similar system to offer advisers more support.
- Increase in provision: Several areas experienced problems during wave 1 with securing sufficient provision appropriate to the needs of those being referred under skills conditionality. Pre-entry basic skills and ESOL courses appeared to be the issue. By wave 2, the problems appeared to have been largely resolved in most areas; in one district which lacked a pre-entry level ESOL course, providers had made use of the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) to address this gap.
- Improved relationships: In some areas, initial issues in the relationships between Jobcentre Plus and providers had improved by wave 2. In one, Jobcentre staff reported that they were focusing more on negotiation and encouragement in their relationships with providers. This has proved a reasonably effective strategy with colleges now more willing to work with Jobcentre Plus:

'from the outset, we had firm ideas on what we needed the colleges to deliver for us, and I think we've had to back off on that a little bit, and just see what they're able to deliver initially'

(Third Party Provision Manager)

However, in other areas there had been little progress made between waves 1 and 2 of the study. This was particularly evident in the basic criteria being used to determine appropriate referrals under skills conditionality, as will be discussed below.

5.2 Who is mandated?

In general terms, the policy was applied more frequently to those with basic skills gaps and in some districts was linked to a general 'skills conditionality' course, which covered basic skills and employability. Mandation was less often applied to those with vocational skills needs, as advisers

felt the distinction between whether vocational skills gaps were preventing a claimant finding work, or whether training would simply help them, was unclear. The main exception to this was the sbwa; claimants who wanted to take part were then mandated to attend the various elements.

However, there remained widespread confusion about the appropriate application of skills conditionality. A wide range of reasons were suggested for the criteria by which the suitability of mandation was decided. Some of these were determined at district or local office level, whereas others were due to Jobcentre Advisers exercising their own discretion. At the district and office level:

- Some areas had a policy of mandating all claimants referred to training or the National Careers Service, to ensure attendance.
- Some offices mandated those with a skills gap that could prevent them entering the labour market, regardless of their willingness to attend.
- In some districts, mandation was attached to particular courses, rather than claimant characteristics, so all claimants attending that course would be mandated.
- This confusion around the policy intent meant that some advisers began to apply their own interpretations to the guidance:
- Some advisers felt that mandation should only be applied to claimants who were reluctant to attend training, or who had been unemployed for long periods.
- Providers also reported that claimants could be mandated on the basis of their transport needs; mandated claimants are eligible for travel subsidies, so advisers tend to mandate claimants with longer journeys.

The consistency of the criteria did not appear to have improved between waves 1 and 2, and some local offices had changed their policies several times. This meant that many advisers were not clear how to operate the policy.

‘There’s a lack of clarity or focus on what the point is ... It’s easier to do something if you know why you’re doing it.’

(Jobcentre Adviser team manager)

‘When it [skills conditionality] was first introduced, I didn’t have a clue what I was doing.’

(Jobcentre Adviser)

The inconsistencies around mandation were also highlighted in some of the National Careers Service interviews observed. For example, in one district two interviews were observed back to back. The first claimant was an individual with a range of skills (including an electrician’s licence), no evident basic skills needs, and who was keen to undertake further training. This claimant had been mandated to the National Careers Service. The second claimant was a 21-year-old without Level 2 in English or Maths, who was highly reluctant to take these courses. This claimant had not been mandated.

5.3 Appropriateness of referrals

Given the highly variable criteria by which Jobcentre Plus districts, local Jobcentres and advisers decide to apply skills conditionality, many provider interviewees found it hard to determine the general appropriateness of mandated referrals. Most felt they were having to deal with some referrals they felt to be inappropriate, but were unsure about this due to the lack of clarity around the policy intent.

The most commonly raised question on the appropriateness of referrals was around those claimants who had been mandated, but who the provider felt would have attended in any case. Certain local offices had implemented a policy of mandating all claimants referred to training provision or the National Careers Service, in the hope of increasing attendance rates. Some National Careers Service staff and training providers voiced surprise that claimants who were keen to attend a particular training course were still being mandated. It would appear from evidence gathered for this study that part of the problem stems from a lack of clarity between Jobcentre Plus, the Skills Funding Agency and providers on the purpose of skills conditionality and when it should apply.

5.4 Barriers to applying skills conditionality

As discussed, questions have continued to arise around the appropriateness of referrals under skills conditionality and the low conversion rates for these referrals. This study identified four broad barriers to the successful application of skills conditionality:

- Inconsistency in policy implementation, discussed above.
- The additional administrative requirements involved in skills conditionality referrals.
- The lack of certain types of provision in some areas.
- The reluctance of some advisers to apply skills conditionality.

5.4.1 Inconsistency in policy implementation

By wave 2 of the study, there was still a general consensus amongst staff at all levels that the policy was not always being applied correctly or consistently and that interpretations varied widely. As a Skills Funding Agency representative stated:

'We're finding that Jobcentre Plus are not using skills conditionality correctly – some are mandating everyone, when they should be targeting it and signposting others ... It's not being applied consistently. In some areas, referrals are high while in others they are very low.'

(Skills Funding Agency Manager)

This confusion also extended to both the National Careers Service and providers, with most feeling they had not been issued with clear guidance on the policy and its application.

'If it was all being done in a way we didn't think was right and everyone was coming through that way, then you'd know what to expect, but it's absolutely all over the place.'

(National Careers Service Adviser)

'I don't quite understand skills conditionality. There's no black and white reasons on why people are mandated.'

(Provider manager)

5.4.2 Administrative requirements

Operating the policy meant there were additional forms to fill in. This led to concern amongst Jobcentre Advisers about additional pressures with high caseloads and limited interview time. Providers also felt they had been asked to take on significant additional administrative duties with no extra resources. Some advisers felt the new forms were over complicated and questioned their usefulness; particularly the apparent duplication around using Ref2 forms to refer a claimant to an Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) interview with a provider and then an SL2 form to refer them onto a course.

There were also problems with the effective transfer of forms and data between the various parties involved in a skills conditionality referral. As well as the number of forms, National Careers Service Advisers also reported that local autonomy for Jobcentres meant that all offices now operated a slightly different system with regards to the administrative element – this sometimes made it difficult for them to be sure that they were returning forms correctly. New flexibilities also meant that some Jobcentres were no longer operating adviser caseloads, meaning that a claimant was no longer attached to a specific adviser who would then deal with all of their forms. Both variation on arrangements for administrative processes and adviser caseloads could lead to some referrals getting ‘lost’ in the system, with Jobcentre staff unable to follow up on instances of failure to attend.

5.4.3 Lack of provision

In some areas, advisers were struggling to find sufficient appropriate provision for claimants, particularly in the first wave of the research. Advisers reported insufficient places on certain basic skills courses – particularly pre-entry basic skills and ESOL. In some districts, Jobcentre Plus felt that providers were unwilling to work with them and reluctant to take on mandated learners. The Skills Funding Agency acknowledged this issue but felt that many providers were also in the process of adapting to a very different working environment:

‘There are challenges for providers in understanding the needs of clients and Jobcentre Plus, and in getting their heads around the flexibilities of the Adult Skills Budget ... All providers are measured on their success rate ... and the issue is that many Jobcentre Plus clients drop out. We’ve said that unitised provision is exempt from our success rates, but I’m still not convinced that message has got through.’

(Skills Funding Agency Manager)

By wave 2 of the study some of the issues with provision had been resolved, although pre-entry level basic skills training and ESOL courses were still reported as lacking in some areas.

5.4.4 Adviser reluctance

The combination of additional administrative demands and lack of clarity around the applicability of the policy had made some Jobcentre Advisers reluctant to apply skills conditionality. Providers in some areas expressed surprise at the low numbers of mandated referrals they were receiving.

On the other hand, some advisers were also reluctant to apply the policy as they were not convinced of its effectiveness. Several advisers discussed their preference for ‘giving claimants a chance’ initially, only resorting to mandate if they fail to attend. They felt this allowed them to develop better relationships with their claimants.

‘I like to build up trust so I won’t mandate until that has been lost. I always try to use a carrot and not a stick.’

(Jobcentre Adviser)

‘Mandation isn’t a magic silver bullet. It’s not a tool to be used for everyone, it should only be used really when the situation or the claimant requires it.’

(Jobcentre Adviser team manager)

5.5 Sanctions

There did not appear to be any clear evidence that the sanctions associated with skills conditionality were effective. Advisers reported that standard practice was to report non-attendance from mandated referrals to the Decision Maker (DMA).

However, there were several issues which could affect the sanctioning process. Providers and Jobcentre Advisers mentioned the number of forms that need to be filled out by providers and returned to Jobcentres to ensure a sanction is applied; these were not always returned correctly and on time. In line with new flexibilities, some Jobcentres no longer assigned claimants to a single adviser, which meant that the forms were more likely to get lost or overlooked between appointments. In other cases, providers complained that many cases put forward for sanction were rejected by the DMA. Finally, it was not always clear that claimants were fully aware of the possibility of sanctions related to skills conditionality:

'Most of them [claimants] haven't the first clue [about consequences].'

(National Careers Service manager)

At wave 2, some claimants continued to be unaware that they had been mandated, and many were unsure about why they had been selected for mandation. National Careers Service Advisers also felt that some claimants appeared either to be unaware of the consequences of not attending, or unconcerned about the possibility of sanction.

'I've had numerous occasions where people have told me they haven't been made aware that it was mandatory. Firstly, I don't think that's right, but secondly therefore it isn't going to have an effect.'

(National Careers Service Adviser)

5.5.1 Claimant views

Claimant responses to the concept of skills conditionality varied; some viewed the changes as negative and overly threatening, but many were more accepting, saying they were happy to attend anyway so they were not concerned about the mandatory element. Some providers also reported that they felt many of those claimants who attended under skills conditionality probably would have been happy to attend anyway.

Broadly the claimants in our study who were mandated to go on a training course fell into three groups:

Those who said they were happy to go to the course in any event, although even in these cases there were some suggestions that the threat of a sanction may have improved their attendance rate.

'I was ok [with skills conditionality], because I wanted to go anyway.'

(Claimant)

In addition, some claimants interviewed did report that being mandated to attend training helped them overcome initial reluctance and were pleased with the results.

'To be honest with you, I weren't too happy at the time but now I'm kind of happy I did do it.'

(Claimant)

'I would not have considered the training if it hadn't been for their [Jobcentre Adviser's] suggestion, it made me do it and I wouldn't have done it without her help.'

(Claimant)

Finally there were those who went purely because they had to in order to continue to receive benefits, but did not think it was worthwhile. In addition, there were claimants who were mandated to attend but still did not turn up.

5.6 Impact on Jobcentre Plus's relationships

5.6.1 The National Careers Service

According to National Careers Service staff, the introduction of skills conditionality has increased the number of Jobcentre Plus referrals they receive, and they generally view this as a positive outcome. One National Careers Service Manager pointed out that referrals from Jobcentre Plus accounted for 50 per cent of their claimants two years ago, but more like 70 per cent now. She felt this was 'a big asset' for the National Careers Service, although acknowledged it could make them overly dependent on one source of referrals. In general, however, this growth in referrals had strengthened the relationships between Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service.

National Careers Service staff had two main concerns about skills conditionality. First, some Advisers were concerned about the effect conditionality could have on their relationships with clients. The National Careers Service has traditionally been keen to maintain an identity distinct from Jobcentre Plus, in that they do not sanction claimants, for example. However, some National Careers Service staff felt that this distinction could become blurred if claimants were mandated to attend.

Second, there was the question of reluctant or non-committal claimants. On the one hand, National Careers Service staff were concerned at the high FTA rates and its cost to the service and at wave 1 were hoping skills conditionality would help to improve this. On the other, however, National Careers Service Advisers felt that the service they offer was different from the mandatory nature of Jobcentre Plus. They felt that it could be hard to perform an advisory role if the claimant was not engaged or willing to take the advice in the first place.

'It [skills conditionality] is based on a misunderstanding of what careers practitioners can do if you don't have buy in from claimants.'

(National Careers Service Adviser)

5.6.2 Providers

The introduction of skills conditionality necessitated a much closer working relationship between providers and Jobcentre Plus. In some areas, this was much more effective than in others. One area in which Jobcentre staff, providers and claimants reported high general satisfaction around provision – particularly sbwas – saw providers looking to Jobcentres for guidance on how they could structure their courses to meet the needs of unemployed learners and the local labour market. In this area, Jobcentre Plus district office had tended to adopt a coordinating role, assessing the needs of the labour market and discussing this regularly with providers, and providers themselves were also prepared to work closely with one another. This approach appeared to work well, although entailed significant additional work for Jobcentre Plus in gaining an understanding of provider supply chains and funding models.

However, in other areas the relationship was not so close or clear cut. This was largely due to the lack of a similar sense of the delegation of responsibilities around the policy, particularly since the Skills Funding Agency's coordinating role among providers had been reduced. In these areas, Jobcentre Plus did not always feel it had the expertise or resources to take responsibility for overseeing and managing provider activities and providers were not working as closely with one another, existing in much more competitive relationships. As a result, both Jobcentre Plus and providers tended to assume that the other should respond to their needs and concerns. Jobcentre Plus were concerned that providers were not always responsive enough in putting on provision, whereas providers felt that the types of provision demanded by Jobcentre Plus, particularly rolling start dates, were difficult to fit in with their funding models. In these areas, more guidance may be

needed on the delegation of responsibility for overall coordination of both skills conditionality and provider Jobcentre relationships.

Like the National Careers Service, providers' main concern around skills conditionality related to the impact of introducing mandated and potentially unwilling learners into their courses, particularly in terms of how this would affect class dynamics. Several pointed out that antagonistic situations were not conducive to genuine learning, and that *'if it's a good course, then Jobcentre Plus should be able to sell it'*.

'A lot of them don't see the point ... and mandating them isn't going to make them understand ... Saying they've then got to come here because, if they don't, their benefits will be stopped, well it's not the best motivation for someone to be here.'

(Provider Manager)

'I understand the reasons behind the whole mandation thing, but I'm not convinced that it works.'

(National Careers Service Adviser)

However, with the numbers of mandated learners very variable, and in some areas quite low, there was little evidence on the effects of this. Some providers were teaching mandated learners in separate classes, particularly in areas where mandation was attached to particular courses rather than claimants. Almost all reported that mandation had had little affect on FTA rates, which would suggest that the most disengaged claimants were still not turning up. All of this made the impact of mandated learners hard to discern, and providers suggested that much was likely to be dependent on the quality of tutors and the dynamics in particular classes.

5.7 Impact on Jobcentre Plus practice

In many areas Jobcentre Advisers have found the new system challenging, both in terms of the criteria for deciding on mandation and staying up-to-date with the training offer in their area. One Partnerships Manager pointed out, *'nobody really appreciates how complicated it [the new system] is for advisers'*.

Some districts are now trying to tackle these problems. One had introduced dedicated 'skills teams', and another was considering establishing a similar system. This comprised a group of advisers who served as single points of contact in local offices, with specialised knowledge of the process for applying skills conditionality, local provision and funding arrangements, and the ability to coordinate between Jobcentre Plus and providers. The effectiveness of this strategy has been mixed, however; there were some issues around communication on the responsibilities of the teams and coordination between district and local level staff.

5.8 The advantages and disadvantages of skills conditionality

5.8.1 Advantages

Most interviewees – across Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and providers – felt that the premise behind skills conditionality was positive and necessary. It was seen to be useful in dealing with claimants who were reluctant to address basic skills needs, and a possible tool for reducing FTA rates. It was hoped that claimants who were initially reluctant to engage would come to see the value in training if given this push to participate.

'We need to do things to keep them [claimants] in the game, and sometimes it needs to be mandatory to make sure they do it and to keep them employable.'

(Jobcentre Adviser team manager)

The new regime has also necessitated closer working relationships between Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and providers; mandation requires staff at all levels to cooperate more extensively to help claimants navigate the system and to identify any problems. Many National Careers Service staff, in particular, felt that the introduction of skills conditionality had helped to strengthen the relationship between Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service, and begun to make Jobcentre Advisers more aware of the National Careers Service offer. While these new relationships had also experienced certain difficulties in some districts, many staff hoped that these would ultimately be resolved and that stronger relationships would allow claimants to benefit from an improved offer on training and provision.

5.8.2 Disadvantages

While the theoretical justification for skills conditionality had widespread support, the practical implementation of the policy had created a number of problems. First, it resulted in additional administrative costs for Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and providers, which many felt they did not have the resources to cover.

Second, the lack of a uniform interpretation of the policy led some providers to question the appropriateness of referrals, such as whether mandation should apply to claimants who were already willing. The definition of a skills gap was also open to interpretation, with some National Careers Service staff questioning whether skills conditionality should be applied where a claimant is attending to review their CV with an adviser, for example.

The complexity of the policy, both around the criteria for applying it and the administration involved, was deterring advisers and providers from applying the process and following it through.

Perhaps as a result of these issues, there was no clear evidence that skills conditionality had had an effect on attendance rates. During both waves of the study, providers and the National Careers Service continued to experience significant FTA rates and reported little clear differentiation between mandated and non-mandated claimants.

6 Training provision

Key findings

- Most of the training to which Jobcentre Plus claimants were referred was fairly generic rather than particularly vocational. Longer term and full qualification-based vocational training was a rarer option and claimants who took this option often self-referred and even paid for themselves. In addition, Jobcentre Advisers organised work experience placements, particularly for claimants with a limited work history.
- Sector-based work academies (sbwas) took two main forms: employer-based models, where an employer was setting up a new operation and worked with a Jobcentre and a training provider to prepare a stream of job applicants; and provider-based models, where providers sought to prepare candidates for a range of vacancies across a sector.
- By their nature sbwas were adapted to the number and form of the vacancies available. They generally lasted for about six weeks and involved varying proportions of work experience, training and, in all cases, a job interview. They were generally viewed positively as a means of directly or indirectly offering claimants a real chance of work, but could prove resource intensive for Jobcentres.
- Some of the areas had encountered difficulties setting effective sbwas due to problems identifying employers with a sufficient number of vacancies; generating enough good quality candidates; the capacity of providers to support the candidates; clarifying roles and responsibilities and ensuring there was sufficient time to set everything up.
- The most commonly identified gaps in provision included pre-entry English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and basic skills courses, Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards, work experience in manufacturing and smaller workplaces and high-level skills courses.
- The Flexible Support Fund (FSF) had been used to fill some of these gaps and meet claimants' specific needs.
- Claimants generally liked the opportunity to be re-skilled and add qualifications to their CV

In this chapter we look at the training and other forms of skill development support to which claimants were referred. In addition, Jobcentre Advisers organised work experience placements, particularly for claimants with a limited work history.

The study found that the most common forms of training provision to which Jobcentre Plus claimants were referred were:

- employability training
- basic skills and ESOL training.
- sbwas – a new form of provision combining a short programme of work experience and training with a guaranteed job interview which grew in popularity during the course of the study as the model became more established.

6.1 Work experience

Work experience was a particularly popular option for the 18 to 24-year-old claimant group because young people were thought to like practical activities and often lacked anything to put on their CV.

In one area, Employment Advisers produced a list of 'Hot' work experience vacancies each week which the advisers were encouraged to have on their desk and to suggest to claimants.

The policy intention behind offering work experience is to help build up a claimant's CV, as opposed to providing them with a job opportunity as available through sbwas see Section 6.3 below. However, some Jobcentre Advisers were sceptical about the concrete employment outcomes from work experience as only a few of their claimants had managed to secure a job following a work experience placement.

'It's unfortunate that there's so many [claimants] out there who don't get anything at the end of it'

(Jobcentre Adviser)

6.2 Training provision

Most of the training to which Jobcentre Plus claimants were referred was fairly generic (ie of relevance to a wide range of potential jobs) rather than particularly vocational (ie applying to particular jobs or occupations) and included basic skills, ESOL and employability courses. More specific vocational courses tended to last longer and providers thought that Jobcentres were more interested in short (four to six week) employment focused courses so that claimants could move into work as soon as possible. However, some Jobcentre Advisers felt that they could benefit from having a more extensive vocational training offer available to them.

Claimants tended not to be referred to full-time provision (if unemployed for less than six months) unless they were referred to an ESOL course, an sbwa or to courses which gave them a full qualification.

Generally providers were satisfied with the quality of referrals, although they reported that only a proportion of those referred generally started the course.

6.2.1 Self-referrals

Some claimants who had attended training had either brought up the subject with their Jobcentre Advisers in their initial or subsequent interview and/or found out about further training options themselves (for example through family and friends). In many cases they had chosen courses that would enable them to pursue a new career (examples include courses to help them become a driving instructor, a housing adviser and a childcare worker). In other cases courses were of more general value (for example one person was studying English literature and French conversation, albeit with the intention of getting an unspecified job in France in the future). In many of these cases the training was not funded by Jobcentre Plus.

6.3 Sector-based work academies

Sbwas are partnerships formed between Jobcentre Plus and usually one (and occasionally more) providers and one (or occasionally more) employers to provide Jobcentre Plus claimants with a mixture of work experience, training and other support (including interview preparation) leading to a job interview for an established vacancy. Participation is voluntary, but claimants put forward for an sbwa are required to complete the training and attend the job interview once they have agreed to participate. Sbwas started in England in August 2011. In the ten months to May 2012, 13,430 claimants started on sbwa placements.

There was a mix of experience of setting up and running sbwas across the five study areas. In one area they were well established (having been operating a trial version of an sbwa for over a year) and were seen as a very successful option for certain groups of claimants. In other areas, sbwas were not so well established and difficulties had been experienced in putting effective arrangements in place.

The way an sbwa was set up varied across the areas. Broadly there appeared to be two models of sbwas based on whether providers or employers took the initiative in establishing the arrangement and the number of providers and employers involved:

- Employer-based models – for instance where a single employer was setting up a new operation (eg a supermarket) and worked with Jobcentre Plus and a training provider(s) to prepare a stream of applicants for the jobs available. In some new establishments the work experience element might be provided by other workplaces with the same employer.
- Provider-based models – for instance where training providers identified potential vacancies across a sector, eg in the care sector, security or logistics and organised relevant training/work experience for potential applicants and work with a range of employers to secure a guaranteed job interview.

Sbwas also varied by a range of other characteristics. These included:

- Size – some were large covering hundreds of opportunities, for instance where a new supermarket was opening up. Others focused on only a few vacancies in one or more establishments.
- Skill requirements – some employers were looking for specific vocational skills (eg security guard training, forklift truck training) while others had more generic requirements.
- Form – while all sbwas include some combination of training and work experience, the balance and form each element took and any additional support provided (such as interview training and CV preparation) varied. In some cases, the work experience preceded the interview, in others it followed on from the interview and was more like a work trial. The work experience element could last anything from one day to six weeks.
- Length – sbwas generally lasted for around six weeks, although the examples examined in this study varied between three and ten weeks. Although some providers felt they should be longer, for example to increase the number of guided learning hours so that learning could be accredited, Jobcentre staff tended to think claimants lost interest if they were too long and the rate of drop out increased and there were fewer job outcomes as a result.

In areas where sbwas were relatively new, there were some difficulties coordinating the involvement of employers and providers at the same time and also ensuring advisers knew about the opportunities available and the type of candidates for whom they would be appropriate.

6.3.1 Advantages and disadvantages of sbwas

Employers, providers and Jobcentre staff identified a number of advantages and disadvantages of the sbwa model.

Advantages

Advantages included:

- Claimants had a real chance of finding work either directly (with the employer involved in the sbwa) or a related employer because of the relevant training and preparation they had received. The guaranteed offer of an interview was thought to be particularly attractive to claimants.

- Even if they do not get a job at the end of the process, sbwas offered claimants the opportunity to enhance their employability and get themselves ready and motivated for work.
- Employers received a good range of relevant candidates.
- Sbwases encouraged providers to be more focused on achieving job outcomes.
- Sbwases were not subject to the 16-hour rule so providers could condense training into a concentrated period of time, which could make delivery more efficient and help participants learn more effectively.
- The training and support elements involved were flexible and could be eligible for support from other funding sources (eg European Social Fund (ESF)).
- Sbwases could act as a catalyst for building closer relationships between Jobcentre Plus, providers and employers.
- Once systems were in place, sbwases were felt to be relatively easy to establish (providing suitable employers and providers had been identified).

Sector-based work academy in retail

In one area, Jobcentre Plus got in touch with a supermarket that was opening a new store and explained that they could work together with the local college to find recruits. The company thought it was quite refreshing to hear from Jobcentre Plus as it was the first time they had been approached proactively. The employer worked with the college to put together a course that involved first aid, customer service and food hygiene. All attendees were interviewed by local store managers (either for opportunities at the new store or existing stores) and successful candidates were recruited to a period of work experience. All the recruits eventually received job offers. The employer thought the exercise a success, they had been provided, in the main, with suitable candidates, at little cost and had built links with the local college.

Disadvantages

Setting up an sbwa could be resource intensive for Jobcentre Plus as tasks included pre-screening candidates, sorting out their travel arrangements, completing application forms with the employer and provider, and making sure advisers were aware of the opportunity. However, they appeared to be easier to operate once systems had been established.

Some employers were not interested in all the component elements of an sbwa (eg they might not have been able to provide the work experience placements) and the full model might not therefore be applicable.

Sbwases did not always result in job outcomes, even where claimants were hired. One provider had run a retail-based sbwa with a large supermarket chain, but found that, even though a significant proportion of participants were hired, they could not claim job outcomes as participants had been offered 12-hour contracts, which did not meet the 16-hour per week threshold required to sign off Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

Sector-based work academy in security

One provider saw an opportunity to set up an sbwa in the security sector due to the relatively high levels of labour turnover in the local area. The provider developed a programme that included a work placement, an Initial Security Training course either as a CCTV operative or in door security, CV support, interview practice and a first aid certificate. The programme lasted six weeks, although participants did not have to attend every day. There were eight participants and all were offered jobs. The provider subsequently started setting up a second sbwa along the same lines.

6.3.2 Difficulties

Not all the sbwas that had been set up in the five areas had been successful and a range of difficulties had been encountered centring on:

- The ability of Jobcentre Plus and providers to generate sufficient numbers of appropriate candidates. There were two related issues here: volume and quality. Difficulties in generating sufficient numbers were encountered when Jobcentre Advisers had not understood the requirement to put forward candidates by a certain deadline or been given insufficient notice to find appropriate candidates. Difficulties ensuring the right quality of candidate (eg that they had the right level of qualifications) could be overcome if the employer's requirements were well understood and candidates were adequately pre-screened (in some cases by both Jobcentre Plus and the provider).
- The capacity of providers to provide sufficient training places, particularly if the sbwa was on a large scale.
- In some areas there were problems identifying an employer who had a sufficient number of vacancies to make setting up an sbwa worthwhile or getting separate employers to work together. It can be more difficult to include smaller establishments as they have smaller numbers of vacancies and less management capacity to organise their involvement.
- Who took the initiative – in one area Jobcentre staff preferred to see providers take the initiative to engage with employers in setting up an sbwa, however, some providers thought that this is a role for Jobcentre Plus. Jobcentre Plus managers are generally expected to be involved from the outset. One Jobcentre Plus manager said that:

'In one sense it's a shared initiative ... but we would need to be invited from the moment they [the training provider] was thinking of setting up the initial meeting [with an employer].'

(Jobcentre Plus Employer Engagement Manager)

- Timing – to be successful the timing had to be right: This involved:
 - A degree of lead time (although some programmes had been set up in two weeks) to bring employers, providers and Jobcentre Plus together and complete administrative requirements.
 - A tightly specified programme which should not take too long, but long enough for participants to benefit. The policy envisages programmes lasting no more than six weeks, but this might not be sufficient for participants to complete a full training course (eg for a level 2 qualification).
 - A short gap (two to four weeks) between the course finishing and the work opportunities being available.

6.3.3 Successful outcomes

The quality and outcomes of sbwas were variable. Some had worked well and had produced high job outcome rates. Others had performed much less well and a number of providers reported that they had run sbwas where few or no participants had been hired at the end. The poor results were either linked to the quality of claimants referred or problems of coordination between different employers.

6.3.4 Demand for places

In some areas it was reported that places on sbwas went very quickly and Jobcentre Plus Districts had to provide 'early warning' of new opportunities to advisers to ensure all had a chance to access the opportunity. However, in other areas, Jobcentres struggled to find sufficient applicants, partly because the systems were not in place to alert advisers to the opportunity or because the employer had particular requirements (eg advanced cooking skills);

Jobcentre Plus generally reserved sbwa opportunities for their most 'work ready' claimants. This could include pre-selecting candidates through a basic skills test.

Sector-based work academy in distribution

A major employer was establishing a new warehouse facility and approached Jobcentre Plus for help with recruitment. It was decided to set up an sbwa with a college from another area (with whom the employer had worked previously). Premises were found in the local area and the sbwa was set up four weeks after the initial approach.

To fill the fork lift truck driver vacancies the employer wanted applicants who already had fork lift truck licences, but they did not need to have experience, as they would gain experience as part of the sbwa training. Jobcentre Plus were concerned they would not be able to find enough claimants with fork lift licences to fill the sbwa. They looked on their Labour Market System (LMS) to see which local offices had claimants with licences, and approached all of these, asking advisers to make contact with suitable candidates. They also approached Work Programme providers with the opportunities to boost numbers. To fill the second cohort of the sbwa, Jobcentre Plus District went to the Skills Funding Agency to request more fork lift provision so that more claimants could be trained to get a fork lift licence.

As part of the selection process, the employer asked Jobcentre Plus to staff a recruitment telephone line for claimants to call to express their interest and sign up to an Open Day. The employer wanted the recruitment line to serve as an initial screening tool, ie only claimants who were committed and confident enough to make the call themselves would be invited to attend the open day (Jobcentre Plus typically would refer claimants straight to the Open Day).

The Open Day was held at a local hotel and 660 people attended. The employer, the provider and Jobcentre Plus each did a talk. After this each claimant had to sit a paper-based basic skills assessment (maths and English). Claimants were divided into three groups (green, amber, red) according to their score. Green claimants were all given a start date to begin the Academy. Amber claimants were sent on an employability course. Red claimants were sent back to their Jobcentre Adviser and the adviser was told to send these claimants to basic skills training as soon as possible, and if they improved they might become eligible for a place on the next sbwa cohort.

The sbwa itself involved four weeks training (Monday – Thursday, 30 hours a week). Jobcentre Plus organised the travel arrangements. The training was designed by the employer and provider in partnership.

Some programmes mirrored the sbwa model, but did not include a full work experience element; however, they still involved a partnership between Jobcentre Plus and employers and a training provider to establish pre-employment training and support for specific vacancies.

Sector-based work academy in hospitality

A college struck up a relationship with a local fast food restaurant with three sites in the local area who were launching a major recruitment drive and saw the opportunity to set up an sbwa in conjunction with Jobcentre Plus. It was initially run as a pilot and comprised a week long course in food hygiene (level 2) and customer service, based on the employer's own training programme; a work tour, a guaranteed interview and work trials for those successful at interview. Including the pilot the college has run four programmes at two monthly intervals and each time the programme has had 16 participants. In most cases, participants go through to the work trial, although not all then stay on in permanent employment.

6.4 Gaps in provision

The most commonly identified gaps in provision included:

- Pre-entry and Level 1 ESOL, which could require resource intensive one-to-one provision and was therefore not very cost effective for providers to supply.
- More intensive ESOL courses, ie that required more than 16 hours learning a week, which was felt to be important for people with very low levels of English.
- Basic skills courses – for people with extremely low levels of literacy or numeracy
- CSCS cards – which were reported to be no longer funded through the Adult Skills Budget (ASB) (although they did appear to be funded through other sources in some areas).
- A wider range of work experience placements, particularly in manufacturing and in smaller workplaces.
- Higher level skills courses for graduates and skilled unemployed claimants.

Over the course of the study more ESOL and basic skills provision appeared to have become available. This was reported to be due to easing of funding and eligibility restrictions and a response from the market with an increased number of private sector providers. However, pre-entry level ESOL provision was still reported to be in short supply.

6.5 Setting up new provision

In all areas, there were examples of using the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) to set up new provision. Although the process of obtaining authorisation was felt to be very time consuming (for example advisers in at least one area needed to demonstrate that it would lead to an employment outcome) they did feel it was a good opportunity for them to influence the availability of provision and to meet specific needs. Examples included:

- Filling gaps in ESOL provision, including pre-entry level ESOL.
- Motivational courses for 18 to 24-year-olds at a local football club.
- Specific needs, such training for claimants with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or autistic spectrum disorders (ASD).

- There were also examples of providers establishing new courses to meet identified labour market needs, such as for security staff in London. However, it could take time to set up a new course and some providers wanted to be sure that there would be sufficient demand, particularly to establish courses with rolling start dates.

It could also take time for the availability of new provision to become known among all advisers and for them to spot relevant needs among their claimants.

Advisers could find it difficult to take an overview of provision across their local labour market and whether there was sufficient provision to meet employers' needs.

One concern that providers identified about setting up new provision was that their performance targets related to learner retention and achievement. Some were therefore reluctant to engage with learners who either might be reluctant to attend or leave if and when they got a job.

6.6 Outcomes

Providers often found it time consuming and expensive to track job outcomes for their learners once they have left their course and, as a result, the quality of the data they had was often not very good. As a result of the lack of systematic information Jobcentres were often not sure about the effectiveness of different types of provision and, for example, whether specific courses resulted in job outcomes and tended to rely on claimant feedback and anecdote.

Many of the claimants interviewed were still unemployed after their training, or had found a job unrelated to their training, but all felt it had increased their confidence and motivation. Claimants generally liked accredited courses which gave them a sense of achievement and helped improve their CV.

'They have helped immensely. Because it's improved my maths skills it actually helped with my [voluntary] work as I've got my till training. I've worked hard to get all the skills I need.'

(Claimant)

'I feel much more positive now, accessing the training courses has developed my self-esteem. Talking to different types of people and knowing that the community is geared up to help, turn up at the volunteer services express my needs and talk to my adviser at the Jobcentre and they were all interested in doing whatever they could within my power, so it felt very nurturing.'

(Claimant)

'It's [the qualification] also given me something to put on my CV, to say I can do. But it's getting the chance with an employer to show you can do the job, that's the key.'

(Claimant)

'The computer skills course will definitely help me to be closer to work. And its giving you a good attitude.'

(Claimant)

7 Approach to supporting young people into work

Key findings

- In most areas partnerships had been established with local authorities and others to tackle youth unemployment, for example, through establishing learning agreements and pre-apprenticeship learning opportunities.
- The most commonly identified needs among young people were for employability skills; establishing realistic career expectations; maintaining their confidence and motivation; understanding the world at work and improving basic maths and English.
- The most common measure that was organised for young people was work experience (including mandatory four week placements brought in under the Get Britain Working (GBW) measures) as they were felt to be very receptive to it and it helped them develop their CV. Work experience took place before, or sometimes alongside, basic skills training.

In most areas, partnerships had been established with local authorities and others to tackle youth unemployment, for example through establishing learning agreements and pre-apprenticeship learning opportunities.

Some of the local offices visited had recently reintroduced age group specialisms, for example with one group of specialist advisers dealing with 18 to 24-year-olds and others working with claimants aged 25 or over. This allowed advisers to develop expertise and knowledge of relevant local provision and the eligibility and funding rules that applied to young people. One local office had set up a 'youth employment suite'; a small room with resources available for young people to use at certain times.

The renewed focus has been partly driven by the development of the Youth Contract, but also recognition of the rate of youth unemployment and the importance of getting young people into work as soon as possible. The emphasis on tackling youth unemployment has led Jobcentre Plus to become more involved in partnership activity, for instance between Jobcentre Plus and local authorities (to develop pre-apprenticeship training), between Jobcentre Plus and Connexions, between Jobcentre Plus and the National Apprenticeship Service (to promote apprenticeships) and in wider groups such as local Skills Partnerships.

7.1 Young people's needs

Some respondents felt that young people's skills needs were similar to other claimants who had been out of the labour market for some time. However, others drew out some differences and the most commonly identified needs among young people were:

- Employability skills – this was thought to be the biggest skills deficit among young people. While advisers thought there was a wide range of employability training on offer they were unsure it was having a positive effect in terms of helping young people obtain sustained employment;
- Establishing realistic career expectations – careers advisers often have to challenge young people's perspectives about their potential career and introduce them to role models or send them to taster sessions to develop a more realistic goal. In one area a difference of approach emerged between the National Careers Service, which was reluctant to push young people into what were seen as low skill uninteresting jobs which they were likely to leave quickly and Jobcentre Plus's focus on getting young people into work as quickly as possible;

- Resilience – some respondents thought that young people became disheartened very quickly and needed support to boost their confidence and regain motivation;
- Understanding of the world at work – including workplace vocabulary, such as the concept of ‘deadlines’;
- Functional skills in maths and English – at a sufficient level to complete an apprenticeship.

7.2 Provision

The most common measure organised for young people was work experience (sometimes before or sometimes alongside basic skills training). Young people were felt to be very receptive to undertaking work experience placements and it helped them develop their CV. This included mandatory four week placements brought in under the GBW measures.

Young people were also referred to careers advice and guidance, as well as support with developing job search skills and interview techniques. Careers advisers generally reported that they had seen an increase in the number of young people (aged under 25), because of the Youth Contract or the closure of local Connexions offices, others in one area they thought they were seeing fewer, attributing this to the Work Programme.

Some providers liked to have mixed age groups on their employability courses, to help counteract low levels of confidence among young people and minimise distractions. However, other providers (and some claimant interviewees) strongly preferred different classes for different age groups and argued that young people’s needs and learning styles tended to be very different to those of older people and therefore needed different forms of provision.

One provider ran two separate versions of an employability programme: one for 16 to 19-year-olds and another for 20 to 24-year-olds. The content of each course was broadly similar, but the delivery methods were slightly different. For 16 to 19-year-olds units on time management and personal presentation were provided. However, this was thought not to be so important for older learners who instead undertook units on effective communication at work and health and safety at work, which were thought to be more useful to this age group.

In one area, providers were looking to develop a greater range of provision for young not in education, employment or training (NEETs), whereas previously most courses had been suitable for 19-year-olds and over. This involved working with specialist providers to develop specific courses. Generally, providers and advisers thought that young people did not respond well to classroom-based provision (as it was reminiscent of school) and preferred more practical ‘hands on’ learning activities.

7.3 Mandatory activity

There were different views on the effectiveness of mandatory activity for young people. In one area the local Jobcentre Plus lead on the Youth Contract thought that young people were not particularly concerned about being sanctioned and so felt that skills conditionality would not be very effective with that group. In other areas 18 to 19-year-olds were reported to react particularly negatively to being mandated and providers were generally reluctant to receive young people who had been mandated to their course as they lacked motivation.

'They come to see you and they don't want to do anything. They can get upset and angry at Jobcentre Plus having sent them to so many places, none of which worked for them.'

(National Careers Service Adviser)

On the other hand, in one area four week Mandatory Work Activity was reported to be very popular with some advisers as a way to engage young people and improve their CVs and work readiness. In another area, an adviser felt that sbwas tended to be pushed towards the 18 to 24-year-olds, particularly those who were not otherwise engaging, because it involved an element of mandation, once claimants had voluntarily agreed to participate.

7.4 Outcomes

The key benefits for young people from taking part in training or other courses were generally thought to be improved confidence and motivation.

'We get a lot of under 25s coming through and many do go on to get jobs. There's a massive drive to focus on NEETs, but actually employers are very willing to take them on as long as they have the basics, so as long as we intervene quickly and help them to help themselves.'

(Training provider)

8 Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to assess how new policies, introduced in 2011, designed to further align the employment and skills systems were being implemented by Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and skills providers (colleges and training organisations). In particular we addressed four broad questions:

- How aligned are the employment and skills systems – in processes, services and provision?
- How well are local partnerships working and what local arrangements are in place, including Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), employers and others?
- What is the claimant experience and the impact of the new system on the quality of the claimant experience?
- How does mandating claimants to skill development work in practice?

In conclusion we draw out the key findings from this study and examine how they answer these questions.

8.1 Alignment of the employment and skills systems

Overall we found a number of signs of progress towards a greater integration between skills provision and employment services. Where it works well, claimants and employers report considerable benefits. Job seekers gain the confidence and skills they need to find work. Employers fill vacancies with motivated and skilled employees. However, there is still scope for further progress across both systems.

There was a wide variability of practice across and within the five areas, reflecting the speed of introduction of new initiatives, the strength of local partnerships, growing local flexibilities and variable levels of knowledge and understanding by Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and providers about available provision, changing funding opportunities and eligibilities.

8.2 Partnership working

In all areas, the partnership between Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service is developing positively. Goals are shared and interviewees from both Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service said they were more and more *'talking the same language'*. Co-location has played an important role in building closer relationships. However there was still more to do in some offices to improve mutual understanding of each organisation's roles and capabilities. For example, some National Careers Service Advisers still felt they were being treated inappropriately as a 'CV service'. While working with claimants to improve their CVs is something National Careers Service Advisers are skilled at, they have other expertise as well and focusing just on CV development is unlikely to be the most cost effective use of their time.

One way in which relationships could be further improved would be to increase feedback between Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service, eg on the relevance and value of action plans and the outcome of training referrals. Also there is still scope for closer alignment of administrative and IT systems, eg to allow greater electronic exchange and sharing of information.

Jobcentre Plus' relationship with providers also showed signs of improvement, partly as a result of the introduction of new partnership manager roles. As a result, providers were responding both

to requests for more shorter courses and to new initiatives, such as sector-based work academies (sbwas). However, some providers thought they needed clearer incentives to work with unemployed people – who are more likely to drop out and therefore not achieve qualifications or attract full funding. There is also potential for Jobcentre Plus to build closer relationships with provider networks to discuss the quality and scope of available provision.

In addition, many advisers only had a partial view of what training and other skill development provision existed in their locality. To this end, District Provision Tools could be further improved, eg by allowing providers to review and update their material and to include feedback on the advisers' and claimants' experience of provision (eg similar to TripAdvisor) as indicators of quality. National Careers Service Advisers would also benefit from having access to the tool. If advisers had a wider understanding of the provision available, they may be in a better position to suggest vocational options to their claimants.

One of the drivers for improved partnership working appears to have been the greater policy emphasis on youth unemployment, which has meant for instance that Jobcentre Plus has forged new relationships with local authorities and, where they still exist, Connexions services.

However, one area where there does appear room for improvement is the effectiveness of relationships at a local strategic level. At the time of the study the role of Skills Funding Agency had just changed from a contractual to a more facilitative one. LEPs were still finding their feet and, initially at least, more focused on high level skills. In these circumstances, Jobcentre Plus and training providers felt there was a lack of a strategic overview and leadership over learning and skills provision, particularly for the unemployed provision which made it more difficult to disseminate changes to eligibility and funding rules and match the supply of training courses to labour market demand. Having clear liaison points in all the relevant organisations, as have been introduced in Jobcentre Plus, would appear to be a prerequisite to greater coordination at local level.

8.2.1 Sector-based work academies

During the course of the study all Jobcentre Plus areas had developed their use of sbwas which necessitated building closer relationships with employers and providers; the results were largely positive. Although there had been difficulties in all areas getting some sbwas off the ground and ensuring that Jobcentre Plus staff and providers were geared up to make them effective, once systems and relationships were in place they appeared fairly straightforward to operate. Once established they did seem an effective mechanism both for building closer relationships between Jobcentre Plus, providers and employers, and for getting claimants into jobs.

8.3 Skills conditionality

It is not clear as a result of the study whether the new policy of skills conditionality has a significantly positive effect on getting more claimants to address their skill needs and increasing attendance rates at diagnostic sessions and courses. The objective or standardised approach to screening, an informal, conversational approach to skills screening by Jobcentre Advisers can lead to some skills gaps being overlooked. While providers do consistently conduct formal basic skills screening with claimants, this relies on Jobcentre Advisers effectively identifying gaps and making the referral. There still seems to be a large number of claimants failing to start mandated courses, despite the risk of sanctions and many of those who do attend say they would have done so in any event. That said, we did find a number of examples of claimants who had attended and reported benefits from attending training courses that they would not have done if they had not been required to do so.

While there is broad agreement on the policy aims, there remain significant practical issues to be addressed around skills conditionality. These include:

- Reiterating the policy intent and issuing more guidance, to ensure a more consistent set of criteria are adopted about who should be mandated to attend which type of support. Currently practice varies between and within Jobcentres.
- Looking at administrative burdens for both Jobcentres and providers to ensure they are kept to a minimum.
- Reviewing systems to collate information on provision for Jobcentre and National Careers Service providers, with particular focus on ensuring advisers receive up-to-date information and have sufficient knowledge to make informed choices between multiple courses and providers.
- In light of a reduced role for the Skills Funding Agency locally, it is important to set out a clear delegation of responsibilities around coordinating skills conditionality, both in terms of securing a full and appropriate offer on provision, and in ensuring that all organisations involved – Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and providers – understand the process and criteria for applying the policy.

8.4 Claimants' experiences

It is not possible to assess the impact of the various changes to the employment and skills systems on claimants from this qualitative study. Many claimants were unaware that their skill needs were being assessed, unless they had taken online tests with a provider. The focus on skills had helped some claimants improve their confidence and self-esteem as well as their basic numeracy, language or IT skills. However, relatively few had acquired a new skill set as a result of the new system and those who had gained new vocational skills had done so largely as a result of their own initiative.

In April 2011, the new pre-Work Programme Jobcentre Plus Offer came into operation, including new skills, and employment policies and systems. This report examines how the new systems were implemented by Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and skills providers (colleges and training organisations). In particular, it focuses on: how aligned the employment and skills systems were; how well local partnerships worked; the claimant experience; and how mandating claimants to skill development worked in practice. The study was based on two waves of interviews and other qualitative research with Jobcentre Plus and National Careers Service staff, as well as providers, employers and claimants.

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