

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 522

Focus groups with New Deal and Employment Zone customers: Research to inform Flexible New Deal

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Summary

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are in the process of reviewing the process for individuals claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). The planned introduction of a 'Flexible New Deal' combined with an increase in the conditions placed on those claiming JSA is intended to move customers into work more quickly through a more personalised offering. The proposed policy changes were set out in the Green Paper *'In work, better off'* in July 2007.

IFF Research was commissioned by DWP to explore current JSA customers' experiences of the existing system to help to feed into the design of the new model. A qualitative research methodology was adopted and a total of ten focus groups were conducted with current JSA customers. These covered customers who had experienced Employment Zone (EZ) provision, New Deal provision and those who had been claiming JSA for between 12 and 18 months without experiencing the more intensive provision available under the New Deal or EZ offers.

It should be noted that all the focus group participants had been long-term unemployed (unemployed for longer than six months). The findings should not be taken as representing the views of all jobseekers. Only 20 per cent of jobseekers remain unemployed for six months.

Customers were asked to discuss their views of the 'standard' Jobcentre Plus service as well as their experiences of New Deal or the EZ. They were also asked for their reactions to some of the changes that would be introduced under the Flexible New Deal model.

Fortnightly jobsearch reviews are short contacts to talk about what the jobseeker has been doing to find work and to confirm they have been actively seeking work. In discussions about their experiences of the Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) process, FJR officers came under criticism for being uninterested and insufficiently well informed about job requirements or vacancies to help customers find work. Almost half of customers stated that they did not regularly see an FJR officer but often simply handed in the details to a 'receptionist' for processing.

Those customers who stated that they did see an FJR officer when they went in for their fortnightly review meetings generally stated that they saw a different

member of staff on each occasion and had to cover the same ground each time. The majority of respondents had expectations that the fortnightly review meetings would, or should, offer more intensive back-to-work support.

The computerised 'Job Points' at Jobcentre Plus were criticised by many customers for bringing up geographically inappropriate roles, being difficult to use or bringing up jobs that had largely been taken.

For many, the FJR process was simply felt to be a 'waiting room' experience that has to be endured for a period if they are to access any useful assistance with their search for work.

The key suggestions for improvement to the Jobcentre Plus process voiced by customers were:

- greater continuity of advisers;
- ensuring that Jobcentre Plus advisers are better informed about sector-specific requirements and available training;
- greater tailoring of advice by Jobcentre Plus advisers so that they offer more support for customers wishing to up-skill to achieve a job in a particular sector;
- reviewing the usefulness of Gateway to Work or similar mandatory courses. Customers felt that these usually failed to deliver what was promised in the introduction to these courses. Smaller classes, more one-to-one tuition or coaching and more severe steps taken to deal with disruptive attendees would all be welcomed;
- developing Action Plans in closer collaboration with customers with the choice of options or activities fully explained. Several customers stated that they had not realised that they could have any input into these plans.

People are required to participate in New Deal after 26 weeks unemployment if aged 18 to 24; and for people aged 25 and over, after being unemployed for 18 out of the previous 21 months. New Deal includes a Gateway period during which the customer receives intensive help from a Jobcentre Plus Adviser. In certain areas of the country, the New deal for people aged 25 and over is replaced by externally contracted EZs.

After relatively negative experiences of the FJR process, customers who then had a more settled rhythm of interviews during their New Deal or EZ provision felt that this compared favourably with the service they received from the jobcentre. This probably reflects the increase in intensity of help that is provided with New Deal and EZs.

Most of the customers who had been on the EZ programme had met with the same personal adviser on a weekly or fortnightly basis. This consistency was felt by all to be important in terms of building a relationship with the adviser and enabling

the adviser to get to know them, their skills and their interests, resulting in them being able to suggest suitable jobs. On top of regular meetings, those who had experience of the EZ reported that advisers often made themselves available on an ad-hoc basis (for example, to help fill in an application form or for a 'rehearsal' prior to a job interview).

New Deal customers reported varied experiences of their meetings with their personal adviser. A minority had weekly meetings with the same adviser which lasted about an hour each time. These customers tended to be very positive about the programme. Others reported just receiving brief meetings of five to ten minutes, and saw no discernible difference between the New Deal programme and the fortnightly job search reviews they had experienced prior to referral to the programme.

For a proportion of customers, simply being able to see the same adviser on a regular basis and receiving some assistance with the process of applying for jobs within the EZ achieved results very quickly (with customers finding work within a week or two).

A move to weekly signing during the period accessing the EZ was generally received positively. While those who had not been through this process viewed it as creating a further administrative burden, those who had experience of the EZ, had found that more regular meetings had given them the impression that the adviser was committed to helping them find work.

In addition to meetings with advisers, customers experiencing both the EZ and the New Deal had received some financial assistance to help them find work (although this appeared to be more common under EZ provision). These customers were generally very positive about the role this had played in helping them get back into work. In several cases, customers attributed assistance, such as being provided with a voucher to buy clothes for an interview or being allowed to use the telephone in the EZ provider's office, as key to enabling them to find work very quickly after being referred.

The other key area of support that customers had received through the EZ about which they were very positive was assistance with jobsearch skills such as compiling a CV, interview techniques and assistance with application forms. While this type of assistance had also been available to those who had experienced New Deal provision, under the New Deal, training in these areas was normally given as a 'course' or 'class' rather than the one-to-one tailored sessions that were available under the EZ. New Deal customers seemed to have difficulty applying this 'general' advice to their specific circumstances, while some of those who had been through the EZ directly attributed the work carried out by the adviser on tasks such as putting together a focused CV to enabling them to secure work.

Some customers who had been through the EZ programme stated that it was the assistance with interviewing skills that really 'made the difference'. Advisers had given them advice on the types of questions that employers might ask and the

ways in which they could respond positively (particularly to questions about their work history, etc.).

In addition, customers felt that both EZ and New Deal providers seemed to have access to more job vacancies than the jobcentre. This was felt to particularly be the case for the private sector EZ providers. Customers felt that these providers had strong relationships with local employers and were often able to 'create' vacancies by contacting employers proactively with details of suitable candidates.

In a few cases, the EZ was successful for customers because it secured them access to a particular training course or certification that they required for their preferred occupation.

Almost all customers that had been referred to an EZ programme thought that this should have happened sooner. Just under half of those that we spoke to who had been through the EZ process had found a job within weeks of moving onto the EZ programme. By comparison, views on whether being referred to the New Deal programme earlier would have helped customers back into work sooner were mixed.

The key conclusions that can be drawn from this research are:

- The key indication from the research is that the EZ model (which the proposed Flexible New Deal has most in common with) is seen by customers as being more successful than the current New Deal model in helping customers back into work. The elements of the model that are most effective in helping customers move on are:
 - meeting with the same personal adviser on each visit;
 - financial support for buying clothes for interviews, childcare or relevant tools/equipment;
 - the provision of sector-specific training or certification;
 - personalised one-to-one advice on CV writing and interview skills;
 - a more 'hands on' approach from the personal adviser involving them calling prospective employers and proactively contacting customers if a suitable job comes up.
- That the stages of Directed Job Search and Supervised Job Search (broadly similar to the process of FJRs and the current New Deal's Gateway Programme respectively) that are envisaged as the stages leading up to entry to the Flexible New Deal may produce limited results, with jobseekers like those in the focus groups, who have been unemployed for longer than six months, unless substantial changes are made to their format and content. Customers who had received provision of this type had generally found it to be too generic and they had experienced difficulty applying the advice given to their own particular circumstances. Jobseekers, who have been unemployed for longer than six months, appear to require more intensive help than that provided by Jobsearch reviews.

1 Introduction and methodology

1.1 Methodology

The DWP are in the process of reviewing the process for individuals claiming JSA. In summary, the proposed revised JSA regime and Flexible New Deal seeks to redesign the current system around the needs of the individual as well as increasing conditionality of claiming JSA over time. Both 18-24 year olds and those aged 25+ would enter a more flexible, personalised New Deal after 12 months of claiming JSA and would receive specialist back-to-work support provided by the private, voluntary and public sectors.

The proposed policy changes were set out in the Green Paper *'In work, better off'* in July 2007. A consultation period followed, results of which were published in December 2007.

IFF Research was commissioned by DWP to explore current JSA customers' experiences of the existing system. The findings of the research will inform the development of the new Flexible New Deal model.

Specifically, the objectives of the research were to provide a better understanding of:

- what elements of the current model have helped customers find work and why?
- what elements of the process could be improved and how?
- at what stages would more or different intervention be helpful?
- what are the implications for the proposed policy changes?

A qualitative research methodology was adopted and a total of ten focus groups were conducted with current JSA customers.

Participants for the groups were recruited through local jobcentres selected by the DWP. Once the jobcentres were selected, the DWP provided an anonymised dataset for individuals meeting the requirements for each of the ten groups. From this a sample of individuals to approach was randomly selected. Records were selected on an '1 in n' basis to generate customers to approach for each focus group in a ratio of 20:1 (to allow for the fact that the DWP does not hold telephone numbers for all customers and that some customers were unwilling or unable to attend focus groups). This sample was sent back to the DWP and contact details were appended.

An opt-out exercise was then conducted whereby all potential participants were contacted by a letter introducing the project and inviting them to reply if they did not wish to be contacted again in connection with it.

Once the opt-out exercise was complete and any jobseekers not wishing to be contacted were removed from the database, respondents were recruited by telephone. An incentive payment of £20 was made to all those participating.

The group discussions were held across three areas: London (Brent), Birmingham and Bristol. The London groups and half the Birmingham groups were held in areas that are EZ areas. The Bristol groups and the remaining Birmingham groups were held in areas where EZ provision is not available.

The composition and geographical location of the ten group discussions is shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Group composition

Group	Target group	Location
1	New Deal participants aged 18-24	Bristol
2	New Deal participants aged 18-24	Birmingham
3	New Deal participants aged 25+	Bristol
4	New Deal participants aged 25+	Birmingham
5	18-24 year olds that have experienced EZ provision	London
6	18-24 year olds that have experienced EZ provision	Birmingham
7	25+ year olds that have experienced EZ provision	London
8	25+ year olds that have experienced EZ provision	Birmingham
9	25+ year olds that have been receiving JSA for over 12 months but less than 18 months	London
10	25+ year olds that have been receiving JSA for over 12 months but less than 18 months	Bristol

The groups were held in meeting rooms in jobcentres or facilities provided by EZ providers and took place in the weeks commencing 4 and 10 December. Groups lasted around one and a half hours each.

Participants were randomly selected from an anonymous database and no quotas were set on ethnicity, disability, gender or other demographic characteristics. However, a good range of customers were represented across the ten groups.

Twelve customers were recruited for each focus group but the numbers attending ranged from four to ten. Across all groups, a total of 64 customers participated. A breakdown of customers by age, gender and ethnicity is shown in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Demographic characteristics of customers attending groups

	Total	Male	Female	BME
New Deal participants aged 18-24	11	7	4	6
New Deal participants aged 25+	15	8	7	4
EZ participants aged 18-24	9	5	4	6
EZ participants aged 25+	18	12	6	10
Customers aged 25+ who have been receiving JSA for 12-18 months	11	7	4	6

2 The role of Jobcentre Plus

2.1 Overview

Views on the service provided by Jobcentre Plus were negative. Almost all customers felt that Jobcentre Plus offered little real help in finding them suitable employment or accessing the training opportunities that would allow them to find employment. This finding needs to be set in the context of Jobcentre Plus policy. The general policy during the first 26 weeks of a claim to JSA is of a short, sharp jobsearch reviews, primarily aimed at ensuring people are actively seeking work, which for most is sufficient. But clearly for some customers, the expectation is that more should be provided. Those who had found work while attending fortnightly reviews at the jobcentre stated that the employment they had been encouraged to take up was 'dead end' or demoralising. This may reflect Jobcentre Plus' policy of 'work first'. This policy is changing and a greater emphasis on sustainable employment outcomes and identifying and addressing skills needs is being adopted within the Flexible New Deal and Leitch proposals.

The Jobcentre Plus advisers came under criticism from the majority of customers for being uninterested in them as individuals and not informed enough about sector-specific job requirements or vacancies. Advisers were generally seen as a necessary conduit for individuals to receive their benefit but of very little help in terms of 'moving them on'.

The computerised 'Job Points' at Jobcentre Plus were criticised by many customers for bringing up geographically inappropriate roles, being difficult to use or bringing up jobs that had largely been taken. A few of those who had attempted to follow-up opportunities posted stated that nobody picked up the phone when they called.

Jobseekers suggested that the service that Jobcentre Plus provides could be improved by making more phones and internet connections available for customers to use, and by offering more tailored careers advice. A few suggested that dedicated careers advisers should be available on site – ideally sector specialists who could provide tailored information and guidance on the entry requirements for different job roles in a specific sector. They also felt that advisers 'should' have lists of

employer contacts in the sector who regularly have vacancies or are prepared to offer work experience. These issues are being addressed by the development of Local Employer Partnerships, which will strengthen Jobcentre Plus' engagement with employers and hence, develop their understanding of local labour markets.

'I think they [Jobcentre Plus staff] should have experts in different fields, like IT, construction. Two people in each different department who have been dealing in those jobs, so that you get to speak to someone, those people should have contacts themselves already into that field for you to speed up the process.'

(25+ JSA customer, London)

A handful of customers had high level qualifications such as a degree and felt that there was no provision within Jobcentre Plus to signpost them towards appropriate roles or training. One customer with a chemistry degree was looking for research work in a hospital and felt that their adviser was 'ignoring' their qualifications and directing them towards roles that they were over-qualified for (for example, in catering roles). As well as introducing sector-specific advisers, these customers also felt it would be beneficial to have advisers that specialised in helping customers find graduate level roles.

2.2 The New Jobseeker Interview and Jobseeker Agreement

Customers were more or less unanimous in the view that the New Jobseeker Interview and the Jobseeker Agreement served administrative purposes only. It was seen by almost all as a form-filling exercise that offered no real help in getting back into work or training. Very few had read the Agreement in detail before signing it.

'It [the Jobseeker Agreement] just tells you what you're going to be getting and how it works, it doesn't like tell you how to get yourself back into a full-time job, they [Jobcentre Plus staff] don't really help you with a full-time job, you have to do it yourself, if you know what I mean.'

(25+ EZ customer, London)

This needs to be seen in the context of DWP policy. Jobcentre Plus helps people identify realistic and achievable job goals and those steps that will offer the best chance of leading to a job. The jobseeker is expected to look for work themselves.

2.3 Fortnightly Jobsearch reviews

FJR are short (typically five or ten) minute contacts to talk about what the customer has been doing to find work and to confirm they have been actively seeking work and are therefore, entitled to payment of JSA. These contacts do not

offer opportunities for an in-depth assessment of barriers to employment – done at key stages (13 and 26 weeks) through more in-depth interviews with a personal adviser.

FJRs were viewed negatively. Some customers stated that they did not typically receive any advice or assistance when they visited the jobcentre for their fortnightly review and reported just handing their information to a receptionist for processing. Overall just under half of customers stated that this was their experience (although this did vary considerably by area and for some jobcentres this appeared to be 'the norm').

'It's just: "okay, sign it, there's your money, go".'

(18-24 EZ customer, London)

Even where customers **had** seen a Jobsearch Review Officer for their review they tended to feel that advisers were predominantly interested in 'going through the motions'. Nearly all customers felt advisers were not interested in helping them up-skill or get them a job in the field they wanted to work in. Several customers had expressed an ambition for a career (e.g. plumbing, the Fire Service), but reported that the Jobcentre Plus staff had offered them no advice or encouragement to work towards this area and instead said they needed to take any job available in the first instance. These customers reported that this had had a negative impact on their motivation and self-esteem.

'They [Jobcentre Plus staff] expect you to get like the cheapest job, like £5.60, you can't work for that in this country, if you're going to do that you might as well just do cleaning.'

(25+ JSA customer, London)

'And I'm not going to take any job, you know, I want to do something I've trained for, you know, what's the point of doing all these years training if I'm going to end up sweeping the roads. I don't want to sweep the roads, I'm a painter and decorator, I want to paint and decorate.'

(25+ New Deal customer, Birmingham)

Those customers who stated that they did see a Jobsearch Review Officer when they went in for their fortnightly review meetings generally stated that they saw a different member of staff on each occasion and had to cover the same ground each time. To some degree, this does reflect job search review policy. The primary purpose is to review jobsearch and make sure the customer is actively seeking work, though it should also identify those who need more help and refer to an Adviser. Customers felt that the FJRs could be significantly improved if they were held with the same person on each occasion, allowing each contact to build upon the last and a better understanding of customer needs and rapport to be established.

'It's better when you're communicating with the same person all the time and he knows what problems you're going through and what job you're looking for. If you go to the Jobcentre you're signing on with someone, he doesn't know you and next week you come in and it's somebody else, they tell you a different story, every time you go in there it's like a new story.'

(18-24 EZ customer, Birmingham)

While customers were broadly in agreement that the FJRs had offered little in the way of real help or support in them getting back into work, experiences of how long staff spent with them and the level of scrutiny their evidence of job searching received varied significantly. Some did not see a Jobsearch Review Officer at all, some reported that a member of staff (who may have been a Jobsearch Review Officer) had just given their paperwork a cursory glance before signing it off, and others reported their FJR officer being more thorough and questioning them on the jobs they had applied for. Customers spilt approximately evenly between those who had not had any form of discussion/interview at their FJR and those who had had at least a five to ten minutes discussion. Those who had not experienced any form of 'interview' were fairly evenly split between those that thought a more thorough approach would motivate them to look for more jobs in between fortnightly reviews, and those that did not.

2.4 13 week review with adviser/Restart interviews

People who do not find work quickly are required to attend more in-depth interviews with a personal adviser at key stages:

- a 13 week interview (20 minutes) is undertaken to review the Jobseeker's Agreement discussing and agreeing with the customer how their job goals and jobsearch might be increased to enhance the prospects of finding work;
- Restart interviews (typically about 40 minutes) are undertaken for people aged 25 and over at 26 and 52 weeks. These interviews provide an opportunity to look afresh at the customer's circumstances, discuss barriers to employment and to see what help, if any, are required.

Recall of the 13 week review or Restart interview was very low. In general, customers tended not to be able to differentiate between the different types of meetings or FJRs they had had with Jobcentre Plus staff.

Where customers could recall this stage of the process they simply saw it as a continuation of the FJRs. It was not seen as offering any additional help or advice, but in the main was just seen to be another administrative hurdle. To some extent this may reflect the limited amount of help Advisers have to offer during 13-week and Restart interviews. Employment and skills training is fairly limited in England until someone joins New Deal.

'[the restart interview] is kind of updating all the computer bits and reviewing your job search thing, and I got sent to an adviser briefly and was made to sign on weekly for a few weeks and it didn't really make a lot of difference, just a bit more intense.'

(25+ New Deal customer, Bristol)

3 Referral to the New Deal or Employment Zone programmes

3.1 Overview

People are required to participate in New Deal after 26 weeks unemployment if aged 18 to 24; and, for people aged 25 and over, after being unemployed for 18 of the previous 21 months. New Deal comprises of a gateway period (up to a maximum of 16 weeks), during which the customer receives intensive help from a Jobcentre Plus Adviser. Customers who do not find work during this period have access to a range of options, including subsidised employment, full-time education and training, voluntary activity or environmental work experience, which are externally contracted/provided.

In certain areas of the country, the New Deal for people aged 25 and over is replaced by externally contracted EZs. EZ providers have more flexibility in that they are not tied to a broad framework, which is the case with New Deal, which comprises a fixed length gateway and Option period. EZ help is also provided in some areas to young people who have previously participated in New Deal.

Among customers aged 25 or over, multiple experiences of going through the New Deal programme were relatively common. A few customers were currently on their third New Deal cycle within the last few years.

Young people who had been through both the New Deal and EZ programmes (New Deal returners) were more positive about the latter. In these cases the New Deal Gateway was viewed as not differing substantially from their experience of signing on at Jobcentre Plus prior to being referred to New Deal, where the EZ provision was seen as offering something over and above this (principally more tailored support).

Almost all customers who had been referred to an EZ programme thought that this should have happened sooner. Just under half of those who had been through the EZ process had found a job within weeks of moving onto the EZ programme. Basic assistance such as help with rewriting a CV, receiving vouchers to buy clothes for interview or going through an interview role-play were seen by these individuals to have had a significant impact in getting them back into employment.

'If you started signing on with [xxxx] [EZ provider in Birmingham] you'd get a job straight away, because they help you more, they sit down with you and talk to you, they want to know about you whereas the Jobcentre is just sign in, don't sit down, just walk in and they ask you have you been looking and it's the same answer 'yes I've been looking in the newspapers blah blah blah'...basically they need to ask more questions and get to know the person more.'

(18-24 EZ customer, Birmingham)

By comparison, views on whether being referred to the New Deal programme earlier would have helped customers back into work sooner were mixed.

To a large extent the customer experience of either the New Deal or EZ programmes was driven by perceptions of the quality of the personal adviser they had been assigned. Views of the experience tended also to be more positive in cases where the adviser offered practical help such as vouchers for clothes or travel, funded training or money to buy necessary equipment (e.g. tools).

Awareness of the options available to them and the practical support on offer varied significantly from customer to customer.

3.2 New Deal/Employment Zone personal adviser

New Deal customers reported varied experiences of their meetings with their personal adviser. A minority had weekly meetings with the same adviser which lasted about an hour each time. These customers tended to be very positive about the programme. Others reported just receiving brief meetings of five to ten minutes, and saw no discernible difference between the New Deal programme and the FJR they had experienced prior to referral to the programme.

'But, you know, my New Deal adviser always knew what stage I was at the next time she saw me, so you know, my experience was all right.'

(18-24 New Deal customer, Bristol)

'My New Deal Adviser would be away and I'd have to see another one and she wouldn't know my circumstances, she'd say oh just sign on and she'll be back next week.'

(25+ New Deal customer, Birmingham)

For a few customers on the New Deal programme there was virtually no one-to-one contact with a personal adviser. On the other hand, a few customers reported forming close links with their adviser which had proved extremely beneficial.

Most of the customers who had been on the EZ programme had met with the same personal adviser on a weekly or fortnightly basis. This consistency was felt by all to be important in terms of building a relationship with the adviser and enabling the adviser to get to know them, their skills and their interests, resulting in them being able to suggest suitable jobs. Meeting with the same adviser on each visit was seen by almost all to represent a significant improvement over either the New Deal programme (where they had experienced both) or the process of FJR.

A few (particularly younger) customers who had experienced the EZ also reported that they had not necessarily only met with their EZ advisers for pre-determined appointments. These customers stated that their advisers had been extremely flexible and had accommodated them at short notice when they required additional assistance (typically just before attending an interview). A couple of very motivated customers stated that they had met with their adviser every two to three days until they had found work.

Although the time the EZ adviser spent with them on each occasion was not significantly longer than they had experienced with jobcentre staff (around 15-20 minutes), many reported feeling like the adviser had 'more time for them'. In most cases this was a result of advisers providing information and advice that was more tailored to their individual needs and requirements and therefore, more efficient. At best this relationship was reported to be collaborative, responsive and resulted in increases in an individual's self-esteem and confidence, as well as securing them a relevant job or training course.

3.3 Practical support in getting back to work

3.3.1. Financial support

Where customers had been provided with financial support for their job seeking, they tended to be very positive about the role this had played in helping them get back into work. In several cases, customers attributed assistance, such as being provided with a voucher to buy clothes for an interview or being allowed to use the telephone in the EZ provider's office, as key to enabling them to find work just a week or two after being referred to the EZ programme (despite being unemployed for six months beforehand). In one case a customer had received assistance in arranging childcare without which it would have been impossible for her to return for work.

Experience of receiving practical help of this sort tended to be more common among those on the EZ programme than on New Deal. Several customers on the latter programme mentioned that travel expenses were covered but experiences of other forms of financial support were rare.

3.3.2 Help with CV writing and interview skills

Some customers praised the amendments that EZ advisers had made to their CV. One customer explained that he had no idea what a CV should look like and because he had had multiple short-term jobs had originally constructed a CV that was eight pages long. When he had presented this at the jobcentre the adviser had photocopied it and returned it to him without comment. It was only when he was referred to an EZ provider (Pertemps in this case) he was told that it needed to be much shorter. After trying and failing to cut it down, the Pertemps adviser spent time with him showing him how to summarise the information. This one-on-one practical help was seen to be a significant help in securing job interviews. Other customers reported that they had been able to bring in application forms to their interviews and their EZ adviser had been able to assist them with completing these.

Some customers who had been through the EZ programme stated that it was the assistance with interviewing skills that really 'made the difference'. Advisers had given them advice on the types of questions that employers might ask and the ways in which they could respond positively. Others reported being impressed that advisers had called them up after an interview to 'debrief' them and find out how it went.

Several customers on the New Deal programme had also received some help with their CV or attended classes on interview skills, although this tended to be as part of the Gateway to Work course where tutors or advisers were seen to have limited time to spend with individuals. The help received here was seen to be less personalised or tailored. A reasonable proportion of these customers appeared to have difficulty applying advice given in this generic way to individual application forms that they had to complete or interviews that they attended.

3.4 The Gateway Programme (New Deal)

On the whole, customers had not found either the Programme Centre or the more intensive Gateway to Work courses particularly useful. Several noted that the group environment was not conducive to learning, as some individuals could be disruptive or intimidating. Other criticisms included tutors not having enough time to spend with people individually, there not being enough computers for everyone to search for jobs simultaneously and newspapers being out of date.

'You basically have to go for six months and you're expected to look for jobs for eight hours each day, which is impossible. After about three hours you've finished looking through all your sources and applied for every single job. Come back the next day but you can't do anything because you've applied for all the jobs...you're supposed to turn up and do nothing for the whole eight hours, it's a waste of time.'

(18-24 New Deal customer, Bristol (discussing their experience of a New Deal option))

'There's older people in there [at [xxxx] – where the Birmingham Gateway to Work course was held] and they want to learn, you've got people in there from different nations, they want to learn, because they come from different places and they're doing English, they're doing maths you know, and they do want to learn. And there's people distracting them all the time, there's people bullying people, you can't believe what you're seeing – bullying on New Deal.'

(25+ New Deal customer, Birmingham)

Older customers were particularly negative about their Programme Centre or Gateway to Work¹ experiences, with some saying that it felt like being back at school. As well as feeling uncomfortable in that environment per se, one or two customers also reported feeling embarrassed about their lack of basic skills being exposed in front of younger customers.

'I think it should [be arranged] in ages...have 18-25's together and then anybody over 25 or whatever, have them in a different class. There's a lot of older people that didn't get to read and write properly, and it's a bit embarrassing if you're around these young people...'

(25+ New Deal customer, Birmingham)

Recall and opinions of the Action Plan were mixed. The majority of customers simply didn't recall this aspect of the process. Others found the Action Plan helpful, while many of the remainder just viewed it as another administrative task that offered little real help in finding them suitable work. Again, the usefulness of the Action Plan was dependent on the quality of the personal adviser, and the level of engagement of the customer.

'It's an action plan but it's for them and not for you, they're telling you what they want, not asking you what you want.'

(25+ New Deal customer, Birmingham)

¹ It was often difficult to establish exactly what provision individuals had experienced (and particularly to distinguish between Programme Centre or Gateway to Work provision). Respondents were often unclear about the timescales of the provision that they had attended and rarely used the correct 'Jobcentre Plus' terms.

Customer portrait

Paul is a 19 year old man from Bristol, who hasn't worked since leaving school three years ago.

His referral to New Deal involved him attending a course at [xxxx] in Bristol for six months to do job searches and get help with his CV and interview skills. He assumed this would involve one-to-one interviews with a personal adviser but after the introduction on the first day he was left to his own devices. By his own admission he just '*sat there for six months*'. He received some help with his CV but no training or work experience. He spent the majority of the time playing solitaire on the computer or listening to music.

At the end of the course he told his New Deal adviser that he didn't want to go back there again and at this point was referred to [xxxx]. Paul found Prospects very different from [xxxx]; there were around half as many customers there so staff were able to spend a bit more time with each person. Paul found the staff at [xxxx] really strict' compared with [xxxx]; they would phone him up if he wasn't there on time and printed out jobs for him to apply for.

After a couple of weeks, when Paul had been unsuccessful in securing a job interview, Prospects organised a voluntary work placement for him in the retail sector. He is enjoying this and thinks it will help him secure paid work.

3.5 New Deal options

Most customers did not perceive themselves to have had a range of options available to them, flexible or otherwise, when they started on either the New Deal Gateway Programme or the EZ. This needs to be seen in the context of the policy. During the early stages of New Deal and EZs, the adviser should be reviewing individual circumstances developing an Action Plan that will maximise the chances of finding work quickly. Options are considered as and when appropriate, rather than being explained or presented as a menu from which to choose. Where this knowledge did exist it was because customers had proactively researched the programme. Very few customers recalled the options being explained to them at the point of referral or at subsequent meetings with an adviser. A few felt that they had been pushed into employment despite expressing a preference for training. Under Flexible New Deal and Leitch, the proposal is to focus more on sustainable employment and addressing skill needs, whereas in the past (currently) the focus has tended to be about getting in to work at all costs.

Only a minority could recall the New Deal personal adviser taking them through the options at the outset.

Where training had been offered by EZ providers it tended to be short (one or two day) courses in basic literacy or numeracy or even shorter courses (one or two hours) in interview skills or CV writing. Very few customers had been

offered or had received sector-specific technical or practical training (although the minority that had were extremely positive about the impact this had had on their employability).

Several customers reported negative experiences of either the suitability or extent of the training that had been suggested by EZ providers. One respondent had been offered a basic literacy and numeracy course that she felt was below the level she required. Other customers reported the opposite – that the course was too advanced or had covered too much too quickly.

Around half of customers, particularly those aged 25 or older, felt that their EZ advisers were too quick to focus on finding them a job, and were not interested in investigating or offering long-term training or development options. Under the revised JSA regime and Flexible New Deal, there will be more of a focus on sustainable jobs and progression and improving skills where this is a clearly defined barrier. To some extent these concerns echoed those expressed by customers in relation to their experiences at the jobcentre where they felt that advisers were more interested in finding them 'any job' and hitting targets than they were finding them a job that made the best use of their skills or experience.

'She 'll say there's a job so and so and I'll say to her "well what about all this training that I've had while I've been signing on", then she says that doesn't count for nothing...they just want to give you a job and get you off the system'.

(25+ EZ customer, Birmingham (referring to experience of the EZ))

Training courses tended to be more common among those on the New Deal programme. A few customers had accessed multiple LearnDirect courses while on the programme and on the whole felt these had improved their confidence and skills.

That said, a few customers felt that the training offered under the New Deal programme was too basic and didn't allow them to compete with young people with level 3 or above qualifications when applying for jobs.

Several customers said that having to pay for training courses was prohibitive. There was confusion over what type of funded training is available for those on the New Deal programme. For example, one customer had been told he would need to pay £250 to train towards achieving a CSCS (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) card (allowing him to work on a building site) whereas others had received this training for free.

'So you think I'll get my qualifications and throw them out of the window...I've done Level 1 and 2, I've done them twice because they altered the specification, but then I'm told that the door is shut in my face, I can't work on a building site because I can't afford £250 [to get a CSCS card]. It's just ridiculous.'

(25+ New Deal customer, Birmingham)

There was a view shared by many on the New Deal programme that help and support is available under the programme, but that to access this the customer needs to research what is available and to proactively ask for elements that they feel are most relevant to them.

'You have to go there and basically pick their brains, because if you go on like you don't know nothing, they're not going to tell you anything, you have to make sure you know.'

(25+ New Deal customer, Birmingham)

Some customers spontaneously suggested that at the initial interview with the New Deal adviser the range of options available to them should be explained, and that more information was needed at this point in the process. The majority of customers stated that they felt this would be a useful exercise.

No customers had been involved with an environmental project as part of the New Deal model. Very few were aware that this was an option available to them.

3.6 A choice of provider

In the London EZ (where customers have a choice of provider) almost all did not realise that this choice was available to them. All but one had been assigned a provider (Reed, Working Links or Working Directions) by Jobcentre Plus advisers automatically and had assumed that that was the only option on offer. Even when they had heard others in their area talking about visiting an alternative private provider, they did not assume a choice was available.

A few customers felt that if they had been offered a choice of provider they would have felt empowered. Others felt that it would have made little difference as they would not have known how to choose. Most would have chosen on the basis of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms from friends also on the EZ programme.

In a handful of cases, customers had been assigned an alternative provider after giving negative feedback about their current one or after returning to Jobcentre Plus after a job they got through the provider didn't work out.

Only one respondent could recall being offered a choice of provider at the initial point of referral. He had been given information about all three providers and had gone away and researched each of these. He felt that having a choice was extremely positive.

Customer portrait

John is a 25-35 year old man, living in London who had been unemployed for 18 months, despite having construction qualifications including a City & Guilds in construction, and holding a CIS card.

In fact he initially found his qualifications a disadvantage, feeling that Jobcentre Plus staff did not feel the need to offer him the assistance he wished in finding a job, rather simply displaying surprise that he could not get a job and questioning how he could be encountering difficulties.

John attributes many of the problems he met during this time down to his criminal record. He felt he received no guidance from Jobcentre Plus staff about how to present himself during interviews or advice around the legalities of what information he should reveal during which part of the process of applying for jobs. Finding himself stuck in this cycle for 18 months inevitably led to frustration.

Being offered involvement with New Deal did not help matters. John found Jobcentre Plus staff asked him to undertake placements unsuitable to his experience and personality, such as in the catering sector.

Then, John was put forward for the EZ programme. Given a choice of private and public sector agencies to go through John researched the options and chose [xxxx], based on their offer of funding for travel to the office and work interviews.

[xxxx] turned John's prospects around immediately. They provided funded training, allowing John to obtain his CSCS card. Crucially, John also received one-on-one advice, including interview techniques as well as guidance on how to disclose criminal records. After five weeks John was self-employed, boosted by the confidence [xxxx] had given him, by deciding to pay for tools worth £600 to allow him to start his own business.

That was two and a half months ago and John has had enough work to keep himself employed full-time and is building a successful business as a painter and decorator/general builder. His only regret is not being able to start with [xxxx] as soon as he was looking for work, and having an established business by now.

NB. Customers would not normally experience both New Deal and an EZ. However, this customer experienced both types of provision in relatively quick succession putting him in a good position to compare the two experiences.

3.7 In-work support

This is a key area where those on the EZ programme had felt significantly more supported than those on the New Deal programme. This may reflect the policy, as In-work support is not currently part of the New Deal process.

Most customers in the EZ programme were pleasantly surprised to receive follow-up calls from their adviser after they had found work to find out how the job was working out and to offer advice about any problems experienced. A minority of those who had found work had been offered bonuses for staying in work for three months and all of these viewed this as highly positive and motivating.

'I was going from a legal secretary to support work, so obviously I didn't know what it'd be like, I might not like it when I get into it, so even once I did get into work they were phoning me, asking how is it going, you know, just making sure, giving me the support, you know, so I stay and keep in the job without falling back out and ending up back looking for another job, so once you get the job they're still giving you that support.'

(18-24 EZ customer, Birmingham)

3.8 Ongoing support

However, several respondents were distressed to find out that they couldn't return to their EZ provider if they left the job they had got through the programme, and instead had to restart the cycle by returning to Jobcentre Plus for six to 18 months before they could be referred again to the provider. Where customers had experienced this they reported feeling 'betrayed' and 'humiliated' when they were not allowed to visit the provider's offices (in most cases they just wanted to check the newspapers or use the internet to look for jobs, as they felt the provider had more or different jobs advertised than the jobcentre). The follow-up support that they had received once they were in work had given them the impression that they would have an ongoing relationship with the adviser and could return to them at any point.

'I went back to the Pertemps office and they recognised me because I'd only just left a few days before; I said I've just come back to have a look at the papers, and they said you can't come in.'

(25+ EZ customer, Birmingham)

In one case a customer felt 'forced' into taking a job he found through Pertemps (the EZ provider in Birmingham) that only had a six month contract. At the end of the six months he was not allowed to go back to Pertemps but had to go and sign on at the Jobcentre where it would be another 18 months before he would be referred again to the EZ programme. His belief is that he would have been ultimately better off holding out for a longer-term job while he still had the support and resources of Pertemps.

If the new Flexible New Deal model is to be set up along the same lines (with customers returning to the 'standard' Fortnightly Review process automatically once a short-term job organised by the private provider in stage 4 has finished) then we would recommend that this is explained to customers at the point of referral to the programme, to allow them to make an informed choice and counteract them feeling tricked or betrayed. The research suggests that allowing customers to return directly to the private provider within a certain period of time (particularly in cases where they opted for a short-term contract as it would prove good work experience) would be more effective in keeping them in work in the long-term than restarting them at stage 1 of the cycle.

Customer portrait

Laura is a 20 year old woman from West London, who left employment to have a baby and had been unable to get back into work.

She was unsuccessful in her attempts to get a job for the first six months. She had attended a literacy and numeracy skills course organised by Jobcentre Plus but found this was too basic and covered areas she was already comfortable with. She felt her standard of written and spoken English was good and that the course was geared towards people for whom English was a second language. She had requested a more advanced office administration course but was told this wasn't available.

Eventually Laura was referred to [xxxx] as part of the EZ programme. Although she found the [xxxx] adviser much more proactive in helping her find work, she had some concerns about the amendments to her CV that were made and the level of jobs that she was put forward for. She felt that, although her CV had been improved, it used words and phrases that were unfamiliar to her and that she had felt uncomfortable trying to elaborate on in interviews. Similarly, she felt that she had been put forward for jobs that were unrealistic. She appreciated the fact that [xxxx] were trying to help her but ultimately felt that they were negatively affecting her self-esteem by encouraging her to apply for jobs that she did not have the skills or experience to get. After several weeks, Laura did get a temporary position working in an office through [xxxx]. After a couple of months this period of employment ended. She assumed she would be able to make an appointment with the [xxxx] adviser and was confident they would be able to find her another position quickly. However, when she returned to [xxxx] she was told she had to return to the jobcentre and that they were unable to help her. Laura found this upsetting as she had built up a relationship with the adviser and didn't understand why she was unable to make an appointment with her. She is now claiming JSA again and is waiting to be referred to [xxxx] in a few months' time.

4 Additional support required

On-job trials or work experience were frequently suggested – the former to give people a chance, who may not come across well in interview; the latter for getting future work (although customers felt that any work experience lasting less than three months was actually counterproductive).

'Anybody can write an application form, but can they actually physically do the job, do you know what I mean, it's like me I can put on my CV I've got six A levels, I haven't got six A levels, how would you know as an actual employer that I'm competent to actually do the job, unless I'm actually on the job and you can see that I can physically do the job.'

(25+ EZ customer, London)

Sector-specific crash courses in vital technical skills were requested by many. Most customers were in favour of paying back some or all of the cost of the training once it had enabled them to find employment.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the majority of customers felt that more knowledgeable and engaged Jobcentre Plus staff would have helped them back into work, before needing to be referred to the New Deal or EZ programmes. Further to this, a minority of customers suggested that employer visits to jobcentres or sector-specific seminars (covering the requirements for particular job roles, suggestions for how to achieve these requirements and a list of relevant employers) held at the jobcentre would have been welcomed.

In several cases, all that would have been required to help a customer move on, was earlier intervention with the practical support (vouchers for clothes or one-to-one CV or interview skills coaching) that was eventually received via the EZ programme. It was felt that earlier identification of individuals requiring this type of 'quick fix' assistance should be identified much earlier and fast-tracked to a private provider for specialist back-to-work support.

Many of the suggestions in this section are an integral part of Local Employer Partnerships, Flexible New Deal and Leitch, and will therefore, be implemented.

4.1 Increased conditionality

Although a large majority of customers rejected the idea that weekly, rather than fortnightly, signing makes a difference (and just saw it as an additional inconvenience), on balance customers felt that weekly signing does keep the momentum of job searching going and felt it to be an effective way of encouraging customers to do more in terms of looking for jobs.

While there is evidence from the research to support the role of weekly signing in getting customers back into work, there is little to support the idea that expecting jobseekers to extend their jobsearch after three months (so that their 'requirements' are based on travel to work, wage and working hours rather than simply a preferred employment or occupation) will ultimately be effective in getting customers back into work and keeping them in work. Of the customers that had taken a job in a sector or job role that they were not interested in, very few were still in employment (in either that job role or another). Evidence from the research suggests that providing training towards a qualification or certification related to the sector an individual is interested in is more likely to result in sustained employment.

'You see that's what people do, they just get fed up with the jobcentre and they're like just give me any job, I don't care...and then in two months or three months time you're getting sick of the job so much you're back to square one again.'

(25+ JSA customer, Bristol)

5 Conclusions and recommendations

The key indication from the research is that the EZ model (which the proposed Flexible New Deal has most in common with) is more successful than the current New Deal model in helping customers back into work. The elements of the model that are most effective in helping customers move on are:

- meeting with the same personal adviser on each visit;
- financial support for buying clothes for interviews, childcare or relevant tools/equipment;
- the provision of sector-specific training or certification;
- personalised one-to-one advice on CV writing and interview skills;
- a more 'hands on' approach from the personal adviser involving them calling prospective employers and proactively contacting customers if a suitable job comes up.

Although these elements were present for some of those who experienced the current New Deal programme, this support seemed to be more consistently on offer once a customer had been referred to a specialist private or voluntary sector provider.

For a proportion of customers, simply being able to see the same adviser on a regular basis and receiving some assistance with the process of applying for jobs within the EZ achieved results very quickly (with customers finding work within a week or two). Accommodating this form of support within the standard Jobcentre Plus process or fast-tracking individuals requiring this help for a short spell with EZ providers, could help to move these individuals off JSA quickly and avoid the barrier created by a 'hole' in their employment record.

A move to weekly signing during the period accessing the EZ was generally received positively. While those who had not been through this process viewed it as creating a further administrative burden, those who had experience of the EZ,

had tended to view the requirement for regular meetings as a demonstration of their advisers' commitment to helping them find work.

Customers tended to be poorly informed about the options available to them. In areas where there were multiple EZ providers, virtually no customers recalled being offered a choice of provider. If customers are to have a choice of provider under the new model, then, for this to work effectively, this choice needs to be better publicised or explained to customers at the point of referral than is currently the case.

The proposals for the new Flexible New Deal include a recommendation that the point at which an individual enters the regime will be shaped by their work and benefit history. Furthermore, all customers will receive an initial skills assessment to determine whether they require a more extensive 'skills health check'. The findings from this research support these proposed changes. In several cases the barriers to employment a customer was experiencing were only identified and overcome once they had been referred to the EZ programme. Earlier identification and intervention for those with a skills or qualifications gap is likely to have helped them move on earlier. Some customers felt betrayed when a short-term job organised by a private provider finished and they had to go back to the 'standard' Fortnightly Review process. This could be addressed in Flexible New Deal by having a short break policy.

Under the proposed new model, most customers will join the Flexible New Deal after 12 months of claiming JSA. Prior to this they will go through a stage of Directed Job Search and Supervised Job Search (broadly similar to the process of fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews and the current New Deal's Gateway Programme respectively). It is these parts of the current model that customers expressed the greatest concerns about. Customers who had received provision of this type had generally found it to be too generic and they had experienced difficulty applying the advice given to their own particular circumstances.

The key suggestions for improvement to the Jobcentre Plus process voiced by customers were:

- greater continuity of advisers;
- ensuring that Jobcentre Plus advisers are better informed about sector-specific requirements and available training;
- greater tailoring of advice by Jobcentre Plus advisers so that they offer more support for customers wishing to up-skill to achieve a job in a particular sector, as opposed to encouraging them to take any job irrespective of their previous work history or interests (where customers had taken 'any job' they were more likely to become 'benefit repeaters');

- reviewing the usefulness of Gateway to Work or similar mandatory courses. Customers felt that these usually failed to deliver what was promised in the introduction to these courses. Smaller classes, more one-to-one tuition or coaching and more severe steps taken to deal with disruptive attendees would all be welcomed;
- developing Action Plans in closer collaboration with customers, with the choice of options or activities fully explained. Several customers stated that they had not realised that they could have any input into these plans.

Appendix

Topic guide used for group discussions

Flexible New Deal Research Topic Guide for Discussions with JSA Customers

1. Introduction

- Introduce IFF
- Explain background to study
- Explain format of discussion
- Ask respondents to introduce each other in pairs (name, household size, work and benefit history)

2. Stages in the process (warm up)

- Ask respondents to describe stages/events in process of applying for JSA (draw out a flow diagram on flip chart)

3. Spontaneous views on the current JSA regime

- At each stage, what has helped them move on/find work? Why?
- What has been less helpful? Why?
 - o at the start of the claim
 - o in the first six months
 - o FOR ND OR EZ GROUPS: from six months up to entering New Deal/ Employment Zone
 - o FOR ND OR EZ GROUPS: since joining New Deal/Employment zone
 - o FOR GROUP NOT IN ND OR EZ: from six months onwards

4. Prompted views on specific elements of the process

- What worked well/less well about:
 - o The role/service provided by Jobcentre Plus
 - o The New Jobseeker Interview
 - o The Jobseeker Agreement
 - o Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews
 - o 13 week review with adviser
 - o Restart interviews
- What impact does weekly vs. fortnightly signing have?
- FOR ND OR EZ GROUPS: Views on the process of being referred to New Deal/Employment Zone – did this happen at the right time? Should this have happened sooner/later?
FOR ND GROUPS:
 - Views on the role of the New Deal personal adviser
 - Views on the usefulness of the Gateway Programme
 - Views on the process of referral to one of the options
 - Views on the options available
 - Views on the flexibility of the options available to them
 - The usefulness of any work experience/training/voluntary or environmental work in getting back to work – how could this have been improved?
- FOR EZ GROUPS:
 - Impact of choosing/not being able to choose their provider
 - Views on the role of the Employment Zone personal adviser
 - Views on the usefulness of Action Plan
 - Views on the range of options available
 - Views on the flexibility of the options available to them
 - Views on any training received/any In-work support received – how could this have been improved?

5. Additional needs and requirements

- What additional information, guidance or help would be useful?
 - o at what stage
 - o at what frequency
 - o in what format
 - o who should this come from
 - What (additional) training or development would be useful?
 - o at what stage
 - o who should this be provided by
 - What intervention might have increased:
 - a) the number/type of job applications they have made
 - b) the number/type of job interviews they have attended
 - c) the number/type of job offers they received
- Prompt:
- o Skills assessments
 - o Seminars
 - o Reviews with personal adviser
 - o Courses (what sort)
 - o Earlier/later entry into New Deal or Employment Zone
 - o The choice of options/activities
 - o Choice of provider
 - o Different requirements for claiming JSA/mandatory community work
- At what stage would this intervention have had the most impact?
 - What experience do they have of other Government initiatives?
- Prompt:
- o New Deal (if not currently a New Deal participant)
 - o Training for Work
 - o Work-Based Learning for Adults
 - o StepUp
- Is there anything the current JSA regime could learn from these?

6. Close

- Is there anything else that you would like to raise/add about the issues we have been discussing?
- Thank for time and reassurance of confidentiality