

## **Research Summary**

### **Jobcentre Plus Customer Satisfaction 2003: Findings from Qualitative Research**

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This report presents the findings from qualitative research with Jobcentre Plus customers, which aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of their satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services and factors influencing satisfaction levels. The research was designed to follow up issues identified in the earlier quantitative national telephone survey of customer satisfaction.

The qualitative research was based upon 50 follow-up telephone interviews with respondents to the quantitative survey and thirty focus groups undertaken in fifteen Jobcentre Plus districts in the English regions, Scotland and Wales. These groups involved 251 customers claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), Incapacity Benefit (IB) and Income Support (IS). The research was undertaken during July and August 2003 by the Policy Research Institute and GHK Consulting.

#### **Key Findings**

Customers' expectations have a major influence on their satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services. Customers tend to be satisfied when their expectations are met but there is considerable variation between expectations of different groups.

Customers' satisfaction is influenced by the policy and legislative constraints on the service relating, for example, to job search obligations and benefit rules and entitlements. Satisfaction can be undermined by a lack of understanding of entitlements.

Satisfaction is also undermined by a variability and inconsistency in customers' experience of the service. In particular, customers with more complex, 'non-standard' needs tended to report more problems of inconsistency in the service. Although many customers reported positive experiences of contact with Jobcentre Plus, there were several instances of long waiting times in offices, long delays in answering the

phone, people being 'passed around', failure to reply promptly to letters and some negative views on the use of standard computerised letters.

The research indicated the key importance of the way in which staff deal with customers and their attitudes, knowledge and competence. Customers reported substantial variation in their experiences and there were many instances of customers feeling that they were treated according to 'the lowest common denominator'.

Customers tended to be more satisfied when they had repeated contact with the same advisor, providing continuity of service and the opportunity to develop a 'rapport'. Those with more complex circumstances were more likely to be upset by the need for repeated provision of personal information and more vulnerable to errors in processes.

The quality of the office environment was seen as less important than staff effectiveness but there were criticisms of Social Security offices, especially by parents with young children. The environment in Jobcentres and new integrated Jobcentre Plus offices was seen as much improved but there were mixed views on whether this resulted in a better service overall.

Awareness of the Customers' Charter was very low and, although many customers had felt like complaining at some point, very few had submitted a formal complaint. Many felt that there was little point in complaining because 'nothing would be done'. Most of those who had complained were dissatisfied with the process and outcome.

#### **Executive Summary**

##### **Expectations, context and communication**

The research indicates that customers tend to be satisfied when their expectations are met. However, there is considerable variation in expectations between different groups of customers. For example, many IB and IS claimants simply expect their benefits to be paid accurately and on time; many JSA claimants want a suitable job. When these expectations are achieved reasonably quickly and smoothly, customers tend to be satisfied.

However, customers' satisfaction is also influenced by policy constraints on service outcomes. For example, some people cited adverse experiences but were grateful to receive their benefits and therefore felt that they should not criticise the service. Some younger JSA customers indicated that, despite the help provided by staff, their expectations for training had been frustrated by eligibility rules.

In some cases, customers' dissatisfaction with the service was due, at least in part, to a lack of understanding of what they were entitled to expect. There were examples where customers did appreciate the policy constraints on service entitlements and were able to separate the effect of such constraints from their perceptions of the quality of service delivery. There is some evidence, therefore, that customers' satisfaction is increased if they are well informed about what they are entitled to expect.

Nevertheless, regardless of how well people are informed about their entitlements, inconsistency and variability in customers' experience of the service can undermine their satisfaction. Customers with relatively straightforward needs tended to have less frequent direct contact and higher satisfaction; conversely, those with more complex, 'non-standard' circumstances tended to have more frequent contact, to report more problems with inconsistency and their needs not being met, and to be more dissatisfied.

### **Access to the service**

The research has indicated some key aspects of the service where variability and inconsistency in the standard of service undermine customer satisfaction, for example, telephone and written

contact with the service and waiting times in offices. Although some customers had found telephone contact to be handled efficiently, there were several instances of long delays in answering the phone and of people being 'passed around' departments and their query not being dealt with effectively. Some customers indicated that they had not received prompt replies to letters and there were also some negative views on the use of 'standard computerised letters'.

The problem of long waiting times was raised by a number of customers and especially by parents with children having to wait in Social Security offices. Part of the problem relates to aspects of the 'office environment', as discussed below, but having to wait a long time, especially when an appointment time is not adhered to, is a significant source of dissatisfaction.

### **The staff encounter**

The research has indicated the importance of the way in which staff deal with customers and their attitudes, knowledge and competence. There was a substantial variation in customers' perceptions of staff helpfulness, politeness, friendliness and degree of respect accorded by staff to them. There were examples of customers who were delighted with the service they had received from staff and it is clear that this had a significant impact on their satisfaction. Customers who had experienced the personal adviser model tended to be more satisfied.

Conversely, there were many examples of customers who referred to poor staff attitudes. For example, several older people recently made redundant felt that they were not accorded due respect and recognition of their circumstances; many people said that they felt they were treated according to the 'lowest common denominator', as if they were trying to cheat the system. Some customers recognised the pressures on staff and the difficulties of their job, but it was widely felt that it was not too much to expect basic standards of politeness, helpfulness and respect.

Several customers indicated frustration at not being given information by staff about what they were entitled to and subsequently finding

this out from elsewhere. Many argued that customers do not necessarily know what to ask of staff so they rely on staff to provide all the relevant information. Moreover, several customers had experiences of staff not having the necessary knowledge, for example about benefit eligibility, resulting in some cases of inaccurate assessments. A particular aspect of this related to customers with special needs, for example, disabilities. Some customers questioned whether computer systems always contained up-to-date information. Finally, some customers had encountered staff who they felt were very young and inexperienced and not adequately trained

### **Service effectiveness**

Underpinning the criticisms of many customers was the view that the service was not very effective in identifying their needs and providing appropriate help to meet those needs. Those with more complex, 'non-standard' needs reported more problems; for example, some customers with mental health problems suggested that their circumstances and needs were not fully catered for. Where customers had experienced continuity of service from the same member of staff they were clearly more satisfied, arguing that staff could build a good knowledge of their needs and develop a 'rapport'. This was emphasised by a number of JSA customers who felt that it was the basis for the provision of good careers advice and appropriate training leading to a good job.

On the other hand, there were several instances of customers who felt that the lack of such continuity compromised the effectiveness of the service, resulting in a need to repeat information previously provided. This was stressful for some, especially those more vulnerable due to circumstances they found embarrassing.

A further aspect of this problem was the perception by some customers that computerised customer records were not always complete and up to date; hence the need to repeat information previously given. Many customers felt that the forms they had to complete were confusing, with terminology that was difficult to understand; yet if they made a mistake it could delay payment of benefits and cause hardship. Some customers reported forms

not being sent as promised and delays or inaccuracies in benefit calculations.

### **The office environment**

The research indicates that this aspect of the service is seen by customers as of lesser importance than the staff encounter and service effectiveness. Nevertheless, there were some strong criticisms of the environment provided by Social Security offices, especially from parents with young children and people with disabilities. Many customers felt that such offices provided an unwelcoming and even threatening environment; some commented on the ineffectiveness of security guards and the way they added to the intimidating atmosphere; and there were criticisms of the ban on food and drinks, the lack of toilets and the lack of facilities for children.

Generally, Jobcentres were perceived as providing a better environment than Social Security offices and many customers felt that the environment in the new integrated offices was much improved. Some customers also felt that the improved environment provided a better working environment for staff, reflected in a better attitude and demeanour amongst staff. This view was perhaps most notable amongst IB and IS customers who had previously used Social Security offices. However, other customers, whilst welcoming the improved environment, felt that it had made little difference to the service provided.

A number of customers had strong concerns about privacy, especially staff who talked loudly about their circumstances within earshot of other people, including security guards. There were some specific criticisms of offices with an open plan layout as lacking privacy, more confusing and lacking signage.

### **Customer voice and complaints**

Very few customers were aware of the Customers' Charter, let alone its contents. There appeared to be better knowledge of the complaints system but some confusion about what actually constitutes a complaint and little knowledge of what kind of response to expect and over what timescale. Most respondents had

felt like complaining at some point, mainly about staff attitudes, problems with telephone contact or benefit decisions. Problems with benefits were more likely to result in a formal complaint but very few had made such a formal complaint, mainly because of a feeling that there was no point, that nothing would be done and that managers and staff were not interested in or committed to dealing with complaints. Most of those who had complained were dissatisfied with the way it had been handled and with the outcome. Those who were satisfied had had their problem dealt with or had received an apology.

### **Policy implications**

Positive experiences of the service reported by customers confirm that, at its best, Jobcentre Plus provides a very effective service and deals with customers in a way that does not make them feel disempowered. However, the research indicates that many customers feel that they have little power in the service relationship with Jobcentre Plus, that they are not treated and respected as individuals and that their views and opinions carry little weight.

Based upon these research findings, it is possible to highlight a number of areas for possible management attention:

- To ensure greater consistency in adherence to standards relating to telephone answering and dealing with telephone enquiries;
- To investigate the potential for more 'personal tailoring' of postal correspondence since there is evidence that satisfaction increases if people feel that they are receiving a personalised service;
- To assess the scope for achieving greater consistency of reasonable waiting times and adherence to appointment times;
- To ensure greater consistency in staff attitudes, motivation and competence through recruitment and, more especially, through training programmes; to review whether sufficient emphasis is placed in staff training on aspects relating to demeanour, politeness and respectfulness, and consideration for customers' particular circumstances; to review whether staff training pays sufficient attention to issues of privacy and to ensure that customers are offered the use of a private interview room;

- To ensure consistent adherence to quality standards in relation to all work systems and procedures and, in particular, that supporting computer systems are effective and fully up to date; to ensure that all staff have up-to-date knowledge of aspects of the service relevant to their job;
- To undertake a fundamental review of the way the complaints procedure is implemented in practice, to make customers more aware of the procedure and the Customer Charter and of their rights and how to submit a complaint.

This research indicates that if greater consistency can be achieved across the service in terms of the quality of the 'staff encounter' then levels of customer satisfaction should improve. This implies attention to basic systems, staff recruitment and training, with the latter not just addressing issues of knowledge and competence and approaches to dealing with customers but also broader issues relating to organisational culture.