

Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal, the Six Month Offer and Support for the Newly Unemployed evaluations: An early process study

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This report presents early findings from the evaluation of the revised Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND), the Six Month Offer (6MO) and Support for the Newly Unemployed (SNU), all of which went live in April 2009. The JRFND is being rolled out in two phases; the first from April 2009; the second from April 2010. The JRFND programme comprises four stages based on length of claim:

- Stage 1: 0 to 13 weeks
- Stage 2: 13 to 26 weeks
- Stage 3: 26 to 52 weeks
- Stage 4: after 52 weeks

The first three stages are delivered by Jobcentre Plus, and last up to 12 months. If a person is still claiming benefit after 12 months, they are referred to a Flexible New Deal provider for further work preparation and support.

SNU and the 6MO were implemented in response to the recession and are planned to last for two years. SNU offers supplementary job preparation and job search services from day one of a JSA claim. The support is designed for people who have recently become unemployed who may have little experience of modern job search techniques. Specialist help is also available for professionals/executives.

The 6MO comprises additional support for jobseekers who reach six months out of work. Everyone reaching six months unemployment is caseloaded by a Jobcentre Plus adviser who provides support, encouragement and advice until they get a job or reach 12 months unemployment. In JRFND Phase 1 districts,

this advisory support is provided via JRFND Stage 3. This provides the vehicle for access to four additional voluntary services to help improve employability. These are volunteering opportunities; a recruitment subsidy for employers; help to become self-employed; and access to Work Focused Training.

Evaluation of these measures will incorporate jobcentre visits, administration data analysis, customer surveys and interviews with all stakeholders to assess implementation, service delivery and the customer experience, and measure employment impacts and cost-benefits. The findings presented in this report incorporate two strands of research:

- Qualitative interviews and observations at Jobcentre Plus sites, conducted in two waves two and five months after implementation.
- A customer survey covering the first 13 weeks of the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claim, comparing the results of those experiencing the JRFND (in Phase 1 areas) with those experiencing the former JSA regime (in Phase 2 areas), conducted in September 2009.

Qualitative research findings

The new policy initiatives were introduced under recession conditions. Along with the changes brought on by the implementation process, the weak economy has imposed additional challenges to Jobcentre Plus – a higher demand for services and a wider diversity of support needs. This has placed a strain on resources (time, staffing and space) and it has been necessary for processes to deviate slightly from the implementation design.

For the most part, staff found the amount and pace of change challenging. SNU and 6MO were introduced at short notice and consequently, customers experienced delays to service availability. During the initial site visits, about two months after the April 2009 start, guidance on the SNU and 6MO was considered incomplete and staff felt instructions on how to blend the new services with the JRFND were inadequate. However, most of these issues were resolved by the second wave of fieldwork five months after the initiatives went live.

JRFND Stages 1 to 3

Back to Work Sessions (BtWS) were established in all study areas at five months after the April introduction. Initial teething problems had largely revolved around a lack of space to hold the sessions in-house, particularly given the high customer volumes. Staff views on the sessions were mixed. Most felt that they were helpful for motivating customers and were held at an appropriate time for reiterating the information regarding conditionality and support that was initially conveyed at the New Jobseeker Interview (NJI). Some staff were concerned about what they felt was an over-emphasis on conditionality in the BtWS, and felt that it got the session off on 'the wrong footing'. Staff also felt the sessions worked best when there was interaction among participants, but the extent to which this was facilitated by the presenters varied widely.

Advisers responded to the requirement to work flexibly in Stage 3 in different ways; while some appreciated the greater flexibility, others felt that more guidance on possible activities to prescribe would be helpful. It was sometimes felt there was little available to offer customers, particularly in rural areas. The type of activities being mandated varied across offices and districts, ranging from one-off job search activities to attending a course of vocational training. There were also variations in the way in which advisers issued mandation.

Caseloading at Stage 3 was generally seen by staff as beneficial but there were difficulties implementing this in practice due to customer volumes. This meant that advisers were not always able to see customers as often as they would like and that continuity of contact with a single adviser was sometimes compromised.

Despite the intention of JRFND to introduce greater and escalating conditionality, staff often felt that the requirements placed on customers were no greater than before, and less stringent when compared to the former New Deal programmes. While most staff felt conditionality backed up by sanctions was justified, some expressed unease about over-emphasising this element, particularly in BtWS. Staff were also reluctant to reveal to their customers the 'bigger picture' of the regime stages, and the process of escalating conditionality over time. Instead they tended to explain only the requirements of the particular stage that the customer was in. Sanctioning requires administrative resource, and in a context of staff shortages and high customer volumes, some staff were reluctant to sanction. Much sanctioning activity had become focused on the mandatory BtWS which often had high fail to attend rates.

Support for the Newly Unemployed

SNU was well received by Jobcentre Plus staff, who welcomed having the additional services to offer new customers. Despite this, customer receptivity to taking up the SNU services remained lower than expected. Some Jobcentre Plus staff believed that it was unrealistic to expect newly unemployed customers to respond to an immediate offer of support, either because they had more pressing financial concerns or because they were confident that they would find a job quickly. Staff also pointed to constraints such as lack of resources (particularly desk space and staff) and a lack of time during the NJI to sell the SNU services properly.

The different component provisions of the SNU offer had been implemented at different speeds and to varying degrees. The one-hour group sessions delivered by Jobcentre Plus had improved by September 2009 and more were taking place. The one-to-one support had lower take up than the group sessions in the offices visited, and in some cases it was only offered after a group session. Customer reactions to the group sessions were mixed. Some welcomed the extra support to help them back to work; others felt that the information provided was too basic.

After a slow start, the support for professionals and executives had become better established and was popular amongst staff and customers.

The one-day general job search support tended to be arranged with existing providers who offered the generic 'programme centre' support. This helped with the implementation as systems were already in place. Feedback from staff was mixed though, and some advisers felt that the generic service was less effective than that for professionals and executives.

The Six Month Offer

On the whole, the 6MO was welcomed by Jobcentre Plus staff. Many advisers liked the fact that the options were voluntary and felt that this helped to create a positive relationship with customers. Advisers generally felt confident about presenting the 6MO and discussing with customers about what might help them. Some advisers presented all strands to all customers, others tailored the information according to perceived customer interest and need. In practice, the self-marketing voucher for the recruitment subsidy was presented systematically to all eligible customers and training (where available) was usually mentioned, but self-employment support and volunteering were sometimes not mentioned if the adviser felt that they were inappropriate for the customer concerned.

The principle of additional advisory support, which underpinned the 6MO services, was popular with Jobcentre Plus staff, although it was slow to be implemented, mainly due to large customer caseloads.

The most straightforward options, and the first to be implemented, were the Self-Marketing Voucher Recruitment Subsidy and self-employment support. The voucher was popular with advisers and received positively by most customers, although some advisers doubted whether customers were applying it to the job search. Self-employment support attracted some customer interest but at the time of the fieldwork, few advisers had experience of customers who had started on the service. Several felt that a greater monetary incentive was needed to persuade customers to take up this option.

Training was popular with customers, but was slow to be introduced, and in some Jobcentre Plus districts there were communication problems between Jobcentre Plus and the colleges providing the courses. The range of courses varied widely between study districts, reflecting the fact that it was designed to meet local employer needs. However, in some districts, advisers also identified gaps in meeting training needs.

The volunteering strand was widely supported by staff but had not proved as popular as many had hoped. In some districts there had been problems with delivery and the referral process was seen to be unnecessarily complex.

Customer survey findings: Stage 1 JRFND

The survey showed that during the first 13 weeks of their claim, more customers reported support services delivered within the JRFND Phase 1 areas than in the Phase 2 areas where JRFND had not rolled out. In the Phase 1 areas, support services appeared to be more targeted at lone parents and those with previous JSA claims. An exception was for PSA 16 customer groups for whom certain specialist support was more common in Phase 2 than in Phase 1 areas. A sizable minority of customers in Phase 1 areas said they felt under pressure to take part in activities they did not feel suited their needs and circumstances, yet the majority of customers across all areas agreed that the support they received from Jobcentre Plus was tailored to their personal needs and circumstances.

Amongst services offered, the BtWS and advice on where to look for job vacancies was seen by customers to be the most useful support offered to customers in Phase 1 areas. This evidence accords with the early implementation views from staff that BtWS were useful for helping provide motivation for job search. The customer survey showed that BtWS were considered more useful in particular by younger customers, prison leavers and those with lower or no qualifications. These are all groups that might be seen to be 'harder to help', so this evidence is promising.

In line with the staff welcoming the services in Phase 1, as found in the early implementation research, the customers in these areas were more positive about their Jobcentre Plus services experiences than Phase 2 customers, reporting that provision had improved and that this had led to increased awareness of job vacancies and confidence for these customers. In particular in Phase 1 areas relative to Phase 2, more parents and specifically lone parents reported increases in motivation to find work, confidence, job search skills and an awareness of the different ways to look for vacancies. More of those with long-term health conditions or disabilities also reported themselves to be confident as a result of the Jobcentre Plus support. Again, harder-to-help groups seemed to be benefiting from these services during these first 13 weeks, more than in Phase 2 areas.

The customer survey shows that for customers who had ended their claim, more had done so sooner in Phase 1 areas. However, the overall share of customers who had left their benefit claim was equivalent across all areas. The service which seemed to be most closely associated with ending benefit claims sooner was the BtWS.

There was a slightly higher entry to paid work recorded for customers in Phase 1 areas. For these first 13 weeks, harder-to-help groups, in the PSA 16 groups for example, had similar work entry rates across all areas. It was mostly those aged 25-49 and those with higher skills who were more often found to have moved into work, especially in Phase 1 areas.

There appeared to have been indications of some successes for JRFND Stage 1 in terms of moving job-ready customers into work. However, as these descriptive analyses cannot take account of the many factors that might affect these transitions to work, it is too early to say whether these promising indications can translate into a measurable impact on the work entry for JRFND Stage 1.

The great majority of customers in all areas felt that the job role they had entered in work was a good match for them. However, there was some evidence suggesting that work for customers in Phase 1 areas was lower skilled, lower paid or considered less suitable for their skills and interests. These analyses should not be over-interpreted, however, as they reflect the first 13 weeks of a JSA claim and cannot account for the important technical issues related to measuring impacts.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 693 1. Research Report 624. January 2010).

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

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