

Fair welfare:
**supporting claimants
into work**

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Background

The new coalition Government has stressed the need for a welfare system to encourage “responsibility and fairness”. “That means providing help for those who cannot work, training and targeted support for those looking for work, but sanctions for those who turn down reasonable offers of work or training.”¹

There is evident symmetry with the previous Government’s vision for the welfare state set out as far back as 1998. “We want to rebuild the system around work and security. Work for those who can; security for those who cannot.”² More recent messages have placed more emphasis on removing passivity in the welfare state in what they have called “a simple deal: more support, more responsibility.”³

The growth in unemployment over the last two years has resulted in claimant numbers being higher now than at any point in the last decade, with around 4.8 million claimants in the UK currently in receipt of out-of-work benefits.⁴ There has been growing political emphasis on ensuring only those who can not work receive out-of-work benefits without the requirement to seek work. For instance, instead of claiming income support (IS), lone parents of older children are now required to claim jobseeker’s allowance (JSA) and to seek work. In addition, the test determining whether someone is unfit to work and therefore entitled to benefits on grounds of sickness or incapacity is stricter, and there are fewer routine exemptions from the test.

Even those not required to seek work must keep in touch with the labour market by attending work focused interviews which should ensure that claimants are given support that will help them tackle any barriers to work.

The recession has led to a rise in the number of people claiming JSA. These claimants are required to demonstrate that they are actively looking for work and taking up opportunities available. The majority of new claimants leave JSA within the first three to six months of their claim – a rate as high as 73 per cent at December 2009, even in the midst of the recession.⁵ This means that support has long been focused on claimants who have been out of work for more than six months, but throughout 2008 and 2009 ministers made specific pledges to help people who lost their jobs as a result of the recession. This included increased funding for the Rapid Response service which works with employers who announce redundancies to help prepare employees ahead of losing their jobs. It also gave immediate access to support that would previously have not been available until later in a JSA claim.⁶ More generally extra resources were made available to Jobcentre Plus to enable it to respond to the extra demands on its services.

Introduction

Problems relating to social security benefits and specifically out-of-work benefits is a significant area of concern for CAB clients. Over half of all working age CAB clients are not in paid work. In 2009/10 Citizens Advice Bureaux across England, Wales and Scotland provided advice on over 7 million issues (7.1 million in England and Wales in 2009/10, and 456,552 in Scotland in 2009/10) of which more than half a million were about out-of-work benefits.⁷ The CAB service is therefore well placed to seek the views of the back-to-work support experienced by benefit claimants.

In order to get a more detailed picture of our clients' experiences of 'back-to-work' support, Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland conducted a survey based research project. Between September 2009 and March 2010, CAB clients and members of the public told us their experiences by completing a survey available in hard copy at Citizens Advice Bureaux throughout England, Wales and Scotland, and on the Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland websites. All respondents, including jobseeker's allowance claimants, were asked about the training and support offered by Jobcentre Plus and about what they felt would help them return to work. Lone parents and claimants of sickness and incapacity benefits were also asked about their experiences of work focused interviews. Respondents were also asked to complete campaign postcards, on which they could tell their story in more detail.

- A total of 845 people responded to the survey – 178 of these were via paper surveys distributed at local CAB offices and 667 were online.
- There was a roughly even split between men (48 per cent) and women (52 per cent).
- 56 per cent were claiming jobseeker's allowance – of whom 57 per cent had been claiming for less than six months.
- 31 per cent were claiming sickness and incapacity benefits.⁸
- 10 per cent were claiming income support as lone parents.
- 250 people sent postcards telling us their story of claiming benefits.

This report aims to provide a voice to these respondents. It does not claim to be representative of all benefit claimants, but where common themes emerge, these experiences serve to highlight areas of the current system that would benefit from further analysis. We hope that the concerns of claimants expressed in the report will be addressed in the design of the Government's new single work programme.

Summary of findings: what did respondents say?

Responses indicated that:

- Most respondents felt that they needed help and support to move back into work but were not happy with the support that had been offered to them.
- Respondents complained of a lack of tailoring of the support offered to them, which limited the effectiveness of interviews and courses.
- Respondents felt that there was a need for improved expertise of personal advisers, particularly in relation to disability and sickness issues.
- The top two barriers to work are different for each claimant group, meaning any single work programme must be able to address varying barriers to employment.

Work focused interviews (WFIs)

Lone parents claiming income support are required to attend work focused interviews every six months and every three months once their youngest child reaches nine. The Jobcentre Plus personal adviser can help them consider their options for returning to work. Most claimants of sickness and incapacity benefits⁹ who have been claiming since April 2008 are required to take part in the Pathways to Work scheme which involves a series of up to six work focused interviews (WFIs) within the first 12 months of the claim for benefit. WFIs should meet the needs of the individual claimant and their particular circumstances. The aim of the interview is to help the claimant address their barriers to work.

Personal advisers can offer help to find training, prepare for interviews and consider financial support that could be available. They can also help with work trials, find family-friendly jobs, identify appropriate childcare or address the claimant's health conditions as appropriate.¹⁰ All lone parents are carried out by specialist Jobcentre Plus lone parent advisers. The first for claimants participating in the Pathways to Work programme is carried out by Jobcentre Plus but then in all but 18 Jobcentre Plus districts the remaining WFIs are carried out by provider organisations. Jobcentre Plus personal advisers have access to specialist disability employment advisers (DEAs), who can provide expertise to them and to their customers. Where we were able to identify whether the respondent had their interview with Jobcentre Plus or a provider organisation, we have made this clear in the text.

Quality of the interview experience

Respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement: The adviser listened to me and understood my situation – why I'm not working now and what makes it difficult for me to work.

- 44 per cent agreed with the statement.
- 38 per cent disagreed.
- the rest weren't sure.

Fewer than half of all respondents agreed that their adviser listened to them and understood their situation. Employment and support allowance (ESA) claimants were the most positive, followed by lone parents. Incapacity benefit claimants and people in receipt of income support on grounds of sickness or incapacity were least likely to be positive about the personal adviser who conducted their work focused interview.

“I’d been made to feel by Jobcentre Plus letters and someone at the contact centre that I didn’t want to work rather than I was too ill and unable to. The lady I saw was really nice and tried to reassure me that no one would force me to work and not to get upset about things that had been said. I have ME and injuries (suffer from anxiety), have been signed off sick by my doctor and just lost my job through ill health.” **ESA claimant**

“In the last six months I have dealt with three different lone parent advisers – each have promised they could help me, then have left or moved to a different department without letting the new lone parent adviser know my situation, which has led to having to go through the same information over and over again.” **Female lone parent of one, aged 18-24, had been claiming IS for more than two years**

“Focus was straight into looking at available vacancies. The personal circumstances of my family were not listened to and I found the staff member to be rude and focused on following a pre arranged script rather than listen to my queries or questions.” **Male lone parent of two, aged 25-49, had been claiming IS for between one and two years**

Respondents who felt that their personal adviser listened to them and understood their situation were less likely to find the interview stressful. Forty per cent of respondents who felt their adviser listened to and understood them agreed with the statement ‘the interview was stressful’, compared with 63 per cent of respondents who did not feel that their adviser listened and understood them.

Lone parents were less likely to report that they found their interview stressful than incapacity benefit claimants. Respondents from both of these groups who found the interview stressful referred to being pressurised to look for work before they felt they were ready. They tended to feel that the personal adviser did not understand their medical condition or their child’s needs.

“I found the entire experience with the jobcentre extremely hard, provoking anxiety bouts whereby I had to seek medical help.”
Male aged 43, by postcard

“I have severe panic attacks which is why I can’t work, but they made me come in and sit where I couldn’t see the door for way too long.” **Female aged 25-49, claiming ESA**

Current Jobcentre Plus guidance advises that advisers will offer the use of a private interview room for discussions of a personal nature where it is deemed appropriate or requested by the claimant. Responses suggested that claimants who could have benefited from a private interview, did not get one. Many respondents described difficulties in talking about their situation and the ways in which their health condition or disability might affect their ability to work, because they were worried that other people in the office could hear them. If the claimant does not feel able to talk about the limitations on the sort of work they could undertake, this is clearly likely to affect the usefulness of the interview. The personal adviser will not be able to suggest possible ways to overcome problems if they do not know what the problems are.

“The interview ended when I was crying and had got all upset in an open plan office in a small community where people know each other, at least by sight. I was left wrecked and dreading the next appointment... I just agreed to [a plan] and signed while badly upset.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming IS for more than two years, her WFI was with Jobcentre Plus**

“Not private, everyone can hear what is being said, therefore there is no confidentiality. I found there were people I know working at the Jobcentre, I feel my health issues may have been discussed/disclosed as they were entered on the computer. Also, the interviewer spoke in a very loud voice asking very personal questions regarding my health issues.” **Female aged 39, by postcard**

Comments from lone parents who were about to or had just started to claim JSA, rather than income support, were not very positive, with claimants saying they felt extra pressure rather than extra support.

“I have to go back to work according to a new law, but for me on my own to go back to work makes me worse off because of childcare. Also I have no qualifications and everything I would like to do I can’t. I don’t think I’m a stupid person but was made to feel I was by the lady giving the interview. [She] said about a job stacking shelves – I want a job where I can learn and earn more...”
Female lone parent of two, aged 25-49, had been claiming IS for over two years

“I was informed that because my child will be seven next year, then I must return to work. I found this upsetting as I have no family available to help out if my child is sick. I feel that this is too young an age.” **Female lone parent of one, aged 25-49, claiming IS**

“I hadn’t worked for many years because of bringing up four children so I started doing voluntary work and training to help me get the skills and confidence to get back to work. At the end of October 2009 I was changed to jobseeker’s allowance. The first few weeks of signing on I had a lady who was very nice and helpful. The next weeks of signing on I have seen different people who are almost accusing... I now have feelings of panic the night before I have to sign on and feel like crying. All confidence I have gained over the last couple of years has been stripped away and I am now scared of people and am afraid I will panic at any job interview.”
Female lone parent of two, aged 50, by postcard

Believing that their personal adviser understood them did not necessarily mean that claimants found the interview useful. Almost a third of respondents who were positive about their adviser, didn’t feel that the interview was of any use to them in moving towards suitable work or training.

Usefulness of the interview

Respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement: ‘The interview was useful. It gave me some ideas about returning to work or training when I’m able to.’

- Only a quarter of claimants felt that their work focused interview was useful.
- 55 per cent did not feel that their interview had been useful.
- 19 per cent said they were not sure whether their interview had been useful.

Lone parents, as a group, were most likely to have reported that their interview was useful, whilst claimants receiving incapacity benefits were least likely to find them useful. Factors that seemed to influence whether the interview was seen as useful are discussed below.

Financial help and support

Positive comments about the interview highlighted the value of information about the financial impact of returning to work. Lone parents who found the interview useful were more likely to have reported that they had received a better-off calculation and that they had found it useful.

“I have had three back-to-work interviews and found them very informative. I felt encouraged to go back to work and they offer good incentives.” **Female lone parent of two aged 25-49, had been on IS for between one and two years**

“They told me what training I could do and also worked out a back-to-work form to show me how better off I’ll be [in work].” **Female lone parent aged 50-59, had been claiming IS for between one and two years**

Personalisation

A number of respondents referred to the feeling that the interview was conducted as a ‘tick box’ exercise – that the personal adviser was working to a prescribed set of questions and not taking into account the actual circumstances or support needs of the individual.

“The focus was on ticking the boxes that my adviser had to complete, not on my experience, training or needs.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming ESA for between three and six months**

“... the interviewer was not interested in my limitations or diagnosis, but was basically there to go through a screen of jobs and for me to give reasons why I couldn’t do any of them.” **By postcard**

“I asked about going to college after 15 years since leaving school. No one in the office could help me. They shipped me from one person to the next asking me where I had looked for work and not listening to my responses. I am still none the wiser as to how to get started. All they were interested in was ticking boxes.” **Male aged 25-49, had been claiming ESA for less than three months**

Other claimants who were looking for specific advice reported disappointment that the interview had not met their expectations.

“I went to the WFI thinking that the time has come to be taken seriously as the invitation states that it is an opportunity to talk about ‘How we can help you in getting back to work, etc.’ I was not given a chance to be self-expressive or given options as to how my life should go... I’m afraid it was a big disappointment...” **Female aged 57, by postcard**

“The interviewer was not helpful. I was looking for advice about retraining and starting college. They never referred me to anyone, nor did they help.” **Male aged 25-49, had been claiming ESA for less than three months**

Expertise of personal advisers

Respondents strongly indicated that they felt the lack of expertise of their personal adviser limited their ability to provide the right support. This had a significant impact on respondents at all stages in the process, from their initial interview to the jobs suggested they apply for, and the advice they received on training.

Lack of understanding of the Disability Discrimination Act

It is important that during the initial interview, the adviser gets an understanding of what would be a reasonable adaptation to accommodate the claimants’ illness/disability. This is key in ensuring that the adviser can give accurate and informed advice about the sort of adaptations the claimant could expect from employers. Knowledge and understanding of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and expertise in how it applies in practice to employers is an absolutely essential requirement to anyone claiming to give ‘expert’ advice to sick and disabled people trying to find work. Comments from respondents suggested that not all advisers were adequately aware of the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) own obligations under the DDA. It is therefore unlikely that they would be in a position to give useful advice when unaware even of their own obligations.

“I am deaf I was speaking to a Disability Adviser but he was completely clueless about hearing loss and was unable to assist me or to offer help at all. He was aware that I could not hear him but continued to conduct the interview. I left feeling even more depressed than I already am. ...What a pointless waste of taxpayers’ money.” **Male aged 25-49, had been claiming IB for between one and two years, his WFI was with Jobcentre Plus**

“[the adviser] kept addressing her questions about me to the person who had accompanied me to the interview... my friend eventually told her she should be addressing all the questions to me... I asked... if she had altered the size of the font in the copy she was doing for me so that I would be able to read it. ...she hadn’t despite my vision problems having been discussed during the interview.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming ESA for between six months and a year**

“I am suffering from a traumatic brain injury, she had no idea of the effects of this injury. My mum is filling this in as I am unable to converse or relate to people. The adviser has not been trained to deal with this – it is frightening attending this.” **Respondent aged 25-49, had been claiming ESA for between six months and a year**

“I have a condition which means that I cannot go out in the sun. I was forced to go to an interview during the heat wave which meant I broke out in boils and blisters. It was extremely painful.” **Female aged 25-49, claiming IB**

Jobcentre Plus policy is for all their personal advisers and other customer facing staff to receive disability awareness training. Training focuses on health in relation to working and specific approaches to overcoming challenges faced by customers. However many of our survey respondents felt that the interviewer was unable to offer useful advice because he or she lacked specialised knowledge or understanding of their illness.

“I went to the interview hoping to get a direction, what I could and couldn’t do given my illness. I got nothing out of it. The interviewer had not come across my problem before (I have no voice) and she said she was at a loss...” **Female aged 57, by postcard**

“The interviewer did not seem to understand my difficulty in attending without support... I suffer from bipolar – at times it is hard getting out of bed.” **Female aged 18-24, had been claiming ESA for six months to a year, she had her WFI with the Shaw Trust**

Condition Management Programme

The Condition Management Programme is available to ESA claimants, as appropriate, as part of the Pathways to Work programme. The aim of the programme is to provide personal support for claimants on how to manage their condition and to improve their functional ability, using the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy. Healthcare professionals deliver the programme and tailor it to meet the individual's needs. In our survey, everyone who mentioned the Condition Management Programme was positive about it, but the survey also indicated that the programme might have benefitted others who had not been offered it. It is difficult to assess how many people were not offered these courses when they should have been, as claimants are unlikely to know what might have been available to them.

“Training is not what I need but counselling and support to get me to a level of health where I can consider going back to some sort of work.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming ESA for between six months and a year**

“She didn't tell me about the condition management programme, I ended up complaining and got a new adviser who is better, but I never got offered any of the back-to-work services they say is on offer... organisations don't offer what it says on their leaflets.” **Female aged 25-49 with one dependent child, had been claiming ESA for between six months and a year**

Access to Work Scheme

Access to Work can help people whose health or disability affects the way they could do a job. It gives the individual and their employer advice and support with extra costs which may arise because of the employee's needs. It is important that advisers are familiar with what this scheme can offer to claimants with disabilities. It was surprising that this scheme was only mentioned by one respondent. As with the condition management programme it is difficult to assess how many people who might have benefitted from it, were not offered it.

“[I wish someone had helped me with] accessible needs, the appropriate training, self confidence, development, ongoing support needs, reasonable adjustments, Access to Work and work based career training, etc.” **Male aged 24-49, claiming IB**

Help with training and support

Different levels of support are available to different benefit claimants depending on why they are receiving benefits, and – in the case of JSA – their age and how long they have been claiming. All claimants were asked whether they felt they needed help and what information and support they had been offered.

More than half of respondents (55 per cent) disagreed with the statement ‘I haven’t needed support to find a job or get training’, therefore expressing that they needed help. JSA respondents were most likely to report that they needed support (58 per cent) followed by IB claimants (55 per cent) and then lone parents (38 per cent).

Of all the respondents that said they needed help, 16 per cent said that they had ‘been given information about training that will be helpful in getting a job’ and 17 per cent said that they had been given help with job searching.

Only 13 per cent of JSA respondents who said they needed help, believed they had been ‘given information about training that will be helpful in getting a job’. The response to this question varied very little between respondents who had been claiming less than six months and those who had been claiming more than six months – a point at which more support generally becomes available. However, there were more comments that specifically referred to lack of support, from newer claimants.

When asked what one thing would help them get back to work, 17 per cent said that training would have helped them. JSA claimants were much more likely than other groups to say that training would have helped them most.

Positive comments about training and support included:

“I was made redundant after only four months due to the company going into administration and have been claiming JSA for six months. I have recently had a six month review meeting which was very positive and I am going on a Sage course which is a new path for me as I have always done secretarial work. I am now going to be caring for my mother and thought perhaps accounts was something I could do from home.” **Female aged 51, by postcard**

“I have been unemployed for one year and two months this time and last employment lasted three months, my last full time post was for 10 months in 2005. I have been to TNG for a back to work course and found this tremendously helpful: with a professional coach and then back-up help with a job adviser from the same company.” **Female aged 59, by postcard**

“I attended a seminar with the East London Small Business Centre, organised via Jobcentre Plus, which was quite helpful if you’re thinking about taking the plunge and becoming self-employed.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming JSA for between three and six months**

“I was informed about an Access course at the local college which I passed and now I have gone on to Uni.” **Female lone parent of one, aged 25-49, had been claiming IS for between six months and a year**

However, many respondents reported that they had not received support.

“I have been given no information about the possibility of training, retraining or grants, etc to help me get back into employment. Just an agreement for me to sign stating that I will actively look for work.” **Male aged 25-49, had been claiming JSA for less than three months**

“I was told that I could use the computers at Jobcentre Plus to search for jobs but that was about it.” **Female aged 25-49, with two dependent children, had been claiming JSA for less than three months**

The value of the support and training offered depended largely on the degree to which it was personalised and tailored to the needs of the individual, whether it was related to skills and qualifications, work experience, childcare needs or disability.

“I have a visual impairment and as a result also get disability living allowance (DLA)... I was referred by a DEA to a specialist blind college. [They] helped me out and put me in contact with Action for Blind People who have helped me loads. I recently got put onto Flexible New Deal with A4E. They are incompetent, they sent me for a teaching job knowing full well I don’t have a teaching qualification.” **Male aged 25-49, had been claiming JSA for between one and two years**

“I was referred to Reed Agency as I have been on benefit for quite some time now. The person allocated to work with me did not even bother to find out whether I have got any qualifications at all.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming JSA for between one and two years**

Key issues around help and support available

Responses about training and support raised by respondents fell into three main categories:

- CVs and 'jobsearch' sessions.
- The lack of careers advice, help to retrain and low expectations of the types of jobs they were expected to look for.
- The fact that only very basic courses were available and funded.

Help with CVs and 'jobsearch' sessions

The most common responses were about help and support with writing CVs or with job-searching skills. Respondents had been given leaflets on how to write a CV and attended CV writing workshops. Some respondents specifically mentioned that they had attended sessions geared towards professionals and executives, introduced as part of the Government's recession recovery package.

Some respondents stressed that increased personalisation in the provision of help with CVs would have been valuable. Some felt they had to attend for an unnecessary length of time and others that their session was too brief. Though in most cases respondents found the help offered to be of some value, a number suggested that shorter one-to-one sessions more tailored to each individual would have been more useful.

"I was offered the service of help with a CV from the job centre. I was then just given a booklet with a template of CVs and told to use it at home – not exactly worth an appointment! The adviser was more interested in getting me to fill in a form to give feedback on what they had done for me – surely just a box-ticking exercise for the government?" **Female aged 25-49, with one dependent child, had been claiming JSA for less than three months**

"A full CV workshop would be useful. I was given some booklets and forms which were designed to help with CV writing, but I think a one-to-one workshop would be much better." **Respondent who had been claiming JSA for less than three months**

“A CV writing workshop – three hours, some useful tips but it was quite generic and 10 people in the room. They were two women taking the workshop with lots of knowledge but I think it would have been more useful to have 30 mins one on one with one of them - in that time we could have rewritten my CV and she could have given me some personal tips useful to me. The back-to-work session is again very generic.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming JSA for less than three months**

“I was offered a course, which took all day, which spent time showing you how to search for jobs online and in the press, and help to revamp your CV. When I got a copy of the agenda for the day, it seemed that everything that was being shown were things that I am already competent in, and that I told the adviser I was competent in. It felt like he was just sending me on the course to be seen to be doing something, rather than because it was of any noticeable benefit to me.” **Female, one dependent child, had been claiming JSA for less than three months**

Some jobseeker’s allowance respondents referred to the fact that they had only received help with their CVs after six months, which they felt was quite late.

“I was offered a CV review session which was useful even though I thought I didn’t need it! Good to have a fresh pair of eyes. But what wasn’t useful was that this was only offered, I think, after six months, which is too late. It should be sooner so people can use the advice earlier in their job search.” **Male aged 25-49, had been claiming JSA for six months**

“After nine months I was eventually referred to Triangle Fusion – who would give me an appointment to review my CV/talk about interview techniques, etc. I am still waiting for the appointment.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming JSA for between six months and a year**

Careers advice / help to train or retrain / low expectations of job entry level

The Jobcentre Plus 'Finding your way back to work' campaign highlights identifying skills and getting new ones in its top three tips for getting back to work. Jobcentre Plus advisers should signpost claimants to Careers Advice Services and where appropriate provide a direct referral to face-to-face appointment for more in-depth skills assessments. In England referrals are to the Skills Funding Agency Next Step service and to similar services in Scotland and Wales.¹¹ However, respondents gave little mention of having received support from careers advisers or the Next Step programme. Instead they frequently referred to wanting support from careers advisers to help them train for a job that would provide a reasonable income, help them see what they could do with their skills or provide advice about how they could retrain to increase their job opportunities, particularly if their disability meant they were no longer able to do the job they had experience in.

"When I asked about training and for advice about changing career the advisor couldn't help me. The last adviser was very young and inexperienced, the one before that implied that I was too old to go back into education." **By postcard**

"I am on high rate DLA... I have been put on the Pathways to Work... I am being forced into looking for work, I am confined to a wheelchair in constant pain... I was a chef when I worked and obviously can't go back into this field, I haven't been offered any training in any other fields, it is madness." **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming IB for more than two years**

"I was hoping to find someone who would be understanding and try to help me to find strengths to build on (I have studied at degree level) but instead found someone who believed I 'should just get back to work even if that meant stacking shelves'. It is not that I am unwilling to stack shelves, far from it but I would have liked to see someone who was able to see I was hoping to move on and gain employment which would help my recovery not hinder it. I am not work shy but felt that the interviewer was judging me in this manner..." **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming IB for more than two years**

"Finding work I could realistically apply for – I can't go back to the type of work I had before, but have no idea what other types of work I can apply for. Careers advice would be nice too, for adults this seems to be uncommon, knowing what I could do to get a better job would be helpful." **By postcard**

Respondents with qualifications commonly felt that they had to lower their employment expectations, and those without qualifications felt that the emphasis was on accepting any job rather than on training that would equip them to achieve sustainable employment.

“I was told that having a law degree does not entitle me to choose a legal career. I was told in a very rude fashion that I should consider working on the check out at Asda.” **Female lone parent aged 49, by postcard**

“I went to an interview with Jobcentre who basically told me that I would have to find my own childcare, that they couldn’t help me and that I had to lower my expectation – I am a trained accountant and just need an update course. They showed me vacancies for account clerks and shop assistants.” **Female lone parent, aged 42, by postcard**

In addition to low expectations of the type of jobs a respondent might be able to get, some responses from IB claimants who wanted to work indicated that they felt they were being told that they wouldn’t be able to find any employment.

“The officer seemed to be at a loss as to what to suggest to me. I had the impression she was simply going through the motions. She failed to be encouraging/positive in any way. I welcome a realistic approach but her attitude was one of disinterest.” **Female aged 50-59, had been claiming IB for more than two years**

“I picked up the message from the interviewer that, at 55 years old, ‘You don’t really want to find a job do you?’ ...I had two of these interviews and both were conducted in similar fashion” **Male aged 50-59, had been claiming IB for more than two years**

Only basic training courses offered – funding not available for re-training

Many respondents found that only basic courses were on offer. While help with numeracy, literacy and basic computer skills are extremely important for some people, a personalised service would establish whether or not a particular client would benefit from such a course and ensure limited resources were not wasted.

“I was sent to a numeracy and literacy course – I have A-levels in Maths and English, ...the course tutors told me during their initial test I got full marks, higher than they’d ever had before, and sent me home. Currently taking part in New Deal, training given is nothing that a person with common sense wouldn’t understand, and I am about to start a work trial – as I’ll be working (for free) in this trial I will be unable to look for work or deal with debt issues as a result of unemployment.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming JSA for between one and two years**

“I have been offered courses in Maths and English. I wanted to retrain to change my career but I’m not allowed. I can’t carry on in my line of work either due to an injury.” **Male aged 25-49, claiming IB**

“Nothing of any use has been offered. As a skilled IT professional they offered me a basic word processing course! when I asked about retraining / updating my other qualifications they said I was too qualified to receive any help. A total waste of time.” **Male aged 50-59, had been claiming JSA for between one and two years**

“All the training offered was basic skills, which would not lead to a job nowadays. When I enquired about higher training such as a Sage qualification or higher computer qualification, I was told it wasn’t available or to pay for it myself.” **Female lone parent of one, aged 25-49, had been claiming IS for less than three months**

Claimants who specifically requested help with re-training were often told that funding was not available. Some people told us that they had tried to find training themselves to improve their job prospects, and were told that these courses would have to be self-funded. Some were also discouraged by advice that participating in a course could risk their entitlement to JSA on the grounds of reduced availability for work.

“Advice leaflets on the desk are all aimed at basic skills courses, and I don’t require this. I mentioned going to evening classes to improve my qualifications (I have a degree, but not technical/ work-related qualifications) and was told I would have to pay for it myself.” **Female respondent, 25-49, no dependents, claiming JSA three to six months**

“I recently enrolled with Pitman Training to do an Excel course. I was told that I would not be able to receive the JSA if I was unavailable for full time work. I explained that I understood this and that the course had flexible hours and I would be able to take a full time job whilst still doing the course. I had to fill out a form detailing what I had already explained, and also sign a written statement detailing once again what I had explained. I feel that as this course is going to improve my employment prospects, the Jobcentre Plus should have been more enthusiastic towards it and should not have made me feel that my benefit would be in trouble from doing it. The way it was dealt with could be improved greatly, and it should be acknowledged clearly that training courses are a desirable thing and not a problem.” **Female aged 18-24, had been claiming JSA for less than three months**

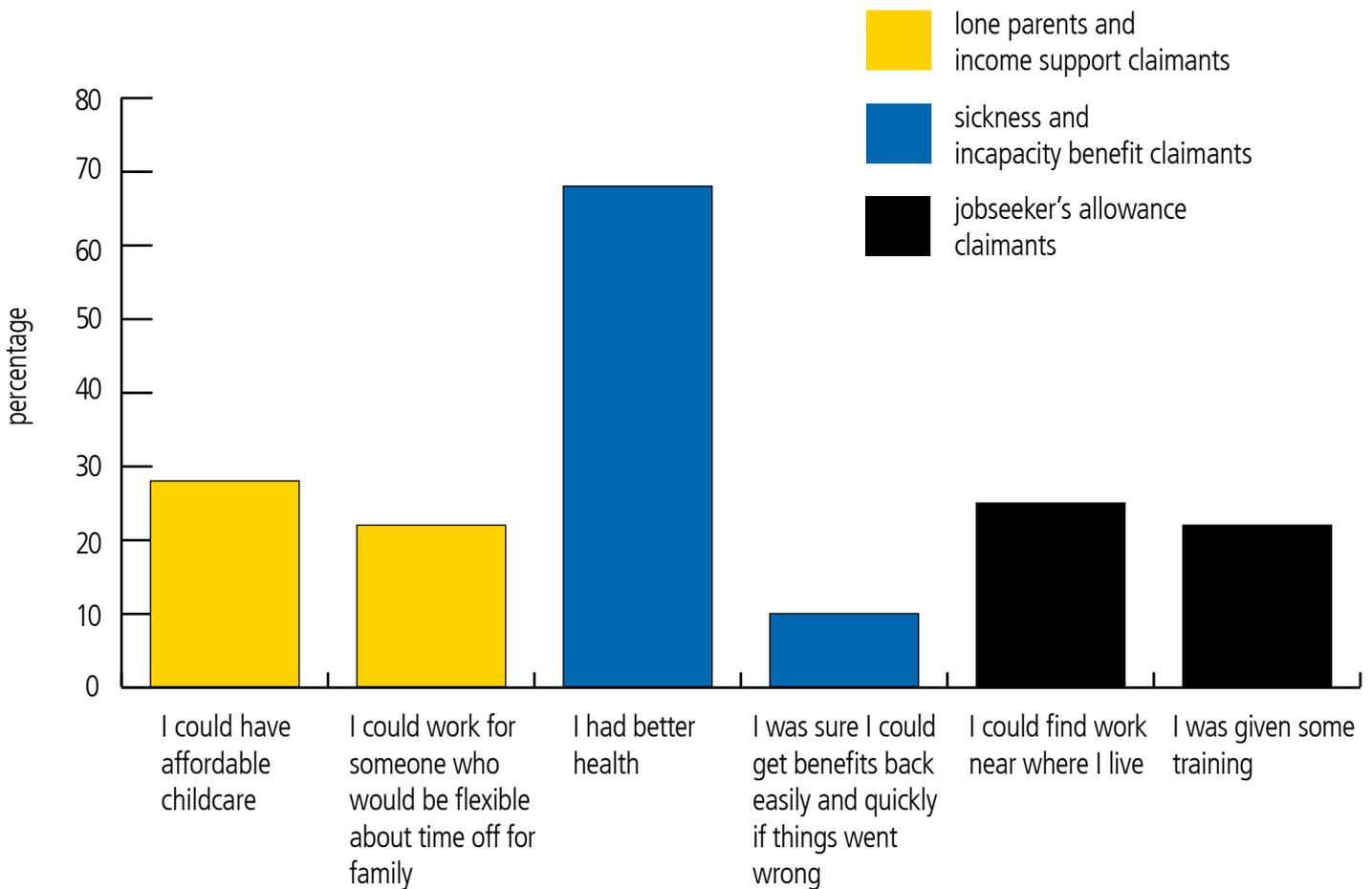
Other comments suggest that funding was designed to last a number of weeks but was not sufficiently flexible to allow claimants to complete a whole course.

“Jobcentre Plus sent me to college for eight weeks, as they have for many others, telling me that if I decided not to participate in this scheme my jobseekers allowance would be stopped immediately... The problem was that all the courses available were two months worth of twelve month courses and of no value whatsoever. The college did give me a certificate in computing which is irrelevant as I only completed five weeks of the twelve month course. This makes me think these schemes are about numbers not people...” **Male aged 25-49, had been claiming JSA for between one and two years.**

“I have, through an adviser, been put on a course to help with my dyslexia but I was not able to finish it as the money has run out.” **Female aged 25-49, had been claiming IS for more than two years**

It would help me get back to work if:

Respondents were asked to name one thing that would most help them get back to work. The table below shows that the top two barriers to work were different for each claimant group.



- Responses from jobseeker's allowance respondents were most varied, but the top two issues were cited as being able to find work near to where they lived or if they were given training. A number simply referred to the recession and the basic need for more jobs.
- Responses from claimants of sickness and incapacity benefits were most likely to cite improved health as the one thing that would help them get back to work. A distant second was confidence about being about to get back on benefits easily if things didn't work out with their employment.
- For lone parents, affordable childcare and working for an employer who was flexible to their needs as a parent would help them most.

Conclusions and recommendations

The new coalition Government has committed to abolishing all current Jobcentre Plus Welfare to Work schemes and replacing them with a single work programme. It has also committed to providing help earlier in the claim process and not making people wait for a set period on benefits before they can access the intensive support provided by schemes such as the Flexible New Deal. The findings from this piece of work provide useful indications of what claimants of out-of-work benefits themselves think would help them, and can be summarised by the following recommendations.

Provide clear information and advice regarding the support available from Jobcentre Plus or provider agencies

The survey findings indicated that there was a lack of clarity about what help could be provided – and funded – with re-training or careers advice. Respondents who wanted help, were not offered what should have been available. Many respondents expressed disappointment and a perception that their attempts to find work were not being supported. While not all re-training can necessarily be funded, transparency in decision-making and consistent referrals to support from training and careers services are essential. It is important that claimants can be supported to consider if the training they are seeking will help them find work and what alternative options are available to them. Jobcentre Plus and their contracted-out providers should be trained to give clear, consistent messages regarding claimant training options. Providing claimants with a menu of support options available, would be a helpful way of supporting them to ask for help.

Personalisation

For some disabled people the most appropriate interviews and effective personalised support could be provided by disability employment advisers (DEAs). Their role is to offer expert advice about appropriate work, training and support programmes available. They can help Jobcentre Plus personal advisers working with both ESA and JSA claimants, and also have their own caseload of claimants with most complex support needs. Personal advisers aim to deliver a personalised service, addressing the particular needs and circumstances of each claimant. However, it was common for respondents to refer to their 'support' as 'a tick-box exercise' and to report that there were inadequate efforts on the part of the personal adviser to find out about them, their situation, their skills and limitations. As a result many respondents reported that the referrals and support provided were inappropriate. These findings are consistent with recent DWP commissioned

research which looked at how personal advisers manage the style and content of work focused interviews. It found a tailored, more claimant-focused approach more effective at helping claimants move closer to the labour market than a process-led 'tick-box' approach.¹² To ensure limited resources are used effectively, providers must commit to delivering an appropriate level of personalisation and to tailor the support offered to each individual. This should take account of their skills, training, work experience, health issues and childcare responsibilities. For ESA claimants, consideration should be given to whether fewer, more tailored interviews would be more effective for some claimants.

Work focused interviews and jobseeker's interviews

The comments and themes provided by the survey respondents chimed with research undertaken elsewhere – for example, survey comments supported DWP research, which found that lone parents preferred to be seen by a designated adviser and were more positive if they saw the same one each time. The value of 'better-off' calculations in helping claimants understand the financial changes to expect when moving into work, were also mentioned.¹³

Consistent with the latest DWP research into the Pathways to Work programme,¹⁴ our survey respondents were more likely to report that their adviser understood them than to say that they felt that the interview was useful. DWP research found that over 90 per cent felt that their adviser understood them but only 58 per cent felt that the WFI had helped them to think about paid work. Though our survey respondents were less positive overall¹⁵ (which may result from the self-selecting nature of the survey), their comments provide useful insight into fertile areas for change.

Recent National Audit Office research concluded that the Pathways to Work programme had had limited impact on moving claimants into work. They also found no evidence that the programme was performing better or costing significantly less in areas where the programme was contracted out to providers than in those run by Jobcentre Plus.¹⁶

The coalition Government's planned new single work programme must provide opportunity for a review of the WFI regime to ensure improved effectiveness. Our survey findings suggested that interviews must be tailored to the needs of a claimant but a more consistent approach to interviews is required, in terms of both conduct and content. Minimum standards for the conduct of interviews should be set by the DWP and included in the provider contracts. All references to personal advisers below should be taken to include both Jobcentre Plus personal advisers

and those within provider organisations. Minimum standards should address the following issues:

Conduct of the interview

Privacy and confidentiality. Currently Jobcentre Plus personal advisers offer a private interview room if they consider it appropriate or if the claimant specifically requests it. We recommend that all claimants of sickness and incapacity benefits are routinely offered the option of a private interview. If claimants hold back on relevant information about the limitations provided by their medical condition, because of fear of being overheard, the effectiveness of the interview will be limited. A clear code of confidentiality should be explained to claimants at the outset.

Expertise of advisers¹⁷

- **DDA training.** All Jobcentre Plus staff have access to guidance about the DDA to help them comply with their responsibilities. Personal advisers' learning includes information on the needs of different customer groups including identifying claimants with a disability or health condition and the DDA in employment. Disability employment advisers (DEAs) have a greater level of training and can provide direct help to claimants or to personal advisers on reasonable adjustments that employers need to make. We recommend that all personal advisers, are trained to fully understand the DDA and the implications for the services they provide, as well as what reasonable adjustments employers may need to make.
- **Mental health awareness training.** Jobcentre Plus provides its advisers with disability awareness training and with 'Employment Health Condition and Disability' guide notes. These notes provide background information on a number of health conditions including mental health issues. DEAs receive further skills training to equip them to deal with claimants with more complex needs. Our survey suggested that in some cases advisers were not equipped to provide adequate support to claimants with mental health conditions. We recommend that given the high percentage of benefit claimants with mental health conditions, all personal advisers should have basic mental health awareness training.

- **Access to Work.** All Jobcentre Plus personal advisers have access to guidance on the Access to Work scheme. In addition, advisers working with incapacity benefit claimants should have training in the Access to Work scheme. We recommend that all personal advisers, are trained to be able to recognise when claimants would benefit from the Access to Work scheme and provide any necessary referral.
- **JSA flexibilities for parents.** All work focused interviews for lone parents are carried out by specialist lone parent advisers. In some Jobcentre Plus districts, lone parent advisers continue to see lone parents who move onto JSA and also new JSA claimants who are lone parents. In other areas they will see mainstream JSA personal advisers, without specialist knowledge of lone parent issues. Within the early stages of their JSA claim, all lone parents should be advised about the support available through New Deal for Lone Parents. We recommend that personal advisers supporting lone parents, whether on income support or jobseeker's allowance, should have training on the existing flexibilities in the law that allow parents to restrict their job search to employment that fits around school hours. They should also be able to advise these claimants on their entitlement to financial support to help with childcare costs and to be able to advise or to refer to information and advice about childcare in the local area.

Usefulness of the interview

Jobcentre advisers can provide a whole range of support to benefit claimants to help them to prepare for and find work. Our survey suggests that claimants are not always offered the appropriate support.

We recommend that:

- Advisers should ensure that better-off calculations are provided and full benefit and tax credit information is always provided.
- Advisers should provide information about and make referrals to Condition Management Programmes when relevant.
- Advisers should always provide claimants with information about Careers Advice and the Next Step programme along with referrals when appropriate.

Advisers should provide claimants with information about their workers' rights. This should help to alleviate some of the worry of lone parents, in particular, regarding what they are and are not entitled to expect from their potential employer.

Endnotes

1. *The Coalition: our programme for government*, May 2010
2. Department of Social Security, *New Ambitions for Our Country: a new contract for welfare*, 19983. *No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility*, DWP July 2008
4. This is made up of 1.47 million JSA claimants, 0.696 million lone parents on income support and 2.62 million claimants on incapacity benefits, as at November 2009, DWP statistics May 2010
5. *Building Britain's Recovery: Achieving Full Employment*, DWP December 2009
6. Jobcentre Plus annual report and accounts 2008/09
7. Incapacity benefit, income support or jobseeker's allowance.
8. 102 were claiming incapacity benefit – (claimants with a national insurance contribution record), 34 were claiming income support, (means-tested benefit for claimants without the necessary contributions), 122 were claiming employment and Support Allowance (new claimants post October 2008)
9. The work capability test not only assesses whether a claimant is fit for work but also helps determine whether claimants should join the Work-Related Activity Group and be required to take part in work focused interviews, or the Support Group and have no requirements placed upon them
10. directgov.gov.uk
11. direct.gov.uk and information provided to Citizens Advice by Jobcentre Plus Customers and Stakeholders division
12. Drew P, Toerien M, Irvine A and Sainsbury R, *A study of language and communication between advisers and claimants in Work Focused Interviews*, DWP research report 633, 2010
13. Gloster R, Caseborne, J, et al, *Lone parent obligations: early findings of implementation as well as experiences of the Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance regimes*, DWP research report 645, 2010
14. *Pathways to Work: the experiences of longer term existing customers*, DWP report 586 2009, and *Pathways to Work: The experiences of new and repeat customers in Jobcentre Plus expansion*, DWP report 627, 2010
15. 44 per cent believed their adviser listened and understood them and 19 per cent believed that their interview was useful in helping them think about work
16. Department for Work and Pensions, *Support to incapacity benefits claimants through Pathways to Work*, National Audit Office, May 2010
17. Information provided to Citizens Advice by Jobcentre Plus Customers and Stakeholders division

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