

In-house Report 126

**Deferrals in Jobcentre Plus: Research into Staff
Understanding and Application of Deferral Guidance
for Non-Jobseeker's Allowance Customers**

A Report to the Department for Work and Pensions

ECOTEC

Research & Consulting Limited

And

Centre for Research in Social Policy

By

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Glossary of Abbreviations

BA	Benefits Agency
CC	Contact Centre
DEA	Disability Employment Adviser
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ES	Employment Service
ESCOM	Employment Service's electronic database containing advice and guidance for Jobcentre Plus staff
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
FA	Financial Assessor
FCO	First Contact Officer
IB	Incapacity Benefit
ICA	Invalid Care Allowance
IS	Income Support
IT	Information technology
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
LMS	Labour Market System
LPA	Lone Parent Adviser
NDDP	New Deal for Disabled People
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NI	National Insurance
PA	Personal Adviser
SSP	Statutory Sick Pay
VANTIVE	Electronic appointment booking system used at the contact centre; also provides staff with a script to use in conversations with customers
WFI	Work Focused Interview
WFTC	Working Families Tax Credit

Executive summary

Introduction

The overall objective of the research was to explore Jobcentre Plus staff understanding of deferrals and waivers for non-JSA customers, following the revised guidance provided to local offices in April 2002. The research also intended to evaluate the impact of the guidance and, more specifically, aimed to:

- explore staff attitudes to the process of applying deferrals and waivers;
- explore staff attitudes and understanding of the new guidance on waivers and deferrals;
- ascertain whether guidance is being adopted at local level, how, and whether it works well;
- obtain examples of good practice;
- determine whether staff think that systems have improved since the new guidelines have been issued;
- check that the ‘right’ customers are being deferred;
- examine customers’ views and experiences of deferrals; and
- see whether systems are in place for picking up deferred customers.

This research included face-to-face interviews with a wide range of staff from the Public Offices and Contact Centres and with non-JSA customers. Non-JSA customers included in the research included lone parents, carers, bereaved customers, and sick or disabled customers.

The research was carried out in four case-study areas. The areas were chosen to ensure a good mix of deferral rates (based on averages May- October 2002), geographical spread (urban/rural), and whether the Pathfinders had been included in previous phases of the Jobcentre Plus research (these were avoided).

Key issues

This research found that processes for making deferral and waiver decisions was broadly being delivered in line with the Jobcentre Plus policy vision, and that Jobcentre Plus staff in both the Contact Centres and Public Offices understood the general purpose of deferrals and waivers. Staff viewed deferrals as offering flexibility to the delivery and timing of WFIs, and waivers were understood to be the result of a judgement that a WFI would not be appropriate for the customer at the time of claim, or at any point in the future. Jobcentre Plus staff also understood that the decision to defer or waive should be made on the basis of a customers’ individual circumstances, and were happy in making these decisions for certain customer groups. However, staff did not always appear to understand that deferrals were a mechanism for ensuring that WFIs were appropriate not only in terms of convenience or immediate timing, but also in terms of a clients’ wider circumstances, in particular, their relationship to work. As a result decisions were sometimes made on the basis of customers’ ‘presenting’ circumstances (which were often initiated the new benefit claim), with no further exploration of a customers’ support needs or feelings about attending a WFI.

A number of key issues were identified as significantly influencing staff understanding and application of deferrals and waivers:

- the level of confidence with which Jobcentre Plus staff are able to deliver a work focused service to non-Jobseekers Allowance customers;
- the level of knowledge that FCOs and PAs have about all of the services and support available to customers from Jobcentre Plus staff and programmes;

- the quality of explanation given to customers about how the system works and the customers' consequent ability to judge whether they would find the WFI useful; and
- the degree to which both FCOs and PAs explore the customer's circumstances in order to tailor Jobcentre Plus services appropriately.

Guidance

The main source of guidance used by Jobcentre Plus staff included: the National Jobcentre Plus Guidance on the Intranet; locally produced manuals in some Contact Centres; and advice from other colleagues. Jobcentre Plus staff generally referred to guidance when they were unsure about a deferral or waiver decision. Guidance was disseminated through a 'top down' approach, with managers tailoring the guidance in line with staff roles. Guidance was disseminated immediately following its release, but there were staff who rarely checked old guidance, as they felt that it was likely to be out of date.

There was limited awareness of the April Live Support Bulletins guidance amongst staff in Contact Centres, and awareness broadly reflected the dissemination process. Awareness was higher amongst managers, and FCOs often did not recall the guidance. However, in Public Offices there was awareness among both managers and PAs. Although there was limited spontaneous recall of the content of the Bulletins by Contact Centre staff, there was a recognition of the key messages when prompted (Section 2.2).

Staff did not report any direct impact of the guidance. In the original Contact Centres staff felt that they were already following the guidance, and that the guidance introduced in April had re-enforced existing messages. However, staff reported that the Live Support Bulletins had an impact on the process by which deferrals and waivers are booked.

Staff exhibited an inconsistent awareness of the principles - as outlined in the April guidance - underlying deferrals and waivers. However, there were some examples of these principles being captured in local guidance, and here staff exhibited a more consistent approach to deferrals and waivers, and a higher degree of comfort in applying discretion.

Deferrals and Waivers at Contact Centres

Jobcentre Plus staff from both Contact Centres and Public Offices reported that they would expect the majority of deferrals to be made at Contact Centres.

Contact Centre staff understanding of deferrals and waivers reflected the level of understanding of the work focus. Staff understood that deferrals were a postponement of the WFIs, whereas waivers would be made where it was not appropriate for a customer to have a WFI at any time. However, fewer staff were confident in explaining how they would determine whether a WFI was appropriate, and they therefore had difficulty in determining whether or not a deferral would be appropriate (Section 3.1.1). In particular, FCOs had difficulty in deciding whether to hold a WFI where customers' circumstances were unpredictable or unlikely to change over the long term. In these cases, FCOs rarely asked customers about their attitudes to work, and showed a fairly limited understanding of the relevant types of support that might be offered through the WFI. However, in other cases FCOs had a more sophisticated understanding of the purpose of deferrals, and explained that they were a useful mechanism for maintaining customers' engagement with the Jobcentre Plus process, and delaying the WFI until it would be a more effective use of PA time.

Deferral and waiver decisions were made on the basis of information collected during the First Contact conversation. FCOs indicated that there were some customer groups for whom they would

find it relatively easy to make deferral and waiver decisions, based on information collected using the VANTIVE script and on available guidance. In these cases, decisions appeared to be made fairly consistently across all the case study areas (Section 3.2.2).

Where customers' circumstances were more complex, FCOs indicated that decisions had to be made on the basis of the customer's individual circumstances, using the FCO's discretion. However, FCOs felt that the VANTIVE script did not prompt them to collect the necessary information, and that they were not always confident about probing into customers' circumstances. FCOs also indicated that they would appreciate more specific guidance in relation to complex cases. Where customers' circumstances were more complicated, decisions relied upon FCO skills (particularly in probing), experience (and associated confidence levels) and discretion.

Deferral of customers with physical health problems depended upon a number of factors: the type, length and severity of illness; the existence and duration of a medical certificate; and whether the customer had to receive medical treatment (in hospital or residential rehabilitation). The ability of the FCOs to make appropriate deferral decisions for these customers was influenced by the lack of confidence FCOs had in asking about medical problems (which FCOs sometimes attributed to a lack of medical knowledge), and limited awareness of support available to customers with physical health problems (for example job brokers, DEAs) (Section 3.2.2).

Customers with mental health problems (ranging from psychosis to depression) were deferred depending on a several considerations: the nature and gravity of illness and whether their condition was controlled. These considerations were viewed as being good indicators of whether the customer would pose any threats to staff safety, and also whether they would be able either to fully participate in the WFI or be able to work. Staff exhibited variable levels of confidence and understanding in relation to dealing with mental health issues and particular confusion related to depression.

Staff reported that lone parents were rarely deferred unless they had additional short-term caring responsibilities or were distressed due the recent breakdown of their relationships. This was because FCOs had a better awareness of the support available (particularly through NDLP), and because they viewed lone parents as being a 'priority group' (as they were perceived as being more likely to want to move into work than other non-JSA customers).

FCOs reported variable practice in relation to deferring carers. A recurrent reason identified for the deferral of carers was that they were unlikely to be unavailable for work, and that there was perceived to be little support that could be offered through the WFI.

FCOs set specific deadlines for when they would expect the PA to re-contact the customer to arrange a WFI meeting. Decisions about these deadlines were based on: indicative timescales (for example, length of hospitalised stay); available evidence (e.g. medical certificate); and individual customer circumstances. Decisions on deferral timescales varied considerably.

The research found that Contact Centres managers had placed increased emphasis on the monitoring of deferral decisions. Generally, managers and staff felt that the right customers were being deferred, although in the newly established Contact Centres they accepted that there was a learning process involved for less experienced staff. All areas had instituted 100% checks for team leader authorisations, on the recommendation of the Pit Stop Bulletins. However, as Team Leaders were sometimes not very experienced, there was no clear impact on practice (Section 3.5.3).

Contact Centre staff felt that it was hard to prescribe deferrals rates, since they thought that all customers should be treated on an individual basis, resulting in variable deferral rates week by week. Managers used consolidation reports to give them an indication of how they compared to other Pathfinder areas. In some cases, managers were aware of tolerance levels.

Deferrals and Waivers at Public Offices

PAs generally had a good understanding of the purpose of WFIs, viewing them: as an opportunity to introduce non-JSA customers to work; to explain the help and services available; and provide help and support. Their understanding of deferrals was also good, although some were less clear about when deferrals were appropriate. Their understanding of waivers was felt to be more clear-cut (Section 4.2).

The case study areas had different approaches to following up customers. In two areas, Public Offices had deferrals teams responsible for picking up work flows from the Contact Centre. In one area, deferred customers were not being re-contacted due to a lack of staff time, and the low priority attached to this activity (because there were no associated performance targets).

The research found that customers were not usually deferred at the WFI, primarily because PAs did not want customers to have a wasted journey. In these instances, PAs would instead shorten the WFI. The exception was one area in which non-JSA customers would be deferred at WFI if the PAs felt that the customers' physical and emotional condition would prevent them from fully participating in the WFI.

PAs had more autonomy to make their own deferral decisions than FCOs, but could seek help from managers and colleagues if required. They generally indicated that they felt confident about making deferral decisions. However, some reported that their lack of medical knowledge posed a difficulty (although this may be related to their discomfort with probing about a customer's health).

Customers with physical health problems would be (re)-deferred according to their ability to get to the WFI, their ability to sit down for a period of time, or whether they had a contagious diseases. The availability of relief for caring responsibilities was the main factor in determining whether carers or lone parents would be deferred. PAs reported that they would also consider whether customers, in particular bereaved customers and lone parents, were in emotional distress. When considering whether to re-defer a customer, PAs would also consider whether the customer's circumstances have changed since making the benefit claim.

Time scales for (re)-deferrals were decided on the basis of: individual customer circumstances; discussion with the customer; and available evidence (e.g. length of medical certificate, date of hospital appointment). Timescales varied from two weeks to six months (Section 4.4.8).

PAs did not appear to emphasise the work aspect of WFIs, but generally made reference to the mandatory nature of attending a WFI (Section 4.4.7).

Public Office staff generally felt that the right customers were being deferred at the Contact Centre. Where Public Offices monitored deferrals, this was limited to checking that workflows are followed up, or that sufficient information had been recorded on LMS. Deferral decisions were only monitored in one area where managers had a strong awareness of the tolerance range. Public Office staff expressed a unanimous view that it was not possible to set a desirable target level for deferrals, as these decisions had to be based on individual circumstances (Section 4.5.2).

Customer Evidence

Customers deferred at Contact Centre had a limited understanding of the Jobcentre Plus process, and of deferrals and waivers in particular. However, in most cases, customers felt that they had been deferred appropriately (Section 5.2.5). The exceptions identified in this research included lone parents with additional caring responsibilities who were still interested in considering work, and sick or disabled customers who wanted to consider retraining or different work options. The timescales for

which customers were deferred were broadly appropriate, however, some customers were not being re-contacted following the end of their deferral period. Customers were usually aware of the conditionality of rearranged meetings (Section 5.2.2).

Customers deferred at Public Offices had a low awareness of having been deferred, and a poor understanding of the Jobcentre Plus process (for example, they were unable to distinguish between FA/PA) . Consequently, they did not expect to be re-contacted, and were uncertain about who to contact if they needed any help or support in the future. Customers deferred at Public Offices also anticipated that they would have to attend re-arranged meetings as a condition of their receiving benefit.

Recommendations

Specific recommendations for promoting the application of appropriate deferral and waiver decisions are made below.

- Staff in Contact Centres, and to a lesser extent, Public Offices, might benefit from guidance and associated training relating to the key principles behind making deferrals and waivers (see Good Practice example, Section 3).
- Staff in both Contact Centres and Public Offices should ensure that they are confident that they have elicited sufficient information from the customer in order to make a deferral decision. This includes asking whether the customer feels whether a WFI would be appropriate, when it might be appropriate, and under what circumstances the customer would return to work, and whether there is any related support that the Jobcentre can offer. More evidence of customers' perspectives should be recorded on LMS conversations.
- An appropriate explanation of the range of support available through the WFIs should always be given by FCOs, and a WFI offered to customers before a deferral decision is made (this requirement could be potentially be included in future 'Must Do' Guidance).
- Staff in Both Contact Centres and Public Offices should ensure that customers understand the Jobcentre Plus process, and know how to access help or support in the future.
- The monitoring of deferral and waivers - in particular the examination of the level of evidence collected, and reasons for deferral - should be used as part of a system of continuous improvement.

1.0 Introduction

In April 2002, Jobcentre Plus staff were issued with new guidance on the application of deferrals and waivers. The guidance was produced following research conducted by the Department for Work Pensions (DWP) and external organisations, which showed that deferrals and waiver decisions were not made as they should be, across the network. In January 2003, ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd and the Centre for Research in Social Policy were commissioned by DWP to explore the reasons for inconsistent application of deferrals and waivers and to examine the extent to which the new guidelines have promoted consistency.

This chapter introduces the wider policy context of Jobcentre Plus and identifies the key issues for research. More specifically, it discusses the aims and objectives of the service and the delivery of deferrals and waivers in Jobcentre Plus. The chapter then details the nature of the evaluation, what it aimed to achieve, and examines comparative research. A brief description of the methodological approach used is followed by a summary of the report structure.

1.1 The Policy Context

The Government's goal is to provide employment opportunities for all. This has led to a fundamental shift in the way in which people without work are supported. The change has been from a passive to a more active system, based on the principle of 'work for those who can and security for those who cannot'¹.

Jobcentre Plus was announced in March 2000, as the consolidation of the Government's welfare reform programme. It brings together the former services of the Employment Service (ES) and the working age part of the Benefits Agency (BA) to provide a single point of delivery for jobs, benefits advice and support for people of working age through Personal Advisor (PA) meetings. Jobcentre Plus builds on the experience of the ONE pilots that were introduced in 1999, in 12 areas throughout Britain. This involved piloting the integration of benefit claiming and work placement/ job seeking.

The Jobcentre Plus service is gradually being rolled out across the country. The first stage of the roll-out began in October 2001, in which 56 Pathfinder sites were opened. The remaining offices began to be rolled-out from October 2002.

1.2 The aims and objectives of Jobcentre Plus

Jobcentre Plus brings a work focus to all customers, including those claiming benefits other than Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). These include lone parents, sick or disabled people, carers and people who have been bereaved. Under this new service, those entering the benefit system (either for new or repeat claims) are obliged to attend a meeting with a Personal Adviser (PA) to discuss their skills and experience, job opportunities, barriers to work and how best to overcome them. Attendance at a Work Focused Interview (WFI) is a condition of receiving benefit.

¹ Department for Education and Employment *Towards full employment in a modern society*, March 2001, DfEE, CM 5084, p27

The Jobcentre Plus vision is that the service should provide:

- a work focus to the benefit system, for everyone using the service;
- a dedicated service to enable employers to fill their vacancies quickly and successfully;
- swift, secure and professional access to benefits for those entitled to them;
- a much better service for everyone who needs help;
- active help from Personal Advisers to assist people to get and keep work;
- a better working environment for staff, which will be safe and professional; and
- greatly improved information technology, accommodation and support services to deliver an efficient and effective service.

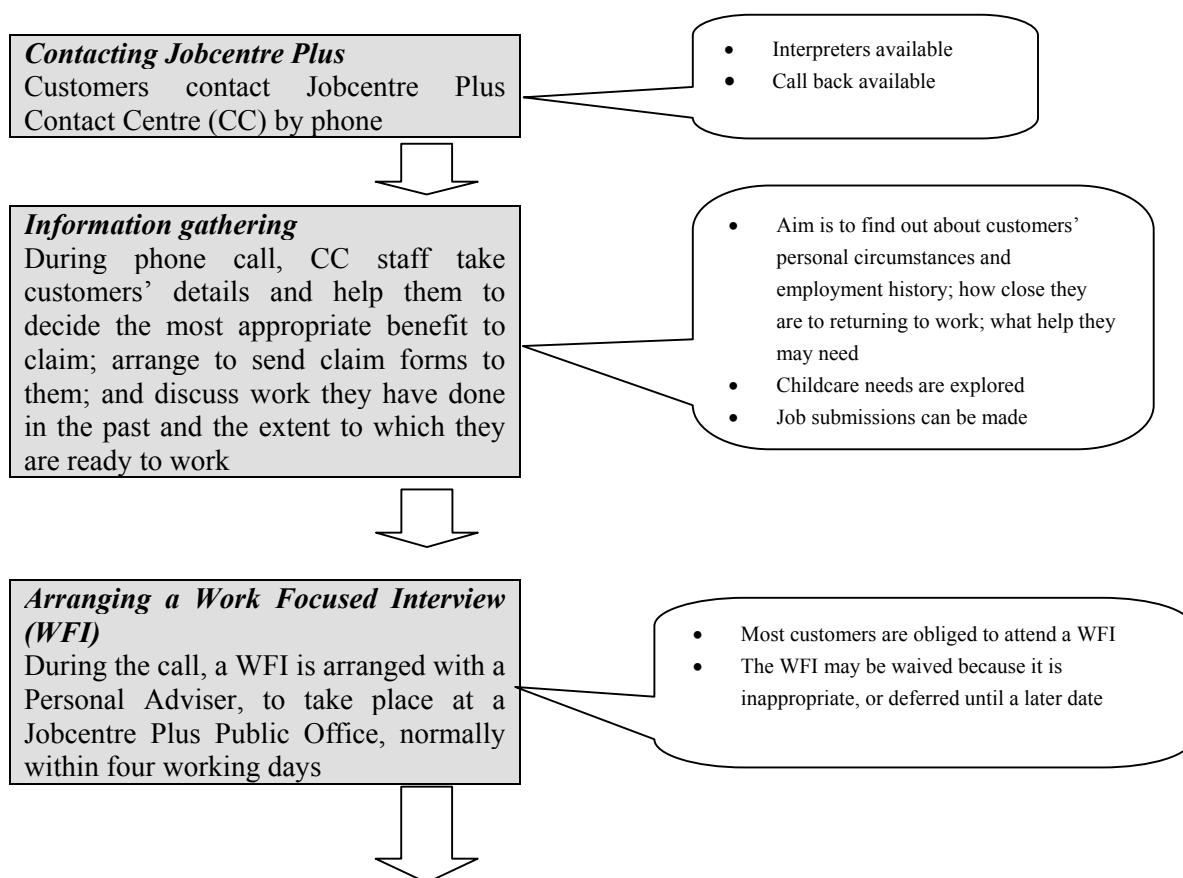
1.3 The delivery of Jobcentre Plus

1.3.1 The Process

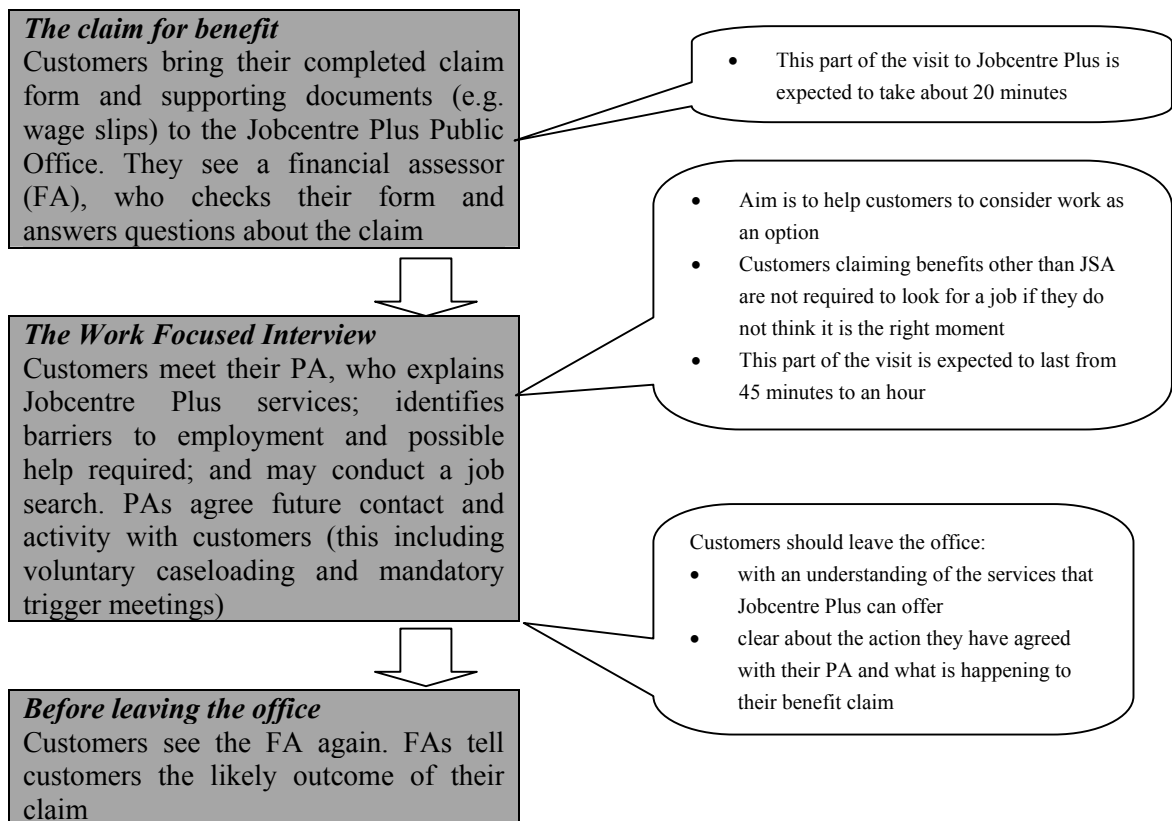
Figure 1 shows the process for new and repeat claimants of working-age benefits. For JSA customers, the emphasis is on work and overcoming barriers to work; these customers follow the well-established Jobseeker's Allowance regime. For non-JSA customers, attendance at a Work Focused Interview is now mandatory in order to receive benefit.

Figure 1: The Jobcentre Plus Process

Contact Centre



Jobcentre Plus Public Office



1.3.2 Deferrals and Waivers

The WFI is intended to assist customers in thinking about the possibility of work, and in moving towards work. Some customers, particularly new customers enter the system following a change in their personal circumstances, and may be distressed, and unlikely to see work as a first priority. For a few customers, work is unlikely to be an option at all. There is, therefore, a system in place which allows the WFI to be deferred, or waived entirely, depending on individual customers' personal circumstances. Deferring a WFI is an option where:

'it is inappropriate for it to take place at the appointed time or it would be of no benefit to the customer in his or her present position' (Jobcentre Plus ESCOM guidance, May 2002).

This meeting can be waived (i.e. the customer will not be interviewed) in cases:

'where the claim for benefit is wholly retrospective or if the customer is unlikely to ever be able to benefit from a WFI because they are so disabled or ill that they are not in a position to be helped into employment. If the severity of the illness or disability is not likely to be permanent, a deferral may be more appropriate' (Jobcentre Plus WFI Live Support Bulletin, Issue 17, 22 April 2002).

Deferrals are intended to be short-term postponements, and individuals who are deferred are expected to attend a WFI at a later stage. Customers who have a short-term injury and are claiming statutory sick pay, those who are recently bereaved, and those due to be hospitalised are deferral cases. Those individuals whose personal circumstances would make a WFI inappropriate, for example terminal

illness or a progressive or degenerative disease will usually have their WFI waived for a long term period, unless the customer indicates that they would prefer otherwise. These decisions will be reviewed after a three year period, and a trigger meeting may then be offered.

1.4 The Jobcentre Plus Evaluation

This research is part of a programme of work to enable an early assessment of the impact of Jobcentre Plus. In addition to this research, three waves of staff and case study research have taken place. Other research includes quantitative surveys of customers. This research forms part of the Jobcentre Plus evaluation, which, through analysis of administrative data and social research, provides a 'real-time' analysis of the delivery and performance of Jobcentre Plus as it is being rolled out over a number of years².

The evaluation of Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders also draws on findings from the ONE evaluation and other New Deal evaluation evidence.

1.5 Research Approach

The overall objective of the research was to explore Jobcentre Plus staff understanding and application of deferrals and waiver decisions for non-JSA customers, in particular in the period following the guidance provided to local offices in April 2002. The research also intended to evaluate the impact of the guidance and, more specifically, aimed to:

- explore staff attitudes to the process of applying deferrals and waivers;
- explore staff attitudes and understanding of the new guidance on waivers and deferrals;
- ascertain whether guidance is being adopted at local level, how, and whether it works well;
- obtain examples of good practice;
- determine whether staff think that systems have improved since the new guidelines have been issued;
- check that the 'right' customers are being deferred;
- examine customers' views and experiences of deferrals; and
- see whether systems are in place for picking up deferred customers.

Several research methods were used to represent fully the process, experience and perceptions surrounding the delivery of deferrals and waivers at Jobcentre Plus. These methods included face-to-face interviews with a wide range of staff from the Public Offices and Contact Centres and with non-JSA customers. Non-JSA customers included in the research included lone parents, the bereaved, carers and sick or disabled customers. Non-participative observations were used to gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics of customer interactions when making initial telephone contact and in WFIs. A full account of the methodology adopted for the research and copies of the research tools used are provided in the annexes to this report.

The research was carried out in four case-study areas. The areas were chosen to ensure a good mix of deferral rates, geographical spread (urban/rural), and because they were new to the Jobcentre Plus evaluation research.

² A report bringing together the key findings from qualitative and quantitative evaluation of Jobcentre Plus services between October 2001 to May 2002 has been published –: Lissenburgh, S, and Marsh, A, 'Experiencing Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders: Overview of Early evaluation evidence', DWP in-house report 111'.

The products of the research included interview transcriptions and observation reports. These were used to complete analytical proformas to provide an initial overview of key findings, reasons, impacts and other evidence. The proformas allowed comparison of findings and evidence at each stage of delivery across all four fieldwork areas. Interviews were transcribed and 'mined' for further information.

Customers were identified from the DWP database. Letters were sent to them explaining the purpose of the research and offering the opportunity to opt out. A gift of £20 was offered to each customer taking part. The relevant manager selected staff from the Contact Centres and Public Offices for participation in staff interviews. Those interviewed included managers, team leaders, First Contact Officers (FCOs), and Personal Advisers.

The main fieldwork took place in April and May 2003. The fieldwork included 63 staff interviews, 36 face-to-face interviews with non-JSA customers, and non-participative observations in Jobcentre Plus Public Offices and Contact Centre sites.

1.6 Report Structure

The report is organised into sections as set out below:

- **Section 2** outlines the nature of the guidance and information used in case study offices and the ways in which the guidance is implemented. This chapter also discusses communication and dissemination of the guidance amongst staff and the impact of the guidance on practice.
- **Section 3** explores deferrals and waivers made at Contact Centre stage. This chapter analyses the level of understanding of Jobcentre Plus, the process of making deferral and waiver decisions, and how these decisions are monitored.
- **Section 4** explores deferrals and waivers in Public Offices. This chapter outlines staff understanding, preparation for a WFI, and how deferral and waiver decisions are made and monitored.
- **Section 5** addresses customer perspectives. The chapter explores customer attitudes to and understanding of deferrals/waivers, the purpose of a WFI, and the appropriateness of a deferral/waiver/WFI.
- **Section 6** presents the conclusions of the research and policy recommendations.
- Finally, **Annexes A, B, C and D** include further analysis of staff and customer interviews, and illustrate the research tools used and describe the study's methodology.

2.0 Use of guidance

2.1 Introduction

The main source of guidance available to staff is the national Jobcentre Plus Guidance, which is available as an on-line manual on the Jobcentre Plus Intranet. In April and May 2002 additional guidance on deferrals and waivers, covering the circumstances under which WFIs should be deferred or waived, was issued to staff via three Live Support Bulletins. Live Support Bulletins are distributed to staff via the Jobcentre Plus Intranet. The key messages contained in the Live Support Bulletins were that:

- decisions on whether to defer should be made on an individual basis;
- no groups of customers should automatically be deferred; and
- enough information to make an informed decision should be collected.

In addition, there was specific guidance in relation to Maternity Allowance cases, customers with mental health problems, and customers with jobs to return to.

This chapter explores the sources of guidance used by Jobcentre Plus staff and the dissemination of guidance to staff in Contact Centres and Public Offices (Sections 2.2 and 2.3). These first two sections refer to the use of and dissemination of Jobcentre Plus guidance in general, providing a context to staff awareness and the impact of the further deferrals guidance issued in April and May 2002, which are explored in Sections 2.4 and 2.5. It should be noted at the outset that the fieldwork occurred twelve months after the new deferrals guidance was issued, therefore it might be expected that recall of this guidance would be limited.

2.2 Guidance Used

Contact Centres

In two areas First Contact Officers (FCOs) relied mainly on internally produced guidance manuals if they were unsure and needed to look anything up. These manuals were based on the national Jobcentre Plus Guidance, and in one area the manual was also based on the First Contact guide. The national guidance had been adapted into a simpler, more accessible format, with additional information on local procedures, such as arrangements and contact details for specific Public Offices. In one area, the information on deferrals and waivers taken from the Jobcentre Plus Guidance included an explanation of deferrals and waivers, examples of when to defer, suggested timescales and procedures to be undertaken on the computer systems (VANTIVE and LMS). In the other area, guidance in the local manual on deferrals and waivers contained only a list of contagious diseases (taken from the national guidance) and a guidance sheet, listing six principles or rules of deferrals which had been given to staff during a training course on deferrals and waivers. This training and guidance on the principals underlying deferrals had been found to be very useful by FCOs and was something they referred back to and understood. In both of these areas the Jobcentre Plus Guidance and Live Support Bulletins were only used by Team Leaders and above. In another area, the main source of guidance used by FCOs was the national Jobcentre Plus Guidance.

In an area where a new Contact Centre had only recently opened, inexperienced FCOs (who had only been working as FCOs for around six weeks following their initial training) were reliant on experienced FCOs from the old Contact Centre (acting as mentors or trainers), for advice on when they should defer or waive a customer. The only written guidance that FCOs referred to was a list of contagious diseases which had been adapted from the national guidance. New FCOs had not gained a full understanding from their initial training of when to defer or waive customers and were only

gaining a piece-meal understanding of when to defer or waive, based on specific examples that they had dealt with. In some cases FCOs made their own notes about who to defer, based on decisions that they had made, and colleagues sometimes made copies of these notes. This resulted in localised practice in relation to certain types of deferral decisions. Some FCOs had used the national guidance on the Intranet, but this was in relation to procedures for booking appointments. In this area staff from the old Contact Centre reported that their main source of guidance which they had referred to had been the national guidance on the Intranet.

The advice and experience of colleagues was a key source of information for FCOs on a day to day basis. Experienced FCOs, who had been with Jobcentre Plus since its roll out, did not often need to refer to guidance, but if they had a specific query about deferrals or waivers or were unsure, they would probably ask a colleague or Team Leader in the first instance.

Public Offices

In all of the Public Offices visited the main source of guidance referred to, by both Adviser Managers and PAs, was the national guidance available on the Intranet. Although on a daily basis staff did not need to refer to the guidance, they would refer to it if they were unsure about anything and would look at the guidance when any revisions or updates occurred.

2.3 Communication and Dissemination of Jobcentre Plus Guidance

This section looks at how guidance in general is disseminated to staff in Contact Centres and Public Offices.

Contact Centres

Across all the Contact Centres new guidance or information was disseminated, through the management structure, from Managers to Team Leaders to First Contact Officers. Commonly it was a manager's responsibility to keep a daily check on new Live Support Bulletins or other updates on the intranet and to notify Team Leaders of any changes or updates relevant to the Contact Centre. It was then the responsibility of Team Leaders to look at the new guidance which had been highlighted by the manager and to disseminate the new guidance to First Contact Officers. This communication chain worked in most instances via email. In only one area did it appear that FCOs saw the original guidance, such as Live Support Bulletins which would be circulated to FCOs. In the other areas the information disseminated to FCOs was adaptations of the guidance. For example, Team Leaders would email a memo or short note highlighting the key messages, or FCOs would be sent an email informing them that there had been an update to the local guidance manual into which the new guidance had been incorporated.

Team meetings were also used to disseminate guidance, either to discuss guidance that had been disseminated by email, or in some cases to communicate guidance or changes that were felt to be too significant to be disseminated by email. Dissemination via team meetings followed the same hierarchical structure: managers would discuss changes in their meetings with Team Leaders and then Team Leaders would be responsible for passing this on in their team meetings with FCOs.

Staff in two Contact Centres reported that where new guidance meant considerable changes to their practice training sessions would be arranged to disseminate the information to FCOs. Where the introduction of deferrals guidance had been supported with training, there appeared to be a higher awareness of the key messages in the deferrals guidance, and more consistent practice in making deferrals. Staff indicated were already confident in applying waivers.

In some areas regular assessments of FCOs, in which Team Leaders listened to and observed telephone calls, enabled Team Leaders to check whether FCOs were following new guidance and to give feedback if they were not.

The main reason why FCOs were provided with new guidance by their Team Leaders was because it was felt that they did not have the time to keep up to date with guidance via the Intranet themselves. FCOs were busy answering telephone calls and the short periods of down time that they did get were felt to be difficult to use. Some managers thought the guidance was difficult to read, thus adapting it made it easier for FCOs to take in. Additionally, a lot of the new Jobcentre Plus guidance on the Intranet was reported by Managers and Team Leaders not to be relevant to FCOs and the FCO role, thus it would use a lot of staff time if FCOs had to look through all the incoming guidance to keep themselves updated. The advantage of an email dissemination system was that Team Leaders could check whether FCOs had seen the guidance (by checking if they had opened their emails).

Although not explicitly stated as an advantage, by not expecting FCOs to keep themselves updated, managers and Team Leaders are able to control the information that FCOs receive and thereby keep a better check on what FCOs are doing. For example, one manager filtered the information contained in PIT Stop bulletins (the good practice guide circulated by the Pathfinder Improvement Team) and did not distribute copies directly to FCOs, because the information did not always apply to the particular procedures that they used.

Public Offices

As with the Contact Centres, Adviser Managers at the Public Offices had the responsibility for keeping up to date with new guidance on the Intranet and notifying Personal Advisers (PAs) of any relevant changes. Adviser Managers either emailed PAs telling them what Live Support Bulletin or other information they needed to look at, or circulated paper copies of the guidance to PAs. In contrast to the Contact Centres, PAs were directed to the original guidance rather than being given amended information. As in the Contact Centres, meetings between PAs and Adviser Managers were also an important means for communicating and discussing any guidance changes.

The reason given for Adviser Managers taking on the responsibility to ensure that PAs were up to date was the lack of time available for PAs to read guidance because of heavily booked diaries.

2.4 Awareness of the April / May Deferrals Guidance

Contact Centres

Awareness of the new guidance on deferrals and waivers issued in April and May 2002 was limited among FCOs. In only two of the areas were FCOs familiar with Live Support Bulletins. Managers and Team Leaders, however, could recall having seen the April / May Live Support Bulletins³. This reflects the way that guidance is disseminated in Contact Centres in that FCOs are not expected to read Live Support Bulletins via the Intranet and may therefore never see them if the guidance they actually see is adapted and in a different format.

Amongst those who could recall seeing the April / May guidance, the majority could not remember what it had said because it had been a long time ago. However, when the key messages in the guidance were read out to staff, all said that they were familiar with them.

³ In areas where new Contact Centres had recently been set up i.e. since April / May 2002, staff awareness applies to those staff who had been working in the old Contact Centre in April / May 2002.

Public Offices

In the Public Offices awareness of the April / May guidance was common amongst Adviser Managers and many Personal Advisers - a few PAs were not sure whether they had seen the guidance because it was a long time ago. This awareness reflects the way that guidance is disseminated in Public Offices, whereby Adviser Managers direct PAs to look at the original documents, either on the Intranet or in paper form. Staff could not spontaneously recall what the guidance had said, but when prompted all recognised the key messages contained within the guidance.

2.5 Impact of the Deferrals Guidance

Overall, although not all staff were aware that new deferrals guidance via Live Support Bulletins had been issued and very few staff could recall the specific details of the April / May Live Support Bulletins (as might be expected bearing in mind the timing of the fieldwork), all staff, when prompted with the key guidance messages, said that they were familiar with them and that they were following the guidance. Among staff who did recall seeing the new deferrals guidance (mainly PAs, Team Leaders and Managers), it was reported to have emphasised and reinforced the messages that they had received before and provided a checklist against which they could compare their own practice.

'I never get a piece of guidance and think I know this, I always read it because sometimes I don't know these things'

(Office Manager, Contact Centre)

'I think what they tend to do is just reinforce what you've got in your guidance'

(Adviser Manager, Public Office)

In two areas staff reported that the October Live Support Bulletin on 'Changes to the Process for Dealing with Deferrals' had made more of a direct impact on their deferrals practice because they realised that they had not been following the procedures correctly, in terms of informing the customer of when the WFI was likely to take place and setting deferrals work flows⁴. In one area it had resulted in FCOs informing deferred customers of when their WFI was likely to take place and the setting up of a deferrals team at the Public Office (see Section 4.3.1) to receive deferral workflows from the Contact Centre. (Adviser Manager, Public Office)

2.6 Adequacy of Deferrals Guidance

A difficulty reported by some staff was that the guidance on deferrals, more so than waivers, was very general and did not provide clear cut advice on how the procedures should be applied. This need for more specific guidance was greater among Contact Centre staff compared to staff in the Public Offices, and was related to staff understanding of the purpose of work focused interviews and the rationale behind deferrals (see Section 3.1). In Contact Centres some FCOs were unsure as to what work focused interviews were able to offer non-JSA customers and so felt less confident in being able to decide whether or not a WFI would be appropriate. Staff in the Public Offices tended to view the guidance as being sufficient as a basic guide, to which they applied their own 'common sense', whereas some staff in the Contact Centres wanted more specific guidance, along the lines of a 'rule book' rather than a guide against which they could make their decisions.

⁴ A workflow is an electronic message sent on LMS. In relation to deferrals, FCOs should send a work flow to the Public Office informing them that they have made a deferral. It is then responsibility of PAs at the Public Office to follow-up these deferred customers at the end of the deferral period.

'The guidance is there but it doesn't actually tell you step by step what to do'.
(Team Leader, Contact Centre)

'The guidance was there to guide us, how we use it and what we do is up to us'
(Personal Adviser)

There was, however, recognition amongst some staff in both Contact Centres and Public Offices that the guidance could not be more clear-cut because deferral decisions had to be made on an individual basis.

There was general criticism by some staff that the national guidance on the Intranet was difficult to search and navigate and was very dry, making it difficult to read. This was one of the reasons why, in some areas, the national guidance had been simplified and adapted for First Contact Officers. Live Support Bulletins were commended by a few staff because they reinforced the key messages in the national guidance. PIT Stop bulletins were also commended for their useful hints and tips and examples of good practice.

'When you get acres of guidance that you've got to plough through it's very easy to miss something and I find it difficult to find the time to read something of that length, but something from a Live Support Bulletin that will at least give you the headlines, but tell you where to look for the in-depth stuff.'

(Office Manager, Contact Centre)

2.7 Summary

On a day to day basis FCOs at Contact Centres sought the advice of colleagues if they were unsure about anything. Where written guidance was referred to FCOs used the Jobcentre Plus national guidance, which in two areas had been adapted into locally produced guidance manuals. In Public Offices staff referred to the national guidance on the Intranet.

At Contact Centres it was a manager's responsibility to check for new guidance and updates. New guidance or information was filtered to FCOs through the management structure and disseminated via emails and team meetings. At Public Offices it was the responsibility of the Adviser Managers to keep up to date with new guidance and to pass this onto PAs. At both Contact Centres and Public Offices managers had the responsibility for keeping their staff up to date because it was felt that FCOs and PAs were too busy to do this themselves.

At Contact Centres and Public Offices most staff – managers, team leaders and PAs, could recall seeing the deferrals guidance in the April / May Live Support Bulletins. Recall was more limited among FCOs which reflected that in some areas FCOs received new guidance in adapted formats. When prompted with the key messages of the April / May deferrals guidance all staff said that they were familiar with them.

Views as to the adequacy of the deferrals guidance varied. In Public Offices staff tended to view the guidance as being sufficient, whereas in Contact Centre some FCOs wanted more specific guidance on deferrals which appeared to be related to a lack of awareness of the reasoning behind deferrals and the purpose of work focused interviews.

3.0 Deferrals and waivers at Contact Centre stage

This chapter explores the way in which deferral and waiver decisions are made at Jobcentre Plus Contact Centres. It outlines Contact Centre staff understanding of the Jobcentre Plus vision and process, in particular the purpose of deferrals and waivers. It then explores the process by which deferral and waiver decisions are made; the types of customers deferred or waived; and the timescales for deferral. Staff confidence and factors impacting on deferral practice are outlined. The level of consistency in applying deferrals and waivers and monitoring of deferrals and waivers is then explored. Examples of good practice are highlighted throughout.

Evidence from the additional database analysis is also referenced in this chapter, where appropriate.

3.1 Understanding of Jobcentre Plus

Staff understanding of the Jobcentre Plus vision- and in particular the application of the work focus- was an important factor in determining the way in which deferral and waivers were applied with non-Jobseekers Allowance (non-JSA) customers. In particular, the policy includes a commitment to addressing barriers to work, and offering support to help customers into work. Staff understanding of the types of help and support that could be offered in this respect was important in determining whether the work focus interview was viewed as appropriate to the customer, or whether a deferral should be made.

3.1.1 Understanding the work focus

Broadly, more junior or less experienced staff (including FCOs, and some newly appointed team leaders) were able to quote the broad purpose of Jobcentre Plus ('work for those who can, support for those who cannot'), and in some cases identify different elements of the support available. More senior staff - including some team leaders, office managers and HEOs - were able to elaborate on these aims, and identify some of the key principles and elements of support available through Jobcentre Plus, in particular in introducing a work focus to non-Jobseekers Allowance customers and supporting them in their movement into work.

FCOs were less confident about explaining the purpose of WFIs to non-JSA customers. Some FCOs did not know what they could offer non-JSA customers. Where FCOs had less knowledge of what might be offered through the WFI, they were less confident in introducing the work focus to non-JSA customers and deciding whether or not a WFI was appropriate for them, and whether it should be deferred. FCOs usually explained the work focus in terms of jobsearches and short term movements into work. Others were able to elaborate on the role of the WFI in addressing barriers to labour market participation, and offering additional support available through Jobcentre Plus.

Some FCOs made reference to the aim of Jobcentre Plus in providing support to employers, for example in finding staff to meet their needs.

3.1.2 Role of the First Contact Officer

FCOs all saw their role as being to book appointments for customers. Less experienced FCOs did not elaborate on this function. Other functions identified by FCOs included explaining the process, introducing the PA, and possibly completing job submissions. In some cases FCOs also viewed their role as being to persuade the customer to attend a WFI if necessary, and make them aware of other elements of the support available, for example, the better-off calculation. FCOs had limited

understanding of how their role related to that of Personal Advisers, for example in relation to relating the work focus to customers, or terms of equipping PAs with the information that might be used to prepare for WFIs.

Experienced staff (at all levels) were particularly aware of the role of the Contact Centre in introducing customers to the Jobcentre Plus process, and ensuring that the system worked efficiently. One manager described the Contact Centre as ‘the gateway to the system...introducing it as a service we provide to smooth the passage towards meeting the Personal Adviser’. However, managers also indicated that they felt that the role of FCOs was sometimes underestimated, and that their ability to deliver the vision was constrained by factors including time constraints and performance targets.

3.1.3 Understanding of deferrals and waivers

Staff understanding of the purpose of deferrals and waivers varied according to both seniority and level of experience. All staff shared an understanding of deferrals as being a postponement of the WFI, and understood that waiving the WFI would mean that the meeting would never be offered.

The more experienced FCOs and Team Leaders showed their understanding that deferrals were available to ensure that WFIs occurred at a time appropriate to the customer. However, there was limited evidence of FCOs being able to confidently explain what they meant by appropriateness. Staff usually explained it by giving examples of the factors which made a WFI appropriate (or not) for a customer at a certain time. Some staff interpreted the appropriateness of a WFI as being determined by whether or not a customer was immediately work ready. (This precludes the delivery of the WFI to everyone except those who were immediately work ready.)

‘When we had the problem about people deferring a meeting because they thought the person couldn’t work, therefore they shouldn’t have a work focused meeting, we took staff offline and talked to them about what did they think was the purpose of a work focused meeting and tried to get over this ‘work’ word’.
(Office Manager)

Where staff had a strong understanding of WFIs- including an understanding of the function of, and philosophy behind, WFIs) this appeared to lead to an increased confidence in making decisions.

Others described the function of the deferral as being to allow the WFI to take place when customers’ circumstances had changed (and when a customer would, therefore, be ready to move into work).

In a few cases Contact Centre staff made reference to the function that deferrals played in maintaining customers’ engagement with the Jobcentre Plus process (and by extension, receiving the help and support that they might need at the most appropriate time). One FCO indicated the deferral function was useful because customers would be contacted at a more appropriate time and ‘*would not be lost from the system*’. Another FCO described deferrals as being ‘*a second option for customers*’.

Where staff exhibited a lack of awareness of the *logic or reasoning* behind deferrals and waivers, they appeared to be less confident in making initial deferral decisions independently, and there was less evidence of a coherent approach to deferrals across team and offices. Decisions were then based on piecemeal evidence, or earlier precedents.

Good practice: Understanding the principles behind deferrals and waivers

In one new Contact Centre, a Jobcentre Plus trainer had given staff a list of six key rules or principles behind the process of making deferral decisions. These rules are listed below:

- First Rule - JSA customers must under no circumstances have their appointments deferred. They can be waived, however, when a claim is wholly retrospective, for example, if they have returned to work.
- Second rule - Remember you are only making the initial decision to defer, from that point on the Personal Adviser will take ownership of the customer to discuss matters in more detail.
- Third Rule - do not fall into the trap of expecting all customers with health problems to qualify for a deferral, and conversely, don't book anyone who is obviously in no fit state to participate. Additionally don't assume that because someone is sick they don't want a WFI. Treat all cases as INDIVIDUALS. Bear in mind that if you incorrectly grant a deferral, this will rarely cause disaster. In contrast, asking a customer to come in who may be physically or emotionally unfit may result in a serious complaint against Jobcentre Plus.
- Fourth rule - You should always offer the WFI to the customers. It will normally become apparent very quickly if any barriers or objections to this requirement exist. The onus is then placed on the customer to explain to you the reasons why they think they are unable to participate. You can then consider whether a deferral is appropriate or not.
- Fifth rule - Remember when considering the merits of a possible deferral you will not have access to any evidence. You will have to take customers at their word. Try to avoid questioning the factual nature of what they tell you.
- Sixth rule - If in doubt, put the customer on hold and consult your Team Leader/ Colleague.

Staff in the Contact Centre which used these rules exhibited a high degree of consistency in the principles behind making deferral decisions. Early evidence from this newly established Contact Centre suggested that deferrals and waivers were generally being made appropriately.

At the same time, FCOs felt deferrals were a useful mechanism for ensuring that PAs' time was used effectively because deferrals could be applied where the customers were unlikely to benefit from attending a WFI (whereas they might in the future, when their circumstances had changed). PAs would then see only customers who were ready to talk about moving into or towards work. In some areas, FCOs viewed deferrals as providing an important function in reducing staff workloads. In these instances, there was no evidence that this consideration meant that deferrals were made inappropriately.

Some FCOs were confused as to the purpose of deferrals and waivers. One fairly inexperienced FCO indicated, for example, that he would defer where he considered it was important that a customer's benefit was processed more quickly.

All Contact Centre staff indicated that they would expect the majority of deferral decisions to be taken by FCOs and Team Leaders at the Contact Centres, rather than by PAs in the Public Offices.

In some of the case study areas those customers whose WFI was deferred might still be offered a meeting with a Financial Assessor either at the Public Office, or through a home visit. It is unclear whether or not the fact that customers were able to access this service had any impact on FCOs' decisions on whether or not to defer.

Staff from the original Contact Centres (which had been established since the inception of the Pathfinders, but were subsequently superseded by new, larger contact centres as new public offices rolled out) indicated that their understanding of deferrals and waivers had improved over time, primarily through experience of having to make decisions. In one new Contact Centre, less

experienced FCOs used the terms ‘deferral’ and ‘waiver’ interchangeably, suggesting that they were not clear about the distinction between the terms.

3.2 Making deferral and waiver decisions

3.2.1 Process

FCOs indicated that the majority of decisions about deferrals and waivers would be made at the Contact Centre on the basis of information collected from the customer during the initial telephone conversation. The main exception to this rule was where FCOs undertook ‘cold calls’ to customers who had submitted their benefit claim forms through alternative routes (e.g. external agencies), and in the less frequent instances where deferral or waiver decisions were undertaken by the PA at the WFI. Where FCOs undertook ‘cold calls’, they were sometimes able to anticipate having to make a deferral or waiver decision based on the information from the benefit forms. FCOs generally indicated that they would use telephone conversations to further determine whether a deferral or waiver would be appropriate. However, there were some exceptions to this, as reported by one FCO:

‘If it is a cold call then it would not be over the phone, it would be a deferral made purely based on what we have in front of us, if they supply a medical certificate ...’

(First Contact Officer)

3.2.2 Level and type of information collected

A strong message from Contact Centre staff was that the VANTIVE script was not flexible enough to elicit sufficiently detailed information to make many deferral and waiver decisions. Contact Centre staff all felt that the onus was to some extent on the FCO to find out more about a customer’s circumstances in order to determine the appropriateness of a WFI.

The process for booking a WFI or making a deferral or waiver decision is usually structured around the VANTIVE script. In the first instance the VANTIVE script requires the FCOs to collect a number of basic personal details which will allow them to book an appointment slot in the PA’s diary. FCOs then use the script in order to determine a customer’s eligibility for benefits by requesting details of the benefit being claimed, the customer’s household circumstances and caring responsibilities. Where a customer has an illness or injury, the FCO will ask whether they have obtained a medical certificate from their doctor.

The VANTIVE script also includes a number of questions which will highlight whether a deferral or waiver is necessary, including ‘are you available for work?’ and ‘are there any health issues which affect your ability to work?’. Where the possibility of deferral is raised the onus is on the FCO to probe more deeply in relation to: the nature and potential length of the illness; whether the customer has a sick note; the duration of existing sick notes; and the customer’s attitude to work. The language and coverage of script may be tailored by experienced staff to their own personal styles.

Many of the details collected at this stage are necessary to book an appointment and process the claim. FCOs are accustomed to completing VANTIVE and LMS records and as result the level and quality of information included appear to be closely monitored. In one area, for example, a Team Leader had introduced a set of minimum standards for the level of information that should be recorded on LMS records. As a result, FCOs appeared to be confident about collecting the correct information, and making deferral and waiver decisions for those ‘types’ of customer for whom there is clear guidance and for whom only minimal information is needed to decide about deferral. Key questions related to: the type of claim and reasons for the claim; the timescales under which the customers’ circumstance had changed or were about to change; and their availability for work.

'It depends because obviously we have guidelines to follow, and if that particular client rings up and falls into one of the categories within the guidelines to say it's a waive or defer, then we follow them, we just then tend to do it'

(First Contact Officer)

Pregnant women; recently bereaved customers and customers claiming short-term sickness pay were all groups for whom FCOs were fairly confident in making deferral decisions. Waivers for people making wholly retrospective claims were made automatically.

A recurrent message from team leaders and experienced FCOs was that the details collected in the course of completing LMS conversations were not always sufficient to make deferral or waiver decisions. The onus is, therefore, on the FCO to ask additional questions regarding the customers' personal circumstances, and whether a WFI would be appropriate. One manager indicated that this is in part because the VANTIVE script is not sufficiently 'dynamic' to elicit the correct information from customers as well as to meet administrative requirements. This view is supported by FCOs who felt that it would not be possible to make a deferral decision on the basis of the script.

'If you've got a sick note, and it says, sick for a particular back ache, you've got to probe on a little bit further to find out what the circumstances are'

(First Contact Officer)

However, Contact Centre managers and some PAs indicated that FCOs did not appear to probe in sufficient depth for particular customer groups. This was particularly true for sick or disabled customers. A number of factors influencing the level of information collected from customers were identified. These included: FCOs' understanding of the level of information necessary to determine the appropriateness of a WFI; difficulties in eliciting sensitive information from customers over the telephone; time pressures; and the need to make customers aware of what was being written about them.

In some instances FCOs did not appear to probe, because they felt that medical certificates were sufficient evidence of a customers' circumstances,

'No, we don't discuss their medical condition with them we just tell them that they need a medical certificate'

(First Contact Officer)

FCOs also demonstrated some discomfort at having to probe about sensitive subjects, and indicated that they felt that this was particularly difficult over the telephone, as customers were generally less willing to volunteer personal details. This was particularly true where customers suffered from serious physical illness or mental health problems. All of the foregoing fits with the observation by staff that sick or disabled customers appear to be the customer group most commonly deferred.

FCOs indicated that the level of information collected from customers was sometimes more limited where they felt that there were pressures on their time (for example, due to meeting targets for call answering). Managers were aware of this issue, and in some cases supported it. One Contact Centre manager indicated that, *'our main priority here is hitting our service levels'*.

One FCO also indicated that the customer's right to see what is written about them on LMS influenced the level and type of information recorded on LMS. In particular, it influenced the words or phrases that they would use to describe the customer's illness. As a result, conditions were not described accurately on LMS records and were, therefore, likely to be less useful to the PAs using it.

Most FCOs and team leaders focussed on having to collect additional information in circumstances where the customers suffered from physical health problems. There was less consideration of other factors, for example mental health, which may impact on the appropriateness of the WFI. However,

some managers indicated that they would expect secondary factors, including the customer's behaviour and attitude, to be taken into account if primary factors such as ability to get to the office do not give a clear indication of whether a deferral is necessary.

'They must weigh up the customer's demeanour, their attitude, their circumstances, are they sick? Are they disabled?But it's a little bit unstructured and I think the crunch time must come when they start talking about the appointment and the customer starts to say, 'well I don't really have time'. So I think a lot of them even though we perhaps have got a certain amount of ... I think a number of deferrals might be initiated by the customer.'

(Contact Centre Manager)

Further probing by FCOs also resulted in some customers, who the FCO might have expected to defer, indicating that they would have liked to attend the WFI, but that it had not been offered to them (see Section 5).

3.2.3 Role of the customer in determining whether a WFI is appropriate

Customers have an important role in volunteering relevant information about their personal circumstances, and indicating whether or not they feel that a WFI would be appropriate for them in the four days following their entry into the Jobcentre Plus process. Some FCOs and managers were conscious that decisions should be made on an individual basis rather than on the basis of client group, or type of illness/ circumstance and indicated that they would expect the customer to play an active role in determining whether the WFI was appropriate.

'I would not be promoting to my team leaders or staff that we categorise people like that because you start to make assumptions on behalf of people and you take choices away from customers'

(HEO)

However, it was not always evident that staff were giving customers the opportunity to influence the deferral decision. The attitude of FCOs towards encouraging the active participation of the customer in first contact conversations depended on a number of factors. These included: the FCO view on whether the customers should have, or would be able to attend a WFI; FCO confidence in promoting the purpose of the WFI and persuading the customer to attend; and the perceived benefit of having a customer's commitment to attend the WFI

In some cases, especially with cold-calls and with bereaved customers, Contact Centre staff anticipated that customers would not want to attend the WFI. They would then either make the decision on the customer's behalf or would offer the deferral early in the conversation.

Other staff offered customers a limited role but felt that it was up to them to make the final decision, especially where they felt that the customer was being obstructive and should be able to attend.

'Well yes, just how you deal with sort of, you know what you say and their response to that yes, because I tend to find if they can lead the interview they will if you allow them to do that, because I've seen that happening with inexperienced staff, whereas if you take control of what's going on, you know the conversation and, and obviously allowing them to say whatever they want to say, but you have to be sort of, you have to make sure that our aims and purposes are communicated to the client, and that they understand that it can affect their benefits if they don't sort of meet certain conditions really'

(First Contact Officer)

Other FCOs indicated that they would use the booking of a WFI to elicit a response from customers as to whether a WFI was appropriate.

'At some point we'd say okay we're going to book you an interview, and then they would make it known whether, oh you know, well I'm unable to attend the office for whatever reason, and we'd discuss that reason with them, and obviously if it was a valid reason then you'd make a decision whether to waiver or defer the interview, and if it's not we explain that well you know most customers do need a Work Focused Interview and they do have to come in for one'

(First Contact Officer)

Other (usually experienced) FCOs and managers indicated that they gave customers detailed explanations of the purpose of the WFI and the Jobcentre Plus process in order to help determine whether the WFI would be appropriate. FCOs indicated that they might try to reassure the customers that the WFI was not intended to 'push them into work', but that PAs would also be able to offer them support in finding appropriate training, or might be able to offer them in-work benefits for example. These explanations were seen as useful in determining whether or not a customer was ready to attend and participate in the WFI, as this would impact on the quality or usefulness of the WFI.

'I would hope that First Contact Officers would ask the right sort of questions to get to the point where they think they know, but would say to a customer, 'How do you feel about attending a meeting?' ... because at the end of the day you've got to have the customer commitment as well.

(Office Manager)

However, there was some evidence that Contact Centre staff were not always confident in dealing with customers who were reluctant to attend a WFI interview, and would leave the PA to make the decisions, in part because they felt that the PA would be better placed to do this face-to-face.

'But at the end of the day the final decision is mine and not theirs and then if they disapprove of it I would make the point for themthat if they still felt that way they could speak to their adviser on the phone when they came in ... I'll come in but I shouldn't have to and these are the reasons why, because they see them face to face and are in a better position to make a firm judgement'

(Team Leader)

3.2.4 Authorisation

The Pathfinder areas visited had all introduced formalised systems for the authorisation of deferral and waiver decisions. In one of the original Contact Centres, an FCO had been nominated to make the final decision on all deferrals and waivers because she was felt to be particularly stringent in making decisions. The Contact Centre manager also hoped that this would introduce some consistency to deferral decision-making at office level.

Several of the case study areas had introduced systems of team leader authorisation. In one case this was a direct response to suggestions outlined in the Pit Stop bulletins. In some areas authorisation had to be secured prior to the deferral decision being made. In one area, for example, FCOs had to log their deferral decisions which were then authorised retrospectively. Authorisation was based on the information recorded in the deferrals log, and conversations between Team Leaders and their staff. Team Leaders indicated that the level of information written down was not always sufficient,

'The FCO makes it at that time and I think it's a judgement call so as I say if they've done it correctly, when they fill in a sheet and it comes to me for checking which I check on the same day and very often when they give me the sheet they'll give me the extra bits to go with it,

because it's pretty basic the sheet, so they'll actually say and the reason this one was deferred was because, so they know the importance of deferrals'

(Team Leader)

In reality, however, mentors from the old Contact Centre were still being used to authorise decisions. Where this was the case, FCOs were explaining the customer's circumstances to mentors, who might also speak to the customer, and the mentor would then make the final decision. One FCO remarked that where they had to interrupt the telephone contact '*it really puts a dampener in the conversation*'. Another area had made decisions in the same way previously, but found that it slowed the process, and had revised their systems so that deferral decisions were authorised retrospectively by team leaders using deferral proformas and logs. In one area, FCOs would undertake deferral decisions with support from a team leader where needed, whereas for waivers they would generally seek team leader authorisation.

The Contact Centre in one area had instituted a help desk system to authorise deferral decisions and offer procedural help, because the previous system of using team leaders did not work very well, as they were often too busy. In the new system, FCOs make the initial decision, and were then supposed to have their decision authorised by the Help Desk, or if they were busy, by the team leaders. The Help Desk was then responsible for agreeing the deferral timescale and checking that the deferral has been booked correctly in VANTIVE, and that LMS has been used correctly. However, evidence suggested that some experienced FCOs were not always using this system to have their decisions authorised because they were confident that their own decisions were right; and did not want to delay the customer by putting them on hold. These FCOs did not think that the help desk staff were any more experienced or in a better position to make a judgement. There is also evidence that some staff on the help desk did not necessarily have any more training on deferrals than team leaders or experienced FCOs, and therefore may not be any better placed to make decisions. The main impact of the Help Desk appeared to be in improving the administration of deferrals and waivers. There is no direct evidence to suggest that decisions were either being made more consistently, or that staff were more confident in making them.

Where team leaders were responsible for making or authorising deferral and waiver decisions, there was no evidence that they handled the decision-making process any differently than the FCOs. Indeed, FCOs were unsure about the basis on which team leaders made, or authorised, decisions. Team leaders were often no more experienced than the FCOs, and were themselves unsure of the rationale behind their authorisation of decisions. This was especially so because team leaders felt that the FCOs were likely to be better placed to make deferral decisions as they were familiar with the conversation that had taken place with the customer. Log sheets were used by team leaders to highlight any errors or queries, which they could then discuss with FCOs.

Most team leaders indicated that it would be rare for them to reverse a deferral decision. One team leader reported that the decision on whether to re-contact the customer would depend on the timescale for which they had been deferred. Where customers were booked for a WFI under circumstances where it may not have been appropriate for them to attend, they would leave it to the PA to make the final decision.

3.3 Types of customers being deferred and waived and timescales for deferral

3.3.1 Types of customers being waived

Most FCOs were confident in making decisions about waivers, and drew clear distinctions between waivers and deferrals (see section 3.1.3.). Contact Centre staff identified a number of different types of customer whom they would automatically waive, in line with the guidance. These groups included:

- customers with wholly retrospective claims;
- customers with terminal illness;
- 16-17 year olds in full-time education with no financial support from a parent or guardian; and
- customers over age 60, or with a partner over age 60.

However, FCOs were able to identify some cases where customers with terminal illness had asked to come in for a WFI.

FCOs also identified other customer groups that might be waived, although there was not unanimous agreement about these. These included:

- customers with severe mental health problems, learning disabilities, or physical disabilities;
- customers about to return to work (including self-employed people); and
- cancer cases (regardless of whether they are terminally ill).

FCOs indicated that where customers had severe mental health problems, learning disabilities, or physical disabilities, the decision on whether to waive the WFI would be made in conjunction with a carer, based on a consideration of whether the customer would ever be able to return to paid employment. However, there was a lack of clarity about what constituted 'severe' conditions.

3.3.2 Types of customers being deferred

There were a number of customer groups for whom FCOs found it easiest to make a deferral decision, and towards whom there was a consistent approach across the case study areas. These included pregnant women, individuals claiming Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) and who had a job to return to, and recently bereaved customers. FCOs knew that these customers should be deferred. FCOs across all areas also indicated that they had instituted policies whereby customers with contagious diseases would be deferred automatically until they had received treatment.

Sick or disabled customers

Deferral decisions appeared to be less straightforward where customers were sick or disabled (other than those claiming SSP); under these circumstances FCOs were less confident in making these decisions and there were differences in the decisions made by staff across individual teams and offices for customers with similar sets of circumstances. It was unclear whether these different decisions had been made because of slight variations in customer circumstances and customers' views about the appropriateness of the WFI, or whether these differences resulted from a lack of clarity on that part of FCOs about the key principals on which they should base a deferral decision. If customers were claiming a health-related benefit, FCOs in all areas reported using the following criteria to determine whether to defer:

- the type and severity of the illness;

- the period of time covered by the medical certificate; and
- whether they were going into, or leaving, hospital.

These factors were mainly considered with regard to whether the customer was able to work, and whether a WFI would therefore be appropriate. In some areas a further consideration was whether the customer could physically get into the office. However, FCOs consistently indicated that they found it difficult to probe into the details of customers' illnesses (see section 3.3.2). FCOs also felt that their lack of medical knowledge made it difficult to understand how certain illness would affect customers on a day-to-day basis.

'They're not trained Disability Employment Advisors, they don't have the necessary background, as I don't. I don't feel I'm trained well enough to make a decision that this particular illness will count you out of the workplace for ever and a day.'

(Office Manager)

One Contact Centre had a member of staff with a medical background, and FCOs consulted that person whenever they were uncertain as to whether a customer should attend a WFI.

There was no evidence that blanket deferrals (or waivers) would be applied to customers with mental health problems. However, FCO were cautious about inviting customers with serious mental health problems to WFIs. Some FCOs were also uncomfortable about having to ask customers suffering from depression to attend a WFI, and would usually defer them (sometimes for as short a period as two weeks).

Good Practice: Disability Awareness Training

Some of the Contact Centre staff had received disability awareness training and felt that as a result they understood mental (and physical) health issues better. There was some evidence that as a result of the training, FCOs felt more confident about asking customers about their health.

Mental health customers would be deferred (or waived) on the basis of a number of different factors:

- the nature and gravity of the illness;
- whether they had medication for their condition; and
- whether they would be able to participate fully in the WFI.

Where customers were in residential care, or had a carer, FCOs made deferral or waiver decisions in conjunction with the residential care worker, or the carer. FCOs queried whether a customer's illness was controlled by medication. This was important in determining: whether the customer posed any risk to staff; whether they would be able to participate fully in the WFI; and whether the customer was likely to be able to move into work. FCOs were also conscious of not wanting to exacerbate mental health problems further, and would defer such customers who were unhappy about having to go through the Jobcentre Plus process. Under these circumstances, FCOs indicated that they might find it difficult to make decisions about the timescales for deferral. FCOs from one area indicated that those customers with severe mental health problems (for example, psychosis) they would be waived.

FCOs were sometimes uncomfortable with having to make deferral decisions about customers suffering from depression. In some areas, home visits from FAs were offered. FCOs' ability to make appropriate deferral decisions for these customers depended upon what the customers told them over the telephone and whether they were able to probe for further information.

Carers

Decisions about deferring carers' WFIs were based on FCOs' perceptions about the carer's availability for work, and about what support was available to the carer through Jobcentre Plus

FCOs (and Team Leaders) generally anticipated that carers would be unlikely to be able to consider work at the time of their entry into the Jobcentre Plus system. In some cases this is because carers would often have taken on their caring responsibilities very recently, and that it would be inappropriate to invite them for a WFI when they had just left work. FCOs also often considered the level of responsibility and effort attached to caring and did not feel that it was appropriate to ask someone with substantial caring responsibilities to attend an interview. In one area, carers would be deferred because FCOs thought that they would find it difficult to get into the Jobcentre because of their caring responsibilities. However, in another area, FCOs asked if carers could arrange substitute care for long enough for them to attend a WFI. FCOs indicated that they would look at the carer's age and then make a judgement about whether they were likely to return to work (based on the condition of the person they were caring for, and the age of the carer). Some FCOs indicated that they would consider making waivers for those carers whom they thought would be unlikely ever to return to work (for example, if they were nearing retirement age).

Where carers were perceived to be unavailable for work, FCOs were not able to identify other elements of support that could usefully be offered through a WFI, and as a result they struggled to explain the purpose of the WFI to customers. However, some FCOs indicated that they would not necessarily defer these customers because they might want to work, for example as a break from caring. They would not waive them because their circumstances might change (for example, if their dependent were to die) and they might then want to return to work. There was no evidence that FCOs ever deferred customers who indicated that they would like to come in for a WFI.

Bereaved customers

Although bereaved customers would generally be deferred, FCOs indicated that they sometimes found that customers were willing to attend a meeting at the Jobcentre in order to resolve their affairs. Interviews were arranged for these customers.

Lone Parents

There was a strong message that lone parents would not be deferred, except in very specific circumstances. These included: where lone parents were within eleven weeks of confinement; were distressed following separation from their partner; or had short term caring responsibilities for their children (for example, if the child was unwell). Some FCOs might also defer lone parents if they were about to start work. Others would not as they considered that if that job fell through, a WFI might be useful to the lone parent.

3.3.3 Timescales for deferrals

Following a deferral, FCOs set up messages to remind PAs to re-contact the customers towards the end of their deferral period. In one area, FCOs had a set of indicative timescales for deferral for different customer groups. In the other areas, the Contact Centres had developed local precedents for deferring certain customer groups for specified timescales. These precedents were based on previous deferral decisions, which then became established as appropriate practice.

The customer groups for which there was consistent practice were as follows:

- Lone parents who were within eleven weeks of giving birth. One Contact Centre deferred these customers for seven weeks from their due date; the rest deferred for two or three months from their due date. Contact Centre staff indicated that these timescales had been chosen because they

were felt to give the customer sufficient time to readjust to their new circumstances and responsibilities.

- SSP customers were generally deferred to the date when their medical certificate ended. In one area, however, they were deferred to the day after they were meant to be returning to work. This was because it was felt that it would be clearer to the PA whether the customer would be able to return to their previous job, or whether they might need some help from the PA in considering different options.
- Hospitalised customers were often deferred for the duration of their medical certificate or the length of their stay in hospital. In some areas, FCOs also allowed for a recovery period, based either on what the customer had been told about the length of their recovery, or on the FCO's personal judgement.

Good practice: Establishing appropriate relationships with local agencies

Customers in drug or alcohol rehabilitation programmes. In two areas, Contact Centres had developed close relationships with rehabilitation workers, and having discussed how the programmes progressed, had decided appropriate timescales for these customers. Where customers were on rehabilitation for twelve months, for example, they would be deferred for either six or nine months, at which point the workers and FCOs agreed that they would be better placed to be thinking about their future plans, and work.

For other customers, including those recently bereaved, customers suffering from depression or mental health problems, and customers with caring responsibilities, decisions were made very differently, even within teams or offices, for customers with similar circumstances. Deferral decisions were made on an individual basis, and on the discretion of the FCO (and possibly, their Team Leader). As with sick or disabled customers, it was unclear whether these different decisions had been made because of slight variations in customer circumstances and customers' views about the appropriateness of the WFI, or whether these differences resulted from a lack of clarity on that part of FCOs about the key principals on which they should base a deferral decision.

Staff in two Contact Centres had been given broad indicative guidelines – in one, the guideline was that all deferrals should be for four to eight weeks, in the other the timescale was two weeks to one month. These guidelines appeared to be shorter than those for one of the first Contact Centres which had been deferring all customers for six months, in its early stages.

Contact centre staff indicated that they found it difficult to decide the most appropriate timescale for which to defer many customers. This was especially the case for those with longer term illnesses and carers, because it was seen as being hard to predict when their circumstances might change. Similarly, it was acknowledged that customers were likely to recover from depression and bereavement at very different rates. Some staff felt that deciding on the timescales was actually more difficult than deciding whether or not to defer,

I think the tricky bit is to say well when is the right time you know. Is it tomorrow, is it for a week, is it for four weeks' time or is it that you don't know yet and you can't know until you've deferred it and then you review it at the deferral point and that to me is well for people whose minds are black and white, what are the rules, you know, how long do you defer it for? You can't tell them the answer and that's what some people find it so difficult to get their heads round'.

(Contact Centre Office Manager).

Making appropriate decisions on deferral timescales had received increased emphasis in some of the original offices,

'Yes I think so because in the beginning when I first started there was not so much emphasis placed on deferrals and who made the deferrals and the records that we needed to keep, that has all come over through time in the last six seven months. And it has just filtered through slowly the importance of it. I think we have only realised the importance of it over a period of time, so yes it has changed. And how we have applied discretion'

(First Contact Officer)

3.4 Explanation of the Jobcentre Plus process and next steps

Where customers were deferred at the Contact Centres, they received a variety of explanations about the next steps in the process. Broadly, FCOs would explain to the customer that their WFI had been 'deferred', 'postponed', or re-arranged, and that they would be contacted in the future to attend a meeting at the Jobcentre. The explanation of the re-arranged WFI varied.

The amount of additional detail offered, for example whether the reasons for the deferral were reiterated, or whether it was explained who would recontact them and when, varied according to a number of factors. These included: the FCO's judgement as to whether the customer needed further explanation (often based on whether the customer had previous experience of claiming benefit through Jobcentre Plus before); the FCO's level of understanding and ability to explain a WFI; and the FCO's perceptions of the pressure on their time. Senior staff generally expected that FCOs would give more detailed explanations than the FCOs indicated that they actually did.

Although customers indicated that they were broadly happy with the way in which deferrals were explained, they exhibited confusion over the Jobcentre Plus process, and were uncertain what to expect in the future. Where customers felt that they would like support (either in relationship to work or training), they were uncertain who to contact or how (see Section 5).

Contact Centre Managers generally expected that FCOs would automatically explain compulsion, and the consequences of non-attendance. However, FCOs in newer Contact Centres were unaware of the compulsion for non-JSA customers to attend. Similarly, some FCOs indicated that they would be unlikely to mention compulsion unless the customer seemed reluctant to attend. As a consequence, staff indicated that customers were not always made aware of their obligation to attend following the end of the deferral period. Nonetheless, the evidence from customers is that they do not view the re-arranged WFI as voluntary, and anticipated that attendance at this meeting would be a condition of continuing to receive their benefit.

3.5 Consistency and monitoring

3.5.1 Consistency

A fairly high degree of consistency was noted in the type of decisions made for customers with particular, 'straightforward' circumstances where FCOs felt that clear guidance was available on what decisions should be made (Section 3.3.2). FCOs indicated that they tended to use discretion when making deferral decisions for customers whose circumstances were less straightforward and would make decisions based on their knowledge of individual customer circumstances. However, in these cases staff sometimes had difficulty in explaining the principles on which they based their deferral decision, and it sometimes appeared that decisions were somewhat 'ad hoc' basis, with limited customer consultation. Some FCOs also felt that because deferrals should be made on an individual basis there will not be absolute consistency in deferral decisions in relation to different sets of personal circumstances.

3.5.2 Perception of whether the right customers are being deferred, and for the right period of time

In most areas, staff were fairly confident that in general, the correct customers were being deferred (or being invited for a WFI) at the Contact Centre stage. However, all staff were able to identify exceptions, where for example, the Public Office had brought a case to the Contact Centre's attention, or where Team Leaders had identified cases where FCOs had made incorrect decisions. In the first instance, Public Offices had highlighted cases where customers should have been deferred at the Contact Centre, but had not been. Most frequently, this related to customers with serious illness, who were either highly immobile, or too ill to be able to participate in the WFI. PAs felt that these cases had slipped through because FCOs had not asked the 'right' questions, or probed sufficiently. In other cases, FCOs felt that customers had not volunteered the correct information for them to make an appropriate deferral decision,

'I will give you a prime example of one in [a local town] where the guy rang up and said he had a problem with his lungs, he was quite happy to come in for the meeting, it wasn't deferred. When he turned up and go into the office he had lung disease, he was in a wheelchair with an oxygen bottle, very different to what he told us over the phone at the end of the day'

(First Contact Officer)

Most offices indicated that they had particularly strong concerns about whether customers with contagious diseases (for example Hepatitis C, or chicken pox) were being deferred appropriately, as these customers posed potential threat to Jobcentre staff, and other cases.

The inappropriate booking of WFIs was one of the key drivers for Public Offices and Contact Centres to establish communication and feedback mechanisms. In most areas, individual members of staff (usually Team Leaders) had been identified in both offices to relay feedback and responses to queries. In one area, for example, Contact Centre Team Leaders were paired with PA advisers, and responsibility for communication with specific Public Offices. Where problems were identified by Public Offices, the Contact Centre liaison would discuss this in the Contact Centre, and try to resolve the issue within the Contact Centre so that further problems did not occur with other Public Offices.

In one area managers were concerned that too many customers were being deferred simply because they had a sick note, with no further exploration of how their illness might affect their ability to work. Conversely, in the same area, there was also a concern that some customers with very serious illnesses were not being waived, and that this had caused them distress. However, in some such cases FCOs indicated that customers in similar circumstances had wanted to come in for the WFI, and an interview had therefore been arranged.

3.5.3 Monitoring of deferral practice

A strong message from all of the case study areas was that the quality and consistency of deferral and waiver decisions had received increased emphasis over time as a result of the new guidance, and a the introduction of more monitoring of deferral decisions. Whilst some of the original Contact Centres had had systems in place to monitor deferrals (for example, one recorded recent deferral rates on a board visible to all staff), managers indicated that deferrals had not been a priority in the early stages of the Pathfinder office.

'..... in the beginning when I first started there was not so much emphasis placed on deferrals and who made the deferrals and the records that we needed to keep, that has all come over through time in the last six seven months. And it has just filtered through slowly the importance of it. I think we have only realised the importance of it over a period of time, so yes it has changed. And how we have applied discretion'

(First Contact Officer)

In this area, managers were monitoring deferral decisions to a great degree, and FCOs were asked to consider guidance more carefully before applying individual discretion, and to avoid deferring for long periods of time.

All of the Contact Centres visited had also instituted 100% checks by Team Leaders as a result of recommendations made in the Pit Stop guidance, or Pathfinder Improvement Team audits. In these instances Team Leaders were authorising deferral and waiver decisions either prior to them being made, or retrospectively (see above, Section 3.2.1, on process). However, the research found that the basis on which Team Leaders in the newer Contact Centres were authorising decisions was not necessarily better informed, or grounded in particular guidance, as they were often as inexperienced as their FCO counterparts. As a result there was no discernible impact of increased monitoring on deferral and waiver practice in the newer offices, apart from raising awareness of the importance of making deferral decisions, and in some cases for improving the process for setting up deferral workflows. However, in one of the original offices, 100% monitoring was supported by a system of tele-assessment⁵. Here, monitoring of deferrals practice appeared to be better grounded in a system of continuous improvement.

Good Practice: Monitoring

In one established Contact Centre there was a consistent message from team leaders that monitoring of FCOs is used for the continuous improvement of the service. Team leaders are required to do two hours of tele-assessments a day. Individual FCOs may be asked to improve in a certain area within a specified period.

'Also if you're doing the checks you do as a Team Leader, you pick up if people are not deferring properly or whether they're putting the right information in, so it's something you can actually point to them and say this is what you should be doing and let's try and get it improved.' (Team Leader)

If Contact Centre-wide training needs are identified, then a course will be run:

'If other team leaders identify a similar need then they'll put a course together so that everyone can go to the course.' (Team Leader 2)

3.5.4 Target setting and deferral rates

Contact Centre managers and Team Leaders in both the original and newer Contact Centres indicated that they sometimes looked at deferral rates as an indicator of performance on deferrals and waivers. In particular, consolidation reports were used to compare local deferral rates with that of other Pathfinders, and to see if their offices were broadly in line. Where there were substantial discrepancies, Contact Centres had received communications from the Pathfinder Improvement Team about deferral rates. Some managers were also aware of the existence of tolerance ranges for

⁵ Tele-assessments are undertaken by managers and team leaders to quality assure the service being offered to Jobcentre Plus service through the Contact Centres. The 'Must Do' documents is generally used as a basis for this assessment.

deferrals, and indicated that they believed them to be between 7-14%. Contact Centre managers were broadly comfortable with these levels.

There was less awareness of desirable deferral rates or tolerance levels amongst FCOs and inexperienced Team Leaders. FCOs generally assumed that it was preferable for deferral rates to be as low as possible. Some FCOs felt it was important to get any many customers as possible into the Jobcentre Plus regime, and in some cases were able to expand on this belief, and indicated that it was important to promote the work focus to as wide an audience as possible. A few staff indicated that high rates of deferrals would be a concern as there would then be fewer customers attending WFIs and this might have an impact on job submission targets. Where staff had low awareness of target levels they felt that indicative levels might be useful in reassuring them that they were deferring appropriately.

However, other staff indicated that relatively high or low deferral rates would be a cause for concern because they would indicate that deferrals were not being made on an individual basis (if they were, they thought that all deferral rates would be around the average).

'If we put the mechanisms in place to make sure that people understand what they're doing and why they're doing it then we can satisfy, and as long as we're satisfied that we've made the right decision, whether it ends up as 15% or 20% in a week... that's the way it is'

(Manager)

3.6 Summary

Contact Centre staff understanding of deferrals and waivers reflected the level of understanding of the work focus. Where staff were uncomfortable about explaining how they would determine whether a WFI was appropriate, and they had difficulty in determining whether or not a deferral would be appropriate. However, in other cases FCOs had a more sophisticated understanding of the purpose of deferrals, and explained that they were a useful mechanism for maintaining customers' engagement with the Jobcentre Plus process, and delaying the WFI until it would be a more effective use of PA time.

FCOs indicated that there were some customer groups for whom they would find it relatively easy to make deferral and waiver decisions, based on information collected using the VANTIVE script and on available guidance. In these cases, similar decisions appeared to be made across all the case study areas. Where customers' circumstances were more complex, FCOs indicated that decisions had to be made on the basis of the customer's individual circumstances, using the FCO's discretion, and there was therefore a higher degree of variation in these decisions, and the principles⁶ on which deferral decisions were made were sometimes unclear. Decisions on deferral timescales varied considerably. In some cases this variation appeared to be appropriate, and reflect customers' individual circumstances. In other cases, the rationale behind different decisions was unclear, and it was not always the case that decisions appeared to have been made appropriately.

⁶ for example, a consideration of whether a WFI would be appropriate.

The research found that Contact Centres managers had placed increased emphasis on the monitoring of deferral decisions broadly following the introduction of the new guidance, and a perceived drive towards the monitoring of deferrals.

4.0 Deferrals and waivers in Public Offices

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the making of deferral and waiver decisions in Public Offices. It outlines Public Office staff understanding of WFIs, deferrals and waivers, and the impact on deferral practice. It then examines the process by which customers are re-contacted by Personal Advisers (PAs) following a deferral at the Contact Centre. The chapter then looks at the process by which PAs make deferral decisions in the WFI for customers who perhaps would have been deferred earlier in the process, and highlights the types of customers who are deferred at this stage. Finally, the chapter examines the system for monitoring deferrals and waivers in Public Offices.

4.2 Understanding of Work Focused Interviews, Deferrals and Waivers

In the Public Offices staff at all levels, Personal Advisers, Adviser Managers and Office Managers, understood the Jobcentre Plus vision to be about helping people into work. This reflected their understanding of their role in the process of delivering WFIs to customers. Staff did not refer to other aspects of the Jobcentre Plus vision, which they were not directly involved in, such as delivering a benefit service to customers.

Staff had a good understanding of the purpose of WFIs, which included: informing customers about the services available; introducing customers to the idea of work; exploring customers' options for returning to work; showing customers that they can be better off in work; and generally providing customers with help and support into work. In previous research⁷, it had been found that some PAs had a narrow understanding of the purpose of WFIs as being to get non-JSA customers into work.

Staff in the Public Offices also appeared to have a good understanding of what a deferral was, that is, a postponement of the WFI because it was not appropriate for the customer to attend at that moment in time. However, understanding of when a deferral would be appropriate was less clear and tended to focus on: the ability of the customer to attend the interview; whether the customer was well enough to attend; or whether the customer was in a position to look for work.

Staff had a more clear-cut understanding of what a waiver was - that it was when a WFI would never be appropriate because the customer would be unlikely to ever be able to move into work, or because attending could be detrimental to the customer.

The perceived value of deferrals and waivers were that they kept PA diaries free for customers who could benefit from a WFI, and that they helped to keep the customer engaged with the service because deferred customers attend a WFI at a time which is more appropriate for them.

⁷ Hartfree, Y., Nimmo, J., Sutton, L., Taylor, J., Kellard K., Sumpton, R. *Jobcentre Plus: Early Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase II)*, July 2002, and Lissenburgh, S, and Marsh, A, 'Experiencing Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders: Overview of Early evaluation evidence', *DWP in-house report 111*.'

4.3 Re-Contacting Customers Deferred at the Contact Centre

4.3.1 Systems for Picking up Customers Deferred at the Contact Centre

The correct process for following-up customers who are deferred at the Contact Centre is as follows:

- FCOs send a workflow on LMS to the appropriate PA at the Public Office;
- on receipt of the workflow, the PA sets him or herself another workflow to contact the customer five days prior to the end of the deferral period.

In one area the Public Office was not re-contacting deferred customers because of a lack of PA time. This office had a limited number of specialist non-JSA Personal Advisers, who had substantial case loads, and were even struggling to conduct initial WFIs. Lone Parent Advisers would re-contact lone parents who had been deferred, but as part of the review and trigger meeting process and not as a separate contact. Following-up deferred customers was a low priority; it was not monitored and there were no performance targets attached to this part of the Jobcentre Plus process.

In the remaining three areas, customers deferred at the Contact Centre were re-contacted by PAs, following the general process outlined above. In two of these areas staff had set up deferrals teams for picking up workflows from the Contact Centre. One of the main reported advantages of having a deferrals team was that having the work centralised made it easier for managers to monitor whether workflows were being followed-up by PAs.

‘Some PAs are more conscientious than others so it was put into one central point to make it easier to control’

(Personal Adviser)

In one area with a deferrals team, workflows were sent to a deferrals team diary and PAs on the team were responsible for picking these up and distributing them across all of the PAs to action. A system such as this could also overcome a difficulty reported in the area which did not have a deferrals team, whereby due to the way that PAs diaries were set up on VANTIVE some PAs received lots of workflows, whilst other received very few. As a result PAs with lots of workflows had to re-queue them to other PAs to deal with.

In the other deferrals team, all workflows were sent to an administrator’s diary who was then responsible for picking up the workflows and allocating them to two PAs who were responsible for re-contacting all deferred customers at the end of the deferral period. The advantage of using an administrator to pick-up workflows was that it maximised PA time for other work. It was anticipated that using dedicated PAs (experienced in dealing with non-JSA customers) to do the re-contacting, would improve the consistency of deferrals practice. Less experienced PAs had not felt as confident in doing this part of the job.

Where customers were deferred by a PA (either at the WFI, or when re-contacting them), PAs queued themselves a message to contact the customer (again) at the end of the deferral period

4.3.2 Timing and method of re-contact

In most areas customers were being re-contacted before the end of the deferral period, although the specific timing of this varied. The exception was one area where staff indicated that they had not yet re-contacted deferred customers (usually because they did not feel they had the time to do so). One area re-contacted deferred customers a few days before the end of the deferral period, another a week before, and another, who re-contacted customers by letter, sent letters out just prior to the end so that customers would received the letter to coincide with the end of the deferral period.

A mixture of both telephone calls and letters were used to re-contact customers at the end of the deferral period. In one area, PAs telephoned customers first and then sent a letter if they had not been able to contact the customer over the telephone. Another area had resorted to contacting customers by letter in the first instance because it was difficult to get hold of customers on the telephone, which generally required several attempts and took longer than the five minutes allocated in their diary. In another area PAs were supposed to telephone customers, but some would just send out a letter, which was described by one manager as *'taking the easy option'*.

If customers did not respond to letters asking them to ring the Public Office to arrange an appointment, then PAs would book a WFI appointment and send the customer a letter informing them of this.

4.3.3 Non-attendance

In two areas, for customers who failed to attend three WFI appointments sanctions were applied, although customers failing to attend three appointments did not happen often. The other two areas were reluctant to apply sanctions to customers who failed to attend and instead would arrange for a home visit to be conducted. Staff were reluctant to enforce sanctions because they were concerned that if the case went to appeal they might not be able to defend their decision, because *'of all the holes in the system'*.

4.4 Making Deferral Decisions

4.4.1 Prior Information

There was a general view among staff in the Public Offices that FCOs did not record enough information about customers on LMS. This applied to information recorded about customers who were booked to attend a WFI (and reflects the findings of earlier research⁸) as well as those who were deferred. PAs only had basic customer details, such as their name, National Insurance number and the type of benefit being claimed, which meant that they could not prepare for or anticipate the customer's circumstances.

'So we do need to at least have a note of what they're actually signed off with. One, because it could be a risk to us ... and to enable us to really go and investigate and find out exactly what is wrong with them and how it affects them.'

(Personal Adviser)

'It's always better to have a reason because if you're ringing someone up and you're in the dark about it, I think there's nothing more embarrassing than doing that.'

(Personal Adviser)

For customers who were deferred at the Contact Centre, it was felt by PAs that FCOs did not record enough detail about the reason for deferral. In particular PAs wanted more detailed and accurate information about the nature of a customer's illness. Observation of LMS records showed that FCOs recorded details such as *'customer suffering from depression'*, but did not record any further details about the severity, or the circumstances underlying the depression. In other cases, FCOs indicated that in order to be sensitive they might describe a customer's illness as related to a *'deterioration of their back'*, rather than saying that they

⁸ Hartfree et al. 2002 – Lack of information recorded on LMS was identified as a barrier to PAs conducting WFIs because PAs were unable to prepare for interviews in advance.

were suffering from a degenerative disease. Lack of detail recorded about customers' health problems reflects the lack of confidence reported by some FCOs in asking customers about their health problems, or in discussing them openly and sensitively.

4.4.2 Making Deferrals

Staff reported that deferral decisions were made on an individual basis depending on the customer's circumstances and whether a WFI was felt to be appropriate – as outlined in the guidance.

However, with the exception of one of the four areas, PAs did not tend to defer customers who were 'missed' by the Contact Centre and subsequently inappropriately attended a WFI. Rather than defer the customer, PAs would usually conduct a shortened WFI, collecting some basic details about the customer and giving them an overview of the services and help available. The reason given by staff for not deferring customers was because they did not want customers to feel that they had had a wasted journey and did not want to have to make them come back in again at a later date. In one area where PAs would sometimes ask the customer whether they wanted to continue with the WFI, or to postpone it until a more appropriate time, PAs found that customers often said they would rather continue to 'get it over and done with'.

'I might shorten it, but in a sense you want to make their journey worthwhile. You don't want them thinking what on earth was that about, it was all a waste of time.'

(Personal Adviser)

'If they have actually attended you might as well just see them so that it's not a wasted trip for them.'

(Personal Adviser)

In the one area where staff did defer customers at the WFI, where this was felt to be appropriate, PAs appeared to have a good understanding of the purpose of WFIs. In this area, PAs had an especially strong sense of what physical and emotional state a customer should be in for them to be able to fully participate in the WFI.

4.4.3 Key determinants of deferral decisions and types of customers deferred

Deciding whether or not to defer a customer, either when re-contacting customers or at the WFI stage, was based on Personal Advisers exploring customers' circumstances to determine whether a WFI was appropriate. Whether PAs considered a WFI to be appropriate tended to be based more on the ability of the customer to attend the meeting, rather than whether it was the appropriate time for the customer to be thinking about work. However, this reflects the type of deferral cases that PAs more commonly deal with, that is customers with health problems.

Customers' health was the most common reason given for deferring customers. There were three main reasons why customers might be deferred because of their health:

- if they were physically unable to get to the WFI, for example customers who had recently left hospital and were required to rest, customers with mobility problems due to a broken leg, or agoraphobic people who were unable to leave the house;
- if they were unable to sit down for long periods of time at the Jobcentre; or
- if they had a contagious disease, such as hepatitis C, chicken pox.

Caring responsibilities were also a reason for deferring customers. Carers who were unable to get replacement care whilst they attended their appointment, or if they were 'too busy caring' were deferred, as were some lone parents who, for example, were unable to get childcare for a sick child.

Emotional distress was another common reason for deferring customers, including those who had recently been bereaved or lone parents who had recently separated. Customers would be deferred if their level of distress meant that they were not in a fit state to think about work or were unable to talk to a PA without becoming upset.

'They're really not going to function at a work focused interview if they've just recently separated. They've got more problems on their minds rather than thinking about work or training, so I think perhaps in them circumstances, they're really down and weepy they could be deferred for a couple of weeks'.

(Lone Parent Adviser)

When re-contacting customers who were deferred at the Contact Centre, a key determinant of PAs' deferral decisions was exploring the extent to which customers' circumstances had changed since they made their claim. In some instances customers' circumstances had actually worsened.

Other, less common, factors that PAs took into consideration were:

- how the customer felt about attending and what the customer thought was best for them – this applied to PAs' decisions in one area where customers had a central role in the decision making process;
- in another area, in making their decisions PAs considered whether there was anything they felt they could offer to the customer and whether the customer would benefit at all by attending; and
- customers' relationship to work in terms of whether they were likely to return to work in the short-term or had a job to go back to. This was a reason less commonly mentioned by PAs because in general customers who had jobs to return to were correctly being deferred at the Contact Centre.

Customers being 'too depressed' was also mentioned as a reason for making a deferral. However, staff were often not able to give clear examples of what 'too depressed' actually meant, or how this was determined.

Other examples of customers who might be deferred by PAs included customers waiting to go into hospital or waiting to attend a Consultant's appointment, whereby it was felt that customers would not be in a position to think about work until their health problem had been addressed and until they had a better idea of what their future circumstances in relation to work would be. Other examples reported included lone parents due to give birth and customers with drug or alcohol problems undergoing rehabilitation programmes.

4.4.4 Customers who were waived at the Public Office

Staff reported having no direct experience of waiving customers because, where this was necessary, it largely happened at the Contact Centre. Thus the examples given were based on their understanding of the process rather than on actual practice. The types of customers who staff said would be waived included: terminally ill customers; customers with severe learning difficulties; and some customers with mental health problems.

4.4.5 Role of the Customer

In some areas the customer's role was seen as being to provide accurate information about their circumstances to enable PAs to make decisions as to whether to customers should be deferred. The exception was in one area where staff described customers as having a central role in deciding whether they felt attending a WFI would be appropriate for them, with the final decision being a joint one between the PA and the customer.

4.4.6 Help and Authorisation of Decisions

PAs had the autonomy to make their own decisions on deferrals and did not have to seek the approval of a manager. In two areas PAs said that they would confer with their manager if they were unsure, for example if a customer's circumstances were particularly complicated. In one of these areas the setting up of the deferrals team, whereby two experienced PAs were responsible for re-contacting all deferred customers, had reduced the need for any form of authorisation.

Good Practice: Help and Verification of Decisions

In one Public Office staff had access to a list of organisations, such as the National Schizophrenic Society, that they could contact for guidance and advice if they were unsure about whether or not attending a WFI would be appropriate for a particular customer.

4.4.7 Explanation of next steps

Evidence from some areas suggested that either when re-contacting deferred customers or when deferring customers at the WFI, PAs tended not to emphasise the work aspect when explaining to customers the purpose of their attending a WFI. As was found in previous research⁹, PAs tended to play down the work focus and instead used phrases to explain the purpose of the meeting as being: '*to discuss options*', or to tell them about the services on offer. PAs reported that they did not want to unduly worry customers who might think that they were going to be forced into work.

Most staff did, however, say that they explained to customers that attending a WFI was a mandatory part of their receiving benefit, although the phrases used to convey this message often less direct. In one area staff told customers that '*we need to see you*', and in another area staff explained that as part of the Government's new process everybody has to attend and through this phrasing hoped to reassure customers that they were not being individually targeted.

4.4.8 Deferral Timescales

The length of time that customers were deferred for was decided on an individual basis and in some areas was decided jointly with the customer. Decisions were largely based on the availability of evidence which indicated a time at which the customer's circumstances were likely to have improved. The most common information upon which deferral timescales were set was the expiry date of medical certificates. Other information included: dates of hospital appointments; expected length of medical treatment or rehabilitation programme; expected date for giving birth. Deferral periods were usually set to occur at some point after these periods, except for drug rehabilitation programmes, where in one area customers were deferred until a few months before the end of the programme.

'If somebody mentioned I've got a course of medication that I've just started, it lasts say for example five or six weeks, you can say well what about at the end of that six weeks we'll get in touch with you.'

(Personal Adviser)

⁹ Hartfree et al. 2002 – PAs used a less direct approach in explaining the work focus to non-JSA customers and as a result some customers were confused as to what the meeting was for.

'He said he was seeing a Consultant in about three weeks, so I said I'd contact him in five weeks time after it had sunk in whatever the Consultant had said.'

(Personal Adviser)

As a result of setting deferral periods on an individual basis the timescales reported by staff varied from between two weeks to six months. In one area staff acknowledged that they ignored the deferrals guidance which indicated that deferral periods should be between a few weeks to three months, because some customers had longer-term conditions which they felt required longer deferral periods.

4.4.9 Staff confidence in making deferrals

Overall, staff generally felt confident about talking to customers and discussing their circumstances in order to collect sufficient information to enable them to determine whether or not attending a WFI was appropriate. In one area less experienced PAs reported feeling less confident because they had limited experience in dealing with non-JSA customers and as a result had a more limited understanding of their circumstances. In this area, however, the dedicated deferrals team responsible for re-contacting all deferred customers had been set up partly for this reason.

The main area of difficulty for staff was in dealing with customers with health problems which in some instances required a degree of medical knowledge in order to understand how the condition affected the ability of the customer to attend and participate in a WFI. In one area staff were able to consult a colleague who was an ex-nurse. In another area staff felt more confident in asking customers about drug problems after having attended a drug awareness training course. However, in one area, a lack of medical knowledge was not reported to be a problem in terms of staff confidence in asking customers about how their health affected them.

4.5 Monitoring deferrals

4.5.1 Perception of whether the right customers are being deferred

Overall, staff reported that the right customers were being deferred at the Contact Centre, although in all areas staff could give a number of examples of customers who had slipped through. Where this happened it was largely blamed on FCOs gathering insufficient information because they had not asked the right questions or probed sufficiently, but had just followed the prompts on the VANTIVE script. In one area, it was also blamed on FCOs not explaining to customers for how long the FA and PA meetings would last. Staff could recall problems which had occurred because customers had either not eaten or taken medication before their appointment and as a result were extremely anxious by the time they saw the PA. Not telling customers how long to expect the appointment to be could cause similar difficulties for other customers, such as those unable to sit down for long periods of time, or those who had arranged substitute care, but for only a short period of time.

It was, however, acknowledged by PAs that FCOs had a difficult job in identifying all potential deferrals because some customers did not want to reveal the sensitive details of their personal circumstances over the telephone – especially if calling from a warm phone where the customer could be overheard, and that a lack of face to face contact with customers could make it difficult to ascertain whether a deferral was required. A further difficulty mentioned in providing a fail proof system at the Contact Centre was that customers with health problems may have been well enough to attend a WFI when they telephoned the Contact Centre, but be having a particularly bad day on the day of their appointment, and feeling that they still had to attend.

When PAs saw customers whom they felt should have been deferred, this was fed back to the Contact Centre via ‘issues logs’ – where PAs noted down particular problems and which were then discussed at joint liaison meetings. These communication systems were reported to have been effective in resolving problems and improving practice.

4.5.2 Deferral rates in Public Offices

There was a low level of awareness among staff of the tolerance level for deferrals. In only one area were staff aware of the tolerance level and this was the only area where staff felt under any pressure to minimise the number of deferrals made.

Monitoring of deferrals in Public Offices was largely limited to Adviser Managers checking that workflows from the Contact Centre had been picked up, and (or) looking at the overall statistics in the consolidation reports so that offices could see how they were performing in comparison to other offices. In the one area where staff were aware of the tolerance levels, their introduction had raised awareness of the need to monitor deferrals and waivers in the Public Office and had resulted in closer monitoring by the Team Leader of the reasons why PAs were deferring customers and of the deferral timescales.

Public offices reported that their deferrals rates had changed over time and that they were now deferring fewer customers because practice at the Contact Centres had improved. This meant that fewer customers were slipping through. The overall impression was that Contact Centres had tightened up their deferrals practice and were deferring more customers than before. However, problems were reported where new Contact Centres had opened with new, inexperienced FCOs.

There was a unanimous view among staff in the Public Offices that there was not a desirable target level for deferrals because deferral decisions had to be made according to the individual circumstances of customers. According to these staff, the main priority was to ensure that the right decisions were being made which meant that deferral rates could, and did, fluctuate.

4.6 Summary

In Public Offices staff had a good understanding of waivers and when they should be applied but were less clear as to when a deferral would be appropriate.

Of the four areas visited, just three were re-contacting customers who had been deferred at the Contact Centre. Of these three, two areas had set up deferrals teams which made it easier for managers to monitor whether or not customers were in fact being followed up. One area was not re-contacting deferred customers mainly because of a lack of PA time to do this. Where customers were followed up this happened before the end of the deferral period, although the specific timing in each area varied.

When re-contacting deferred customers PAs felt that staff at the Contact Centre did not record enough detail about the reason for the deferral which meant that PAs could not prepare for, or anticipate the customers circumstances before they contacted them.

Except for one area, PAs did not tend to defer customers who were inappropriately booked to attend a WFI, but instead conducted a shortened interview so as not to make the customer feel that they had had a wasted journey.

Decisions about whether or not to defer customers, either when re-contacting them or at the WFI stage, were made on an individual basis. The main factor taken into account was the customer’s

ability to attend the WFI, which usually related to customers with health conditions. Caring responsibilities and the emotional distress of customers were also taken into account.

The length of deferral periods were also decided on an individual basis. Decisions were based on evidence such as the expiry date of medical certificates, or dates of hospital appointments, after which time it was expected that customer's circumstances might have improved. By setting deferral periods on an individual basis they varied from between two weeks and six months.

Overall, staff felt that the right customers were being deferred at the Contact Centre and that deferrals practice at the Contact Centre had improved. Where customers slipped through this was largely blamed on insufficient exploration and probing of customer's circumstances by FCOs.

5.0 Customer evidence

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents evidence from interviews with non-JSA customers:

- deferred at a Contact Centre;
- customers deferred at a WFI;
- customers who were not deferred and had had a WFI.

The research also intended to include evidence from customers who were initially deferred, but who had had a subsequent WFI at the time of the research, however, it was not possible to recruit any such customers.

The chapter examines: customers' attitude to, and understanding of deferrals and the WFI; the appropriateness of deferrals decisions where they were made; and the timescales for being re-contacted. Where customers had a WFI arranged for them immediately, the appropriateness of these interviews is explored.

5.2 Customers deferred at a Contact Centre

This section includes evidence from customers who were originally deferred at a Contact Centre. In most cases customers were not obliged to attend a meeting at the Jobcentre Plus office until the end of the deferral periods, however in some areas meetings with the Financial Assessors were arranged for customers at the Jobcentre or through home visits, before the end of the deferral period.

Customers deferred at Contact Centre included: those with short term illnesses or injuries who had a job to return to; customers with more serious, long term illnesses; lone parents with additional caring responsibilities; customers who had recently started caring; and bereaved customers.

5.2.1 Customers' attitude to and understanding of deferrals

Customers understood deferrals as being a postponement of a meeting at the Jobcentre Plus office until a later date. However, the level of understanding of reasons for a deferral, 'next steps', or subsequent meetings at the Jobcentre, were variable and often very limited.

Where customers reported having been given limited explanations of the next steps, they were uncertain about how the process worked, or what their responsibilities were. Some customers reported being told that they '*may be re-contacted*'. Other customers indicated that they had been uncertain as to the status of their claim following a deferral at the Contact Centre. Some customers did not recall having been given an indicative timescale on which they would be re-contacted. Furthermore, some customers did not understand the distinction between Financial Adviser (FA) and Personal Adviser (PA) meetings. Where customers only attended an FA meeting, this further confused them. This was particularly true where customers had been told by Contact Centre staff that they would have two meetings at the Jobcentre Plus office.

Some deferred customers were told that they were obliged to attend the FA meeting, but were not asked to attend a WFI.

5.2.2 Customers' attitude to and understanding of, the purpose of the WFI

Most customers were aware that they would have to attend a meeting at the Jobcentre, however these customers had a limited sense of what this meeting would entail. In some cases they understood that they would have to attend two meetings. One customer, for example, had been told that his first meeting would be *'to process his benefits'*, and the second would be *'to discuss his circumstances'*. For the most part, customers' understanding was more limited, and they expected to attend a meeting at the Jobcentre in the future in order to discuss their benefit entitlement. This appeared to be because FCOs had emphasised the processing of benefits, and underplayed attendance at a WFI. For example, one customer with a short term injury was told that *'with the sick there was no pressure [to attend an interview]'*. Another customer with a short term injury indicated that,

'[the FCO] did mention something about checking that I was getting all I was able to claim'.

In a few cases, however, customers reported that they had received a more detailed explanation of the process, and it was explained to them that WFIs were available to help those who were ready to find work. Customers appreciated this level of explanation, and seemed comfortable with the idea of discussing work. Customers with short term illnesses or injuries and a job to return to were often more aware about the work focus of the Personal Adviser meeting. They understood that they had been deferred because of their immediate circumstances, and would be re-contacted when their circumstances changed.

'yes, I think they did say something about it being deferred...I just assumed that until I knew about my hand.. that's what they meant by being deferred...She said "we'll defer it for four weeks".. initially that was what my sick note was for'

(Sick or disabled customer with short term illness, age 40)

However, customers sometimes reacted negatively to having the work focus explained to them initially, as they did not think it was appropriate for them under their circumstances. This was sometimes the case even where customers were deferred,

'Yes, I think I was told that it was about the possibility of returning to work, about finding more alternative work and that's when I said that I'd got work waiting for me – it is just that I'm ill and that is why they postponed it because we are not really going to do any good anyway, there is not going to be any point in it. I could have understood it if they said I had lost a leg or something like that and couldn't do this work and they were going to discuss retraining or something like that but it did seem silly to me that the only reason I wasn't working was because I was sick and I would then have to go and discuss future work plans'

(Short term sick or disabled customer, aged 46).

Customers' understanding of the focus of the WFI appeared to be influenced to some extent by the customers' own personal circumstances and prime concerns. For example, those with a job to return to saw it being about claiming benefits, lone parents saw it as about moving into work and getting support from the Jobcentre. Few customers used the term 'work-focussed' interview. Customers usually indicated that they had just been told that they would be asked to attend a meeting with a personal adviser. There was limited evidence of customers having received explanation of the Personal Adviser where the work focus received emphasis.

Customers were usually aware of the conditionality attached to a WFI, and usually accepted having to attend a meeting as part of the process of claiming and obtaining benefits. The main exceptions were customers claiming SSP who had a job to return to, who were sometimes annoyed at the idea of having to attend a meeting about work in the future, when they intended to return to their old jobs. According to the guidance, these customers should be deferred. Customers who were bereaved or distressed were also sometimes upset at having to attend a meeting in the future, but this was often because they did not know what to expect from these meetings.

5.2.3 Customer role in making deferral/waiver decisions

Customers generally did not report having been asked about whether or not they would like to come in for a meeting at the Jobcentre, and could not recall having been told about the services available through Jobcentre Plus. There was limited evidence of customers having been asked whether or not they felt that a WFI would be appropriate for them at that time. Their role in making deferral or waiver decisions therefore appears to have been fairly limited.

5.2.4 Impact of level of information received

Where customers reported not having received very detailed explanation about the Jobcentre Plus process, they: were uncertain about what to expect in the future; were not aware of what help and support was available through the service; and were uncertain about if or how to contact the service in the future if they needed support. The exceptions were where customers were told that if they needed any help or support in finding work, that they should re-contact the Jobcentre. This was mainly reported by Lone Parents, or customers with short term illnesses who might be expected to move into work in the short-medium term.

5.2.5 Appropriateness of deferrals decisions made at Contact Centres

Deferrals at the Contact Centre generally appeared to have been made appropriately. Customers with short-term illness or injury and with a job to return to did not often see the benefit of their attending a WFI (and they often understood that this meeting would be about work). Similarly, carers were often relieved that they had not been asked to attend a meeting at the Jobcentre, as it would have been either inconvenient get into the Jobcentre, or could not see the benefit of attending a meeting when their claim would be resolved independently of it.

However, in some cases customers felt that although they did not need, or were not in a position to discuss their work options, they would have liked to speak to someone face to face about sorting out their claim.

In some cases, however, deferred customers indicated that they would have liked to have been invited to a WFI at the time of their entry into the Jobcentre Plus system. These customers included:

- Sick or disabled customers: In particular, customers who were uncertain as to whether they would be able to return to their old job, those who felt that they would have liked to speak to someone about re-training or different job options (such as setting up a business). However, these customers had not been aware that this support was available, and for this reason had not asked about it.
- Lone Parents: Some lone parents, who appeared to have been deferred because they had additional caring responsibilities (for example, for a child with special needs), or who were distressed due to current circumstances (for example, relationship breakdowns and custody cases) indicated that they would have liked to discuss options for training or work in the future. One lone parent caring for an autistic son, for example, said that she would have appreciated finding out about any support she could get in caring for him, and that she wanted to start thinking about her work options for the future. In some cases, lone parents were particularly focussed on moving into work in the near future, but had not been aware of the support available through the Jobcentre.

In some cases customers who had attended a meeting with a Financial Assessor reported that they would have appreciated an opportunity to discuss their work options for the future.

5.2.6 Appropriateness of timescales

Customers reported that FCOs appeared to have decided deferral timescales on the basis of available evidence (including medical certificates), and on the basis of information of any medical treatment that they might be receiving. In one case, a customer reported that their FCO used her own experience to make a judgement about an appropriate deferral period,

'She told me because of the operation she felt, in a way she had the same operation that I went through, the varicose vein operation and she said it was painful, and she knew then I would not be able to sit down properly ... But that's why she deferred it for two weeks'

(Sick or disabled customer, aged 44)

There was limited evidence of timescales having been decided in conjunction with the customer. However, customers generally understood why they had been deferred for certain timescales, and were content with this. Customers' circumstances had generally changed very little at the time of the research, and as a result they often felt that the initial deferral decisions had been made appropriately.

5.2.7 Re-arranging the WFI

Some customers were told to call if their re-arranged WFI was not appropriate, for example if they had moved into work, or if their circumstances had not changed. In some cases, customers were then told that home visits would be arranged for them.

Some customers had not been re-contacted at the times indicated by the FCOs. In some cases, customers had to chase up their re-arranged WFIs. This was done by customers who were motivated to resolve problems with benefit claims.

In other cases customers were re-contacted and felt the timing was appropriate, as changes to their circumstances meant that they were better able to attend a meeting at the Jobcentre.

5.3 Deferrals made at Public Offices

Few customers appear to be deferred at WFIs, and as a consequence, it was not possible to interview as many of these customers as was planned. The collection of evidence on deferrals at Public Offices was further complicated by the fact that customers had a great deal of difficulty in identifying where they had been deferred, and were often unable to distinguish between a meeting with a financial assessor, and one with a personal advisor. There was no evidence of customers having been deferred at the FA meeting.

Customers who attended meetings at the Jobcentre still appeared to have fairly poor understanding of the Jobcentre Plus process.

Within this group of customer respondents, there appeared to be only one example of a clear case of a WFI having been deferred by a PA. This related to a customer who had previously claimed Jobseekers Allowance, but whose health problems deteriorated to the point that he was unable to work. The customer explained that he was deferred in the second interview that he attended at the Jobcentre,

'Its just, I got paid off, then I went to the Job Centre and what they said was, I did the first interview, then I went back and he said what you want to do is you want to go to your Doctors, see him and get a sick note and go from that, because I couldn't get out to go and look for work, so he put us on like a six months sick straightaway'

(Ex-JSA customer, claiming incapacity benefit, aged 41)

However, there was evidence of customers having curtailed WFIs at Public Offices. In these instances, customers felt that they had had shortened meetings because they were too distressed to participate fully in a WFI. Customers had not known what to expect from the WFI, and had become very upset when asked to consider work. They indicated that their meetings had been brief (less than twenty minutes), but that it not been made clear to them that their meeting was being deferred.

5.4 Appropriateness of re-arranged WFIs

Where customers were re-contacted to arrange a WFI, the timing of this contact was generally felt to be appropriate. Customers with short-term illness or injury and who had had not been able to return to work, were ready to consider other options. In some cases, the customers' change in circumstances required that they make a claim for a new benefit, following attendance at the WFI.

In some cases, however, the end of the deferral period was felt by customers to have been too early. For example, one customer with a long-term illness who was waiting for an operation had had to attend a WFI, but felt that it had been inappropriate for him as he was unsure at that stage how his condition would develop. As a result, the re-arranged meeting had not been very useful to him,

'I'd been off work for 28 weeks on sick pay... I think they were hoping that I'd have my operation a lot earlier.'

(Sick or disabled customers, aged 22)

This re-arranged meeting lasted only ten minutes. Following his interview he was told that he should *'contact them to let them know how he's doing'*.

5.5 Customers who had a WFI upon contact with Jobcentre Plus

This section is based on interviews with customers who had a WFI as soon as they made first contact with Jobcentre Plus. In general, these customers had similar circumstances to those customers who were deferred at either the Contact Centre or Public Office.

Customers who attended a WFI immediately after their entry into the system had acquired a better understanding of what was on offer, having attended both an FA and PA meeting. Customers consistently indicated that the resolution of the benefit claim had been valuable. Lone parents generally appeared to have a positive experience of the PA meeting, and could identify at least one aspect of the service that was of use to them. For example, one lone parent who considered that she was well informed about what was available through the New Deal for Lone Parents, was encouraged to learn about the possibility of having her claim fast tracked if she were to return to work.

Further research found that some customers had work focused discussions with their PA and had a positive experience. Customers who were uncertain about whether they would be able to return to work appreciated having information about possible training opportunities. In other cases, alternative work options had not been discussed with customers who might not have been able to return to their old jobs, and who would have appreciated advice on retraining or other options.

5.6 Summary

Customers deferred at Contact Centre had a limited understanding of the Jobcentre Plus process, and of deferrals and waivers in particular. However, in most cases, customers felt that they had been deferred appropriately. The timescales for which customers were deferred were broadly appropriate, however, some customers were not being re-contacted following the end of their deferral period. Customers were usually aware of the conditionality of rearranged meetings.

Customers who appeared to have been deferred at Public Offices had a low awareness of having been deferred, and a poor understanding of the Jobcentre Plus process (for example, they were unable to distinguish between FA/PA). Consequently, they did not expect to be re-contacted, and were uncertain about who to contact if they needed any help or support in the future. Customers deferred at Public Offices also anticipated that they would have to attend re-arranged meetings as a condition of their receiving benefit.

6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides: an overview of the use of guidance relating to deferrals and waivers in the case study areas; the application and understanding of deferral and waivers in the Contact Centres and Public Offices; and customer perspectives on the appropriateness of deferrals and waivers. A number of key issues are identified at the outset, and the chapter concludes with related recommendations and good practice.

This research found that processes for making deferral and waiver decisions was broadly being delivered in line with the Jobcentre Plus policy vision. Jobcentre Plus staff in both the Contact Centres and Public Offices understood the purpose of deferrals and waivers, and knew that the decision to defer or waive should be made on the basis of a customers' individual circumstances, and were happy in making these decisions for certain customer groups.

However, there were several key issues which significantly influenced staff understanding and the appropriate application of deferral and waivers. Previous research highlighted some of these issues as being significant in the broader delivery of the Jobcentre Plus services¹⁰. These included:

- the degree of confidence with which Jobcentre Plus staff are able to deliver a work focused service to non- Jobseekers Allowance customers;
- the knowledge that FCOs and PAs have about the services and support available to customers;
- the quality of explanation given to customers about how the system works and the customers' consequent ability to judge whether they would find the WFI useful; and
- the degree to which both FCOs and PAs explore customers' circumstances in order to tailor Jobcentre Plus services appropriately.

6.2 Conclusions

6.2.1 Guidance

Use of guidance

Guidance was generally referred to when staff were unsure about whether to make a deferral or waiver. It was not used by front line staff on a daily basis. The main sources of guidance included: the National Jobcentre Plus Guidance on the Intranet; locally produced manuals in some Contact Centres; and advice from other colleagues. Guidance was usually disseminated through a 'top-down' approach, with office managers adapting the guidance in line with the roles of their staff. In some cases, this appeared to result in staff having a limited awareness of the principles behind deferrals and waivers, and instead concentrating on individual cases where deferrals should be made, or the procedure that should follow these decisions. Guidance would be disseminated immediately following its release, but there were staff who rarely looked up old guidance, as they felt that it was likely to be out of date. Where colleagues were consulted, they often drew on precedents based on previous decisions.

Impact of revised guidance

¹⁰ Hartfree, Y., Nimmo, J., Sutton, L., Taylor, J., Kellard K., Sumpton, R. *Jobcentre Plus: Early Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase II)*, July 2002 and Lissenburgh, S, and Marsh, A, 'Experiencing Jobcentre Plus Pathfinders: Overview of Early evaluation evidence', *DWP in-house report 111*.'

There was limited awareness amongst staff in Contact Centres of the guidance in the April Live Support Bulletins, and awareness broadly reflected the dissemination process. At Contact Centres there was some awareness amongst managers, but FCOs often did not recall the guidance. However, in Public Offices there was awareness among both managers and PAs. Although there was limited spontaneous recall of the content of the Bulletins by Contact Centre staff, there was a recognition of the key messages when prompted.

Staff did not report any direct impact of the guidance. In the original Contact Centres staff felt that they were already following the guidance, and that the guidance introduced in April had simply reinforced existing messages. However, staff reported that the Live Support Bulletins has had an impact on the process by which deferrals and waivers are booked.

Staff were generally satisfied with the level of guidance available to them. Some staff in Contact Centres wanted more specific or ‘clear-cut’ guidance about making deferral decisions. Public office staff generally felt more confident in applying their own common sense to the guidance.

Understanding of principles behind guidance

Staff exhibited an inconsistent awareness of the principles behind deferrals and waivers, although there were some examples of these principles being captured in local guidance. In this area staff exhibited a more consistent approach to deferrals and waivers, and a higher degree of comfort in applying discretion.

6.2.2 Application of deferrals and waiver guidance at Contact Centres

Contact Centre staff understanding of deferrals and waivers reflected the level of understanding of the work focus. Staff broadly saw deferrals as postponement of the WFIs, whereas waivers would be made where a WFI would never be appropriate for a customer. However, fewer staff were confident in explaining how they would determine whether a WFI was appropriate, and they therefore had difficulty in determining whether or not a deferral would be appropriate. Some FCOs viewed deferrals as a way of postponing the WFI meeting until the customer’s circumstances had changed, for example when they recovered from a short-term illness or injury. They therefore had difficulty in determining when a WFI would be appropriate for customers with circumstances that were unlikely to change over the long-term, or were unpredictable, and rarely asked customers about whether they would like to work, despite their condition. Most FCOs also had a fairly limited understanding of the relevant types of support that might be offered through the WFI. However, there were exceptions where staff had a more sophisticated understanding of the purpose of deferrals. For example, some FCOs viewed deferrals as being an appropriate mechanism for maintaining customers’ engagement with the Jobcentre Plus process, and delaying the WFI until it would be a more effective use of PA time.

6.2.3 Making deferral and waiver decisions

There was a consistent message from staff across both Contact Centres and Public Offices that they would expect the majority of deferrals to be made at the Contact Centre.

‘Clear cut’ deferral and waiver decisions

FCOs indicated that there are some customer groups for whom they find it relatively easy to make decisions based on information collected using the VANTIVE script, and on available guidance. In these cases, decisions appeared to be made fairly consistently. FCOs were confident about waiving the following groups: wholly retrospective claims; customers with terminal illness (and cancer cases); 16-17 year olds in full time education with no financial support; and customers over age 60, or with a partner over age 60. These waivers decisions are prescribed in the revised guidance. FCOs sometimes also waived customers with severe mental health problems or disability; and customers about to return to work.

FCOs were also confident about deferring the following groups: pregnant women within 11 weeks of confinement; customers claiming SSP with a job to return to; bereaved customers; and customers with a contagious illness.

Complex deferral and waiver decisions

However, where customers' circumstances were more complex, FCOs indicated that decisions had to be made on an individual basis. However, FCOs found it difficult to make individual decisions and they felt that the VANTIVE script was not sufficiently dynamic to collect the necessary information and specific guidance was not provided on complex cases. In these cases, decisions were reliant upon the FCO's expertise (particularly in probing), experience (and associated confidence levels) and discretion.

Deferral of customers with physical health problems depended upon a number of factors: the type, length and severity of illness; the existence and duration of a medical certificate; and whether the customer had to receive medical treatment (in hospital or residential rehabilitation). The ability of the FCOs to make appropriate deferral decisions for these customers was influenced by the lack of confidence FCOs had in asking about medical problems (which FCOs sometimes attributed to a lack of medical knowledge), and limited awareness of support available to customers with physical health problems (for example job brokers, DEAs).

Customers with mental health problems (ranging from psychosis to depression) were deferred depending on a several considerations: the nature and gravity of illness and whether their condition was controlled. These considerations were viewed as being good indicators of whether the customer would pose any threats to staff safety, and also whether they would be able either to fully participate in the WFI or to work. Staff exhibited variable levels of confidence and understanding in relation to dealing with mental health issues and particular confusion related to depression.

Staff reported that lone parents were rarely deferred unless they had additional short-term caring responsibilities or were distressed due the recent breakdown of their relationships. This was because FCOs had a better awareness of the support available (particularly through NDLP), and because they viewed lone parents as being a 'priority group' (as they were perceived as being more likely to want to move into work than other non-JSA customers).

FCOs reported variable practice in relation to deferring carers. In one area, they would be deferred more or less automatically. In another area the carer would be asked if they were able to find somebody to relieve them of their caring responsibilities so that they could attend the WFI. A recurrent reason identified for the deferral of carers was that they were unlikely to be available for work, and that there was perceived to be little support that could be offered through the WFI.

Deferral timescales

FCOs set specific deadlines for when they would expect the PA to re-contact the customer to arrange a WFI meeting. Decisions about these deadlines were based on: indicative timescales (for example, length of hospitalised stay); available evidence (e.g. medical certificate); and individual customer circumstances. In only one area did FCOs have guidance on indicative timescales available to them, and as a consequence, a high degree of discretion was involved. Decisions on deferral timescales varied considerably.

Monitoring of timescales

The research found that Contact Centres managers had placed increased emphasis on the monitoring of deferral decisions. Generally, managers and staff felt that the right customers were being deferred, although in the newly established Contact Centres they accepted that there was a learning process involved for less experienced staff. All areas had instituted 100% checks for team leader

authorisations, on the recommendation of the Pit Stop Bulletins. However, as Team Leaders were sometimes not very experienced, there was no clear impact on practice.

Contact Centre staff felt that it was hard to prescribe deferrals rates, since they thought that all customers should be treated on an individual basis, resulting in variable deferral rates week by week. Managers used consolidation reports to give them an indication of how they compared to other Pathfinder areas. In some cases, managers were aware of tolerance levels.

6.2.4 Application of deferrals and waiver guidance at Public Offices

Understanding of deferrals and waivers

PAs generally had a good understanding of the purpose of WFIs, viewing them: as an opportunity to introduce non-JSA customers to work; to explain the help and services available; and provide help and support. Their understanding of deferrals was also good, although some were less clear about when deferrals were appropriate. Their understanding of waivers was felt to be more clear-cut.

Deferral practice in public offices

The case study areas had different approaches to following up customers. In two areas, Public Offices had deferrals teams responsible for picking up work flows from the Contact Centre. In one area, deferred customers were not being re-contacted due to a lack of staff time, and the low priority attached to this activity (because there were no associated performance targets).

PAs indicated that FCOs did not always record sufficient prior information on customers to prepare for WFIs, or to highlight where a deferral might be appropriate.

The research found that customers were not usually deferred at the WFI, primarily because PAs did not want customers to have a wasted journey. In these instances, PAs would instead shorten the WFI. The exception was one area in which non-JSA customers would be deferred at WFI. In this area the generalist non-JSA customer PAs appeared to have a particularly strong sense of what they wanted from the WFI, and what physical and emotional condition they needed for the customers to be in for them to participate fully in the WFI.

PAs had more autonomy to make their own deferral decisions than FCOs, but could seek help from managers and colleagues if required. They generally indicated that they felt confident about making deferral decisions. However, some reported that their lack of medical knowledge posed a difficulty (although this may be related to their discomfort with probing about a customer's health).

Deferral decisions

Customers with physical health problems would be (re)-deferred according to their ability to get to the WFI, their ability to sit down for a period of time, or whether they had a contagious diseases. The availability of relief for caring responsibilities was the main factor in determining whether carers or lone parents would be deferred. PAs reported that they would also consider whether customers, in particular bereaved customers and lone parents, were in emotional distress. When considering whether to re-defer a customer, PAs would also consider whether the customer's circumstances have changed since making the benefit claim.

Time scales for (re)-deferrals were decided on the basis of: individual customer circumstances; discussion with the customer; and available evidence (e.g. length of medical certificate, date of hospital appointment). Timescales varied from two weeks to six months.

PAs did not appear to emphasise the work aspect of WFIs. They described WFIs as the opportunity to discuss options or to give information on the services available. However, the mandatory nature of attending a WFI was explained to customers, for example in telling them that, *'everybody has to attend'* or that *'we need to see you'*.

Public Office staff generally felt that the right customers were being deferred at the Contact Centre. Where Public Offices monitored deferrals, this was limited to checking that workflows are followed up, or that sufficient information had been recorded on LMS. Deferral decisions were only monitored in one area where managers had a strong awareness of the tolerance range. Public Office staff expressed a unanimous view that it was not possible to set a desirable target level for deferrals, as these decisions had to be based on individual circumstances.

6.2.5 Customers' understanding

Customers deferred at Contact Centre had a limited understanding of the Jobcentre Plus process, and of deferrals and waivers in particular. However, in most cases, customers felt that they had been deferred appropriately. The exceptions identified in this research included lone parents with additional caring responsibilities who were still interested in considering work, and sick or disabled customers who wanted to consider retraining or different work options. The timescales for which customers were deferred were broadly appropriate, however, some customers were not being re-contacted following the end of their deferral period. Customers were usually aware of the conditionality of rearranged meetings.

Customers deferred at Public Offices had a low awareness of having been deferred, and a poor understanding of the Jobcentre Plus process (for example, they were unable to distinguish between FA/PA) . Consequently, they did not expect to be re-contacted, and were uncertain about who to contact if they needed any help or support in the future. Customers deferred at Public Offices also anticipated that they would have to attend re-arranged meetings as a condition of their receiving benefit.

6.3 Recommendations

Specific recommendations for promoting the application of appropriate deferral and waiver decisions are made below.

- Staff in Contact Centres, and to a lesser extent, Public Offices, might benefit from guidance and associated training relating to the key principles behind making deferrals and waivers (see Good Practice example, Chapter 3).
- Staff in both Contact Centres and Public Offices should ensure that they are confident that they have elicited sufficient information from the customer in order to make a deferral decision. This includes asking whether the customer feels whether a WFI would be appropriate, when it might be appropriate, and under what circumstances the customer would return to work, and whether there is any related support that the Jobcentre can offer. More evidence of customers' perspectives should be recorded on LMS conversations.
- An appropriate explanation of the range of support available through the WFIs should always be given by FCOs, and a WFI offered to customers before a deferral decision is made (this requirement could be potentially be included in future 'Must Do' Guidance).
- Staff in Both Contact Centres and Public Offices should ensure that customers understand the Jobcentre Plus process, and know how to access help or support in the future.
- The monitoring of deferral and waivers - in particular the examination of the level of evidence collected, and reasons for deferral - should be used as part of a system of continuous improvement.

Annex A: Study Methodology

1. Background

Aims and objectives

The overall aim of this research was to explore the understanding of key Jobcentre Plus staff on the consistent application of deferrals and waivers to non-JSA customers, and the procedures for picking up customers following the issue of improved guidance given to local offices in April 2002. More specifically, the research objectives were to:

- explore staff attitudes to the process of applying deferrals and waivers;
- explore staff attitudes and understanding of the new guidance on waivers and deferrals;
- ascertain whether guidance is being adopted at a local level, how, and whether it works well;
- obtain examples of good practice;
- determine whether staff think that systems have improved since the new guidelines have been issued;
- check that the ‘right’ customers are being deferred;
- examine customers’ views and experiences of deferrals; and
- see whether systems are in place for picking up deferred customers.

2. Methodological approach

Qualitative interviews

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method to gather information about the experiences and views of Jobcentre Plus staff and non-JSA Jobcentre Plus customers (lone parents, sick or disabled customers, carers and the bereaved).

The interview topic guides for use with Jobcentre Plus staff were structured to obtain details about their attitudes to the process of making deferrals and waiver decisions. The questions aimed to examine whether the guidance was being applied at local level, how effective this had been, and whether systems were in place to defer and waive the ‘right’ customers.

The interview topic guide for use with non-JSA Jobcentre Plus customers was designed to obtain comprehensive details of respondents’ contact with the service, to elicit their opinions about their experience of the different stages of the Jobcentre Plus process, and to check that the correct customers were being deferred.

Interviews were structured to obtain as much detail as possible about staff and customer experiences of Jobcentre Plus, whilst allowing ample opportunity for respondents to expand on specific issues of importance to them and to express their own views.

All interviews were recorded, provided the permission of the interviewee was obtained. Researchers stressed that everything the interviewee said would be treated in the strictest confidence and that the recordings made would not be passed on to anyone outside of the research team. Interviews were subsequently transcribed.

Observations

Observations of first contact calls provided a valuable insight into the functioning of the deferral and waiver processes at Contact Centre stage. The purpose of observations was to triangulate research findings collected from staff and customers. Researchers listened to FCOs, to hear what was said to customers and how language was used. Body language was observed as was the way in which information was recorded and the general approach of the FCO. The researchers conducting the observations strove to remain as unobtrusive as possible, so as not to influence the behaviour of staff.

Document Review

A review of the deferral guidance and VANTIVE script was undertaken to explore the procedures in relation to the process of making deferrals and the systems in place to support staff in caseload planning. Researchers analysed the content, clarity and level of information offered in the guidance. This aided researchers when examining the evidence collected from staff in relation to the use of the guidance notes.

Analysis

Key findings from the initial formative evaluation based on observations, and interviews with customers and staff were taken forward to the debriefing session. Here researchers discussed the main issues and agreed the key messages. Manual content analysis and thematic gridding was undertaken to inform the development of analytical frameworks that were completed and compared for each case study area.

3. Fieldwork

Case Studies

Three main factors influenced the selection of case study areas. These were:

- deferral rates (based on averages for May- October 2002);
- geographical spread (location, urban/rural); and
- 'new' case study areas (i.e. not included in previous Jobcentre Plus evaluation research).

The research did not aim to re-visit areas already included in the previous case study and staff research¹¹. The selection process sought to uncover differing experiences of deferrals and waivers throughout non-JSA customer groups and amongst Jobcentre Plus staff.

In addition, the selection of case studies was undertaken at a time when Jobcentre Plus was rolling out. Many areas were opening new contact centres to serve the additional public offices. For this reason it was necessary for researchers to visit two areas where contact centre offices had opened very recently. Where this was the case, they endeavoured, as far as possible to interview staff from both the original and the new contact centres. This was in order to gain an insight into how deferral practice may have changed over time, and to determine whether the guidance issued in April 2002 had had an impact on deferral practice.

¹¹ Hartfree, Y., Nimmo, J., Sutton, L., Taylor, J., Kellard K., Sumpton, R. *Jobcentre Plus: Early Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase II)*, July 2002

Table 1: Summary of case study areas

Case Study Area	Contact Centre	Urban/Rural	Deferral Rates
1	New	Urban	Average-High
2	New	Rural	Low-average
3	Original	Mixed	Low-average
4	Original	Urban	High

Organisation of case study visits

Jobcentre Plus office managers were contacted by telephone in advance of planned site visits. They were advised of the proposed research programme and suitable dates for visits were negotiated. The initial contact person was asked to organise a timetable of interviews and observations and to inform staff about the purpose of the research.

To gain a range of staff viewpoints, a minimum of five staff interviews were requested in each Jobcentre Plus public office. These included office managers/team leaders and Personal Advisors (PAs). A minimum of eight staff interviews were requested at Contact Centres with office managers/team leaders and First Contact Officers (FCOs).

Staff interviews

Staff were interviewed on a one-to-one basis, where possible in a private room. Interviews were structured using topic guides tailored to the role of the staff member, but covered the same themes where appropriate. All interviews were recorded and staff reassured that information from the recording would be treated confidentially.

Paired interviews were undertaken where possible with FCOs and PAs, in order to generate a discussion about deferral/waiver practice, and explore similarities and differences. This aimed to examine any possible discrepancies in the understanding and application of the guidance.

Interviews were conducted with the following types of staff:

Jobcentre Plus Public Offices	Contact Centres
Office managers	Office Managers
Team leaders	Team leaders
Personal Assistants	First Contact Officers

The number of interviews conducted with FCOs in one case study area was limited due to staff sickness on the day.

Copies of the tailored topic guides used to structure staff interviews can be found at Annex D.

Observations

Researchers used observation schedules to record the details of the topics discussed, the order of the discussion, the time taken discussing each topic and the approach of the FCO. Information was recorded on the issues discussed in the call, the language used by the First Contact Officer, the way information was recorded, and the length of call. Whilst researchers intended to be present at first contact, it was necessary in one area to conduct tele-observations.

It was not possible to anticipate when a deferral or waiver might be made, except where FCOs were cold calling. Consequently, whether researchers were with FCOs or tele-observing, they took notes for all observations and in some cases, researchers were able to pick up deferral/waivers. However, as they were not able to hear the customer whilst observing, their ability to follow the whole conversation as it happened was limited at times. Due to problems with the computer system in one area, the number of observations was limited.

Copies of the observation schedules used can be found at Annex D.

Document Review

Researchers supplemented staff interviews and observations by examining deferral logs, where they existed, and collecting examples of supplementary local guidance where used. The results of this review are included in the main body of the analysis in this report.

Customer Research

The sample

Jobcentre Plus customers fall into four groups: Jobseekers claiming JSA; Lone Parents (usually claiming Income Support); people with illnesses or disabilities (usually claiming Incapacity Benefit) and others; carers (normally claiming Invalid Care Allowance) and the bereaved (claiming Widows and Bereavement Benefits). For convenience, the last three customer groups are collectively referred to as 'non-JSA customers'.

Jobcentre Plus customers were recruited from a database supplied by the Department for Work and Pensions. A time period of two months was chosen to maximise the number of customers within the sample frame. Targets were established for the number of interviews to be conducted with each non-JSA customer group. These were as follows:

Table 2: Target numbers for customer sample

Relationship to deferral		Customer group			Sub Total	Total
		Lone Parents	Sick or disabled	Other		
Deferred	At CC	1-3	5-8	4-6	15	20
	At WFI	1	2	2	5	
Deferred, then had WFI at later date		1-2	5-7	2-3	12	12
Not deferred, who have had a WFI		2	4	2	8	8
Total		8	20	12	40	40

The database listed a sample of customers from all customer groups who were either: deferred at contact centre or work focussed interview; initially deferred, but have since had a work focussed interview; or were not deferred. The data indicated at which stage the deferral was [not] made. However, the telephone screener was necessary to confirm this. Customer descriptions of their experiences did not always tally with the database provided. This contributed to difficulties in reaching the sample target.

Interview recruitment

A standard introductory letter was sent to all sampled customers explaining the purpose of the research and that a member of the research team would be in contact to arrange an interview. Sampled customers were given two weeks to 'opt out' of the research. A small number of 'opt-out' requests were received. These customers were not contacted again.

Customers were recruited for individual qualitative interviews by telephone, using a recruitment questionnaire that checked their eligibility to take part in the research and their customer 'type'. A copy of the recruitment questionnaire is included at Annex D.

Appointments were made to interview non-JSA customers in their own home. Customers were sent written confirmation of the appointment. Every effort was made to recruit the target number of customers from each client group across the four case study areas. However, it was not possible to meet the sample for some client groups and deferral stages. Even with an additional 'top-up' sample, it proved difficult to recruit sufficient numbers of carers or recently bereaved customers. There were also relatively few customers who had been deferred at the Work Focussed Interview or that were initially deferred, and then had a subsequent Work Focussed Interview. A further issue was gaps in the sample data. Where the sample was not met, and telephone numbers were omitted or inaccessible, follow up letters were sent to customers to ask them to contact ECOTEC if they were interested in taking part in the research.

Non-JSA customer interviews

Interviews with non-JSA customers were recorded, with the respondent's permission, and typically lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. Copies of the topic guide used to structure the interviews can be found at Annex D. Customers were given a gift of £20 in return for their participation.

5. Fieldwork completed

The actual customer fieldwork completed is shown in Table 3 below:

		Customer group			Sub Total	Total
		Lone Parents	Sick or disabled	Other		
Deferred	At CC	2	12	3	16	17
	At WFI	0	1	0	1	
Deferred, then had WFI at later date		0	8	0	8	8
Not deferred, had a WFI		5	3	2	9	9
Total		6	22	5	35	36

As described above, the recruitment process found difficulties with obtaining the intended sample spread across client groups and deferral stages. Rather than conducting multiple interviews with the same client groups, additional staff interviews were undertaken in place of customer interviews.

The staff fieldwork conducted in Contact Centres is shown in Table 4 below:

Staff Type	Case Study Area				Sub – Total
	1	2	3	4	
Managers	1	2 (2 paired)	2	1	6
Team Leaders	2	2	2	2	8
FCOs	7 (2 paired)	7 (1 paired)	4 (1 paired)	4	22
Total	10	11	8	7	36

The staff fieldwork conducted in Public Offices is shown in Table 5 below:

Staff Type	Case Study Area				Sub – Total
	1	2	3	4	
Managers	1	1	4	1	7
Team Leaders	2 (1 paired)	0	0	1	3
PAs	4 (2 paired)	4 (2 paired)	7	2	17
Total	7	5	11	4	27

6. Analysis

Each researcher recorded key findings from customer and staff interviews on an analytical proforma. This proforma included space to record findings on key themes at each stage of the deferral process, from customers' first contact onwards. However, this proforma acted as a guide and was not intended to provide an exhaustive list of themes. Researchers completed the proformas on the basis of notes taken during interviews. Individual proformas were then consolidated to produce one, final analytical grid for each case-study area.

Annex B: Analysis of Phase II Staff Transcripts

1. Introduction

This report complements and expands on some of the key research findings on the practice of deferrals in Jobcentre Plus Contact Centres and public offices reported in earlier research – ‘Jobcentre Plus: Early Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase II)’¹². The information provided is drawn from the further analysis of qualitative interviews with Contact Centre Managers, First Contact Officers (FCOs), Personal Advisers (PAs), and Adviser Managers. The interviews were conducted in April 2002, just prior to the issue of new deferrals guidance at the end of April 2002. Further analysis of the staff interview transcripts covers the following areas: the decisions taken into account when deferring customers at the Contact Centre, and at the public office (section 2); staff views on the guidance and training they had received (section 3); and the process for re-booking Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) with customers who had been deferred (section 4).

2. Staff Understanding of Deferrals and Waivers

First Contact Officers

Phase II of the qualitative research found that, in general, FCOs felt more confident in making deferrals and were deferring less frequently than in Phase I of the research.

In general there were two approaches to making deferrals at Contact Centres. In some areas FCOs used a common sense approach, whereby FCOs listened to customers and probed for further information to determine whether a deferral was appropriate. In other areas a ‘strict’ approach was used, based on locally produced written and verbal guidance from management about reducing the number of deferrals.

Staff experience was a key factor in deferring customers appropriately and affected which type of customers were deferred. In particular some less experienced FCOs had difficulty in determining whether to defer if the customer had caring responsibilities, was ill or distressed.

FCOs would defer customers depending on their personal circumstances. Circumstances under which FCOs would defer a customer included: whether the customer was ill; claiming Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) and returning to their employer; was pregnant; had recently been bereaved; or was too distressed to attend. Some of these circumstances were more straightforward to determine than others.

The most straightforward circumstances appeared to be when deferring pregnant women, individuals claiming SSP and returning to their employer, and bereaved customers. FCOs knew that these customers should be deferred.

Pregnant women: FCOs were generally confident about the criteria required to defer pregnant women. Most FCOs knew that they had to take into account the expected date of confinement before deferring for four weeks after this date.

¹² Hartfree, Y., Nimmo, J., Sutton, L., Taylor, J., Kellard K., Sumpton, R. *Jobcentre Plus: Early Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase II)*, July 2002

Customers claiming SSP and returning to their employer: First Contact Officers also appeared to be aware of the need to defer customers who were temporarily incapacitated and returning to an employer. They based the length of the deferral on the duration of the medical certificate.

Bereaved customers: All FCOs were aware that they should defer bereaved individuals where this was appropriate. They tended to defer bereaved customers for two to four months from when their partner had died.

Deferral decisions appeared to be less straightforward in respect of sick or disabled customers and FCOs used a wider range of criteria to determine whether to defer. This applied across all eight case study areas. If customers were claiming a health related benefit, FCOs in all areas reported using the following criteria to determine whether to defer:

- the type of and severity of the illness;
- the period of time covered by the medical certificate; and
- whether they were going into, or leaving hospital.

In some, but not all areas, a further consideration was whether the customer could physically get into the office. This resulted in some discrepancies between and within some offices about whether to defer customers with physical incapacities, such as broken legs, and in particular, whether they needed help to get there. For example, in one Contact Centre staff reported that if a customer had a broken leg and was in plaster, they would be deferred, whereas in another area an FCO reported one customer with two broken legs and a broken arm still having to attend his appointment.

Furthermore, some FCOs in four areas reported that they felt under pressure not to defer customers wherever possible. The Contact Centre Managers in these areas emphasised to their staff the need for all customers to attend a Work Focused Interview (WFI). This was not reported as an issue in the remaining areas.

'We are under a bit of pressure not to defer people or waive people if possible...I try not to defer anybody but there are cases when you've got to.'

(First Contact Officer)

This additional pressure may have contributed to the discrepancies between offices about who should and who should not be deferred.

There was also some confusion both within and between a few areas over whether other non-JSA customers - particularly carers, those with mental health problems, and distressed customers - should be deferred.

- Carers: In one area, one FCO reported that they would defer all full-time carers, whereas other FCOs in other areas reported that they would only defer them if they were also working. In general, in most other areas FCOs would not defer non-working carers.
- Customers with mental health problems: In a few areas it was reported that customers with mental health problems would be deferred, compared to most other areas that tended to book a WFI for this customer group. The few FCOs that would defer such customers did so because of concern about exacerbating their mental health problem.
- Other distressed customers: A few FCOs recognised that a WFI was not appropriate for some distressed customers at that point and would defer them. However, this was dependent on what the customer told the FCO over the telephone and whether the FCO listened intently to probe for further information. In some instances, the customer was able to convey the extent of their distress to the FCO, whereas in other cases customers were not adequately able to do so.

Distressed customers could be from a range of customer groups: carers, sick or disabled people or lone parents.

There also appeared to be some uncertainty about whether to defer or waive a customer with a terminal illness. Customers with a terminal illness should have their WFI waived¹³.

In some areas, FCOs reported that they would waive the WFI for customers suffering from these conditions, whereas in others these customers tended to be deferred.

Overall, FCOs in all areas reported deferring less than in the Phase I research. This appeared to result in PAs in all areas reporting that they were seeing customers for a WFI that they felt should have been deferred. This is discussed further in the following section.

Personal Advisers

This section explores the practice of deferring customers in the public office and how PAs dealt with customers whom they believed should have been deferred. In Phase II of the early Jobcentre Plus research, PAs reported interviewing customers whom they believed should have been deferred. These included:

- customers with a job to return to;
- customers with difficulties attending the WFI - for example, those with mobility problems and caring responsibilities who had not been given the option of a deferral or a home visit; and
- customers who were very distressed either through the breakdown of their relationship or through some other traumatic event.

In general, all PAs understood that deferrals were based on decisions taken at the Contact Centre and most PAs appeared to understand clearly their own role in deferring customers. PAs knew that they had the option of discontinuing the interview if the customer was obviously unwell or in distress and was, therefore, unable to benefit from a WFI at that point.

Most PAs reported seeing customers who in their view should have been deferred at the Contact Centre. These fell into the following categories:

- those with substance use issues;
- those with mental health problems;
- those in obvious pain and discomfort;
- those suffering from severe distress; and
- those with jobs to return to.

Personal Advisers in most areas reported that they would continue with an abbreviated WFI with these customers. In these cases PAs asked customers initial questions about their current circumstances, and occasionally they would put the customer in touch with other organisations that might be able to help them further, for example drug and alcohol advice organisations.

However, a few PAs expressed concern about whether to continue with the WFI with some customers who were in obvious pain or distress. For example one PA saw a woman who suffered from claustrophobia and was asthmatic. When she arrived in the office she was experiencing breathing difficulties. In this instance, the PA reported feeling *'really bad and I thought like I was pushing the interview'* and subsequently deferred her for the length of her medical certificate. An Adviser Manager reported seeing lone parents who were distressed having recently been estranged from their partners. In this instance they reported that they would defer the customer because they would not be work-focused.

¹³ Jobcentre Plus Guidance – Live support bulletin: issue 17-22 April 2002.

'If you don't think you're going to be able to do a work focused interview you shouldn't see them.'

(Adviser Manager)

Some PAs reported that they would seek their line manager's approval before deferring the customer, particularly if they were inexperienced.

In a few areas, some PAs felt that deferrals should be their responsibility. This was because PAs had reported seeing customers who in their view should have been deferred at the Contact Centre. In these instances, the concern was that Contact Centre staff were not always able to make the correct decisions, because of difficulties in determining the severity of the customer's condition over the telephone.

'I think you're always going to get a percentage that are in the wrong place or the wrong benefit. And until you get to see them and have an in-depth interview with them I don't think it's always obvious from phone chats.'

(Adviser Manager)

As was the case in Contact Centres, views on whether to defer or waive terminally ill customers varied. For example, one PA reported that under the ONE system, there had been a reluctance to waive anyone but under Jobcentre Plus she had waived terminally ill customers. Some other PAs in different areas believed that terminally ill customers were, or should be, deferred.

3. Staff Views on Guidance and Training

Phase II of the qualitative research found that deferral guidance was vague, leading to different interpretations. Several FCOs and Contact Centre team leaders felt that the importance and complexities of deferrals were not fully addressed in the initial training.

First Contact Officers

Three areas had developed their own written guidelines to advise staff on deferrals and waivers. These included examples of different circumstances with suggested timescales for deferral. However, whilst the majority of FCOs felt that the written guidance for deferring customers was vague, many recognised that it had to be vague because of the wide range of individuals' circumstances. Furthermore, many reported that being able to defer appropriately was often down to common sense and came with experience. Those who were inexperienced had often *'picked it up as they had gone along'* (First Contact Officer) and sought further advice from their line managers.

A few FCOs expressed concern about the way they had received written deferral guidance. Rather than being left to read and use it themselves, they would have preferred someone to go through it with them.

Job shadowing team leaders in Contact Centres and PAs in public offices was suggested as one method of gaining wider experience and knowledge of their roles and responsibilities.

Personal Advisers

Phase II of the research reported that there was insufficient information and support on deferrals, particularly compared to the information and support received under ONE. One area reported that staff training happened far too early, occurring four months before the 'go-live' date. Case studies and role-play activities were requested as well as more intensive support on working with non-JSA customers.

Personal Advisers in three areas reported being concerned about the lack of training for dealing with sensitive issues, including bereavement or serious illness cases. Personal Advisers thought that refresher training, and/or help with going through the written deferrals guidance would be beneficial. In one area a PA also felt that they needed more guidance about their roles and responsibilities, which would help them determine when to continue with a WFI and when to defer a customer.

'So just defining what are our responsibilities and what we're not trained to do, in terms of things like counselling, all these gray areas where you do actually end up counselling people as well.'

(Personal Adviser)

In a further area the Adviser Manager reported finding useful a table drawn up by the Contact Centre, and a locally based training workshop which presented different scenarios on when to defer and when to waive a customer.

4. Re-Booking Deferred Customers

Phase II of the qualitative research highlighted that although most Jobcentre Plus offices had a system in place to re-contact deferred customers, some PAs expressed concern about whether all such customers would be re-contacted. This was due to an increased workload, which meant that in some areas they did not have the capacity to follow up all deferred customers.

All areas had systems in place to re-contact deferred customers. Re-booking deferred customers was very clearly expressed, by both Personal Advisers and FCOs, as being the responsibility of the PA. In general, if the customer was deferred at the Contact Centre a note was put onto the VANTIVE system with the date when the PA should re-contact the customer. The PA then transferred this information onto LMS. If the PA deferred the customer at the Jobcentre Plus office, they noted the date to re-contact the customer on their computer system.

In the majority of areas deferred customers were allocated to PAs to be re-contacted. How PAs were allocated to this task varied across areas. For example, in two areas a designated PA was responsible for re-contacting all deferred customers, whilst in another area deferred customers were allocated to various PAs who would then contact the customer during their caseloading time. In another area all PAs were allocated one particular day of the week to check for any deferred customers that were due to be re-contacted on that day to re-book their WFI.

There did appear to be some confusion about the re-booking process at one Contact Centre. In this instance there were conflicting views expressed about exactly when PAs contacted the customer to re-book the WFI. One FCO thought that customers were contacted by the PA five days before the deferral date and another thought that customers were re-contacted on the actual deferral date. This appeared to be due to a lack of awareness about the process at the public office.

The following issues about the process of re-booking WFIs were also raised by PAs.

- PAs disliked ‘cold-calling’ deferred customers, as they often had to explain the service from scratch and persuade them to attend the WFI. In particular, some PAs felt that they had not had enough training in dealing with bereaved customers.
- Contact Centres did not always record the reasons for deferrals on the VANTIVE system, which made the calls to deferred customers very difficult. For example, one PA rang a deferred customer to check whether his circumstances had changed and whether he was now able to attend the WFI. Unfortunately the customer had a brain tumour, which was terminal. This information had not been noted on the VANTIVE system. (This customer should have had their WFI waived by the FCO.)

5. Summary

Contact Centre staff were generally confident in deferring customers who were pregnant, bereaved or claiming SSP and returning to their employer. However, staff were less sure about deferring customers who were ill, distressed or had caring responsibilities. FCO’s level of experience and pressure from management were key factors in determining whether these customers were deferred or not. Personal Advisers reported seeing some customers who they felt should have been deferred at the Contact Centre and in some instances reported uncertainty about whether to continue with a WFI.

Although guidance on deferrals was reported to be vague it was recognised that this was necessary due to the wide-ranging variation in customers’ circumstances. However, both FCOs and PAs would have liked more help with going through this guidance. PAs also reported needing further training on dealing with customers who had suffered from bereavement or had sensitive issues to discuss.

All areas had systems in place for re-booking deferred customers but some PAs reported being concerned that these customers would not be re-contacted due to increased workloads. Finally, some PAs expressed concern about having to ‘cold call’ customers who had been deferred. ‘Cold calling’ presented particular difficulties for some PAs due to a lack of information on the VANTIVE system about why the customer was originally deferred.

Annex C: Analysis of Phase II Customer Interviews

1 Introduction

This report complements and expands on some of the key research findings on the practice of deferrals in Jobcentre Plus Contact Centres and public offices reported in earlier research – ‘Jobcentre Plus: Early Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase II)’¹⁴. The information provided is drawn from the further analysis of qualitative interviews with non-JSA customers – customers with health problems or disabilities, carers and lone parents. The interviews were conducted with customers who were booked to attend a Work Focused Interview (WFI) in March 2002, before the issue of new deferrals guidance to Jobcentre Plus staff at the end of April 2002.

The aim of the analysis was to explore customers’ personal circumstances, attitudes to work and views of attending a WFI as a means of ascertaining whether the ‘right’ customers were being deferred. Due to the large number of non-JSA customer interviews (119 in total) only the details of those customers for whom it was considered by the researchers that a WFI was **not** appropriate, i.e. they should have been deferred or waived, are presented. In judging whether a customer should or should not have attended a WFI the researchers based their decisions on the information given in the new Jobcentre Plus guidance issued in April and May 2002 (see references).

Only those cases where the researchers had enough information to feel confident that a deferral or waiver should have been made are presented. Where there was any doubt as to whether a customer should have been deferred or not, it was assumed that they had been correctly submitted to attend a WFI.

The details of customers who in the view of the researchers should have had their WFI deferred are explored in Section 2 and those who should have had their WFI waived are discussed in Section 3. For comparison, the details of customers who had been deferred are presented in Section 4. Section 5 provides an overall summary and conclusions.

2 Customers who should have been deferred

A deferral is a postponement of the WFI to ensure that it occurs at a time when it will have most effect. A customer should be deferred if it is considered that their current circumstances prevent them from being able to focus on work, but that they are likely to benefit from a WFI in the near future. There are no ‘blanket’ deferrals for particular types of customer as some may be coping with their situation better than others, but examples of customers for whom a deferral might be appropriate include:

- customers who are temporarily sick but have a job to return to;
- lone parents who have a date to start or return to work;
- customers who are too ill - for example confined to bed, or due to go into hospital within a week or two, or receiving treatment – such as chemotherapy;
- customers who are too distressed, for example someone who has just been bereaved; and
- customers who have just had a life changing event, for example become a carer or a mother.

A deferral is intended to be a short term postponement of the WFI of about two to three months. The length of the deferral period should:

¹⁴ Hartfree, Y., Nimmo, J., Sutton, L., Taylor, J., Kellard K., Sumpton, R. *Jobcentre Plus: Early Qualitative Research with Staff and Customers (Phase II)*, July 2002

'match the circumstances, for example until the date for starting work or until the medical certificate runs out, or until the customer is likely to be out of hospital and recovered sufficiently to attend the meeting'¹⁵.

It is the view of the researchers that some customers should have been deferred according to the Jobcentre Plus guidance issued in April/May 2002. Their circumstances and the process they went through in attending a WFI are described below.

Customers who had a job to return to

There were four customers who attended a WFI but who all had jobs to return to when their health improved. Three had been off work for between six and eight months and had made a claim for Incapacity Benefit (IB) / Income Support (IS) because their Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) had run out or was due to run out. The fourth had returned to work after being off for six months recovering from an operation, but due to continuing health problems had been signed off work again and made a new claim for IB. Three had problems with joints / bones and the other had a neurological disorder. All were waiting to receive further medical treatment or diagnoses: one customer was waiting for further information following an MI scan; one was waiting for an appointment with a specialist; one was waiting for an appointment for more x-rays; and one was waiting for an operation. None were able to say when they might be likely to be able to return to work, but all wanted to return to work with their current employer, if they were able to.

'I don't know when I'm going back to work, it's going to be a long time because I'm waiting for an operation'.

(Sick / disabled customer)

Three of the four customers used the Contact Centre for initiating their benefit claim. All three reported explaining their circumstances to the FCO, i.e. that they were intending to return to work with their employer. One customer was not aware that the WFI was mandatory but was told to go along and to see what she thought. The other two were aware that they had to attend as a condition of receiving benefit.

What happened to these customers at their WFI varied. One customer who was waiting for an operation had a very short meeting with the PA. After looking through the customer's claim forms there were no further discussions with the PA about work:

'He came and basically said, "There's not a lot I can discuss with you", because I think they were under the understanding that I was out of work.'

(Sick/disabled customer)

Two customers did have work focused discussions with their PA and both found the WFI to be a positive experience. For one of these customers the PA asked about the type of work they thought they might be able to do and invited them to start a computer training course. The customer was interested in doing this and was booked a place on the course during the WFI. The customer was enjoying the course and felt encouraged that if she was unable to return to her job then she would be able to do something different. For the other customer the PA asked about her current job, identified the skills she had, and told her to come back to see her if she had any queries or was looking for another job in the future. The customer was very positive about the WFI because she had been listened to and had learnt that she did have skills: *'It was worth going to because I found something*

¹⁵ Jobcentre Plus delivery manager's bulletin: 4-8 May 2002.

out that I wouldn't have otherwise'. However, she still felt that attending a WFI did not really apply to her as she had a job to return to.

The fourth customer saw a PA who went through his claim forms, inputted his details onto the computer, and explained about options for part-time work for people who were disabled and the services they could offer. The customer explained that this was not relevant to him because he was still employed. After about 20 minutes the PA called over another PA (possibly a supervisor), who on enquiring about the customer's circumstances dismissed him:

'She said, "It's ridiculous, I don't know why they've called you in, there's no need to see me at this present time".'

(Sick / disabled customer)

The customer felt that attending the WFI had been a waste of both his time and petrol. However, during the research interview the customer explained that he was worried about whether he would be able to do his job when he returned to work because it was heavy manual work, without any option for doing lighter work. It did not appear that this was discussed at the WFI, although it might have been of benefit to the customer to explore alternative options.

Customers who were too ill

From reviewing the customer interviews, it appeared that it would have been appropriate for two customers to have been deferred because they were too ill. The first was suffering from tuberculosis, had various other health problems and had recently stopped work. He had initiated his claim via the Contact Centre. The FCO asked him for his date of birth, his circumstances and what benefit he wanted to claim. The customer had no previous experience of claiming benefits and was unsure of what he was entitled to. It is not clear whether the customer had conveyed the severity and contagious nature of his disease to the FCO, or whether the FCO had not requested further information and clarification about his illnesses. He was told he would see two people: the first to discuss his claim and the second to talk about his circumstances. The customer saw an FA who checked through his forms. He then saw a PA and explained his current circumstances and that he wanted to work when he was better. The PA gave the customer some leaflets about New Deal for Disabled People, but arranged no further contact with the customer, although the customer said he would get back to them when he was better. The customer was satisfied about attending the meeting because he felt that he had been able to explain his situation and get his claim processed.

The second customer who it was felt should have been deferred for health reasons had given up part-time work when she started to suffer from panic attacks which had left her lacking confidence and was unable to go out on her own. Her illness also resulted in memory lapses. She had received treatment with a psychologist and was taking medication from her doctor. The customer's SSP entitlement had expired and so she made a claim for benefit by collecting a form from her local ex-BA office, which she completed and sent off. She was contacted by Jobcentre Plus who explained the need for a WFI. The customer reported that she, *'became a bit hysterical'* and tried to explain that she could not get there and that she could not work. The First Contact Officer explained that it was a new requirement but would check with his colleagues and ring her back. He later confirmed that she would have to attend. The customer felt that the FCO had dealt with her sympathetically. The customer's husband accompanied her to the WFI where she saw an FA and a PA. The PA introduced herself and asked the customer about her previous work history and the type of work she would like to do. The customer explained that she could not work at present. The PA also talked about available computer training courses, which the customer was considering. The customer felt that the PA helped to *'allay a few anxieties'* and had been sensitive, but still found that it had been very difficult for her to attend.

It appears that the customer had been able to attend the WFI because her husband had been able to accompany her, although this possibility had not been explored by the FCO when deciding to book the customer a WFI. The customer did not describe the WFI as being a negative experience and it may have started her thinking about training courses. However, a deferral might have been more appropriate considering that the customer was still suffering from memory lapses, was very anxious about being out of the house during the WFI, and would have been unable to benefit from starting any training until she felt confident to go out alone.

Customers who were too distressed

There were two customers who were distressed at the time of their making a claim for benefit and for whom it was judged that a WFI should have been deferred until a later date.

One customer was suffering from depression and her marriage had broken down, which had resulted in a short stay in hospital. The customer made a claim for IS via the Contact Centre, and was not aware that she would be discussing work at the time of initiating her claim. She was offered a private interview room, where the FA checked through the claim form. The customer became upset during the WFI and found it hard to remember what had been discussed:

'I was there in body but not in mind. It's hard to concentrate when your marriage is going wrong'.

(Lone parent)

However, it appears that the PA mentioned college courses and the customer explained that she was currently at college but had fallen behind with her work due to depression and her current circumstances. The PA arranged to see the customer again in six months time (this may have been as part of the PA's caseload). The customer felt that the PA had been sympathetic and that it was reassuring to have someone who would help her back into work when she was ready. However, a deferral may have been more appropriate because she was unable to concentrate on what was being said and was still very distressed.

The second customer, an IS recipient, had attended a WFI even though her husband had just died. She also suffered from hearing problems and had enlisted the help of a friend to phone the Contact Centre on her behalf to explain the customer's change in circumstances. The customer was not offered a deferral at this stage, nor any advice about what additional benefits she may be entitled to, nor any explanation of the reason for the WFI. The customer reported being '*scared stiff*' about attending the WFI because she was '*in a kind of shock about everything*' and because her hearing problems made her nervous about meeting new people. An FA checked her forms through with her and then a PA asked her about her future plans and if she wanted to work. The customer explained that she '*hadn't thought about the future*' at all and the PA closed the meeting by stating that she would not be contacted for the next three years, but if she changed her mind to contact him. Overall the customer did not mind attending and felt that she had been dealt with courteously, however she would have preferred a private interview room. She was also unaware that she could have been offered a deferral.

3 Customers who should have been waived

Customers for whom work will never be an option should have their work focused interview waived, that is they do not ever need to attend a WFI in order to claim benefit. Examples of customers who should be waived include those with a terminal illness, or those with a very severe physical or mental disability or illness which means that it is impossible for them to work.

Further analysis of the customer transcripts identified one customer who should have been waived in the view of the researchers. This customer had lung cancer and a range of other health problems, and as a result was unable to walk very far and had difficulty sitting down. He had given up work because he was no longer able to manage the physical lifting side of his job. It appeared that the customer did not tell the First Contact Officer about his health problems, but did request whether a home visit would be possible because he would not be able to sit for long. He was told by the FCO that he would have to go to the public office and an appointment for a WFI was made. On arrival the customer explained to the receptionist that he had difficulty sitting down and was shown to a soft seat. The customer saw an FA who checked through his claim forms. The PA then conducted a short general interview with the customer, explaining his role and advising the customer that he would not need to renew sick notes or attend job interviews because his medical certificate confirmed he could not work again. The customer's priority was to get his benefits sorted, but did not have any objections at having to attend a WFI. However, this example suggests that the FCO could have explored in more detail the customer's circumstances following the request for a home visit.

4 Customers who were deferred

Further analysis of the transcripts identified two customers who were actually deferred. One customer was deferred at the Contact Centre whilst the other customer was deferred at the Jobcentre Plus office. Both customers had mental health problems but their difficulties varied considerably. Their circumstances are outlined below.

The first deferred customer had a severe psychotic illness and was already in receipt of Disability Living Allowance. His father telephoned the Contact Centre to claim Income Support alongside the aforementioned benefit. The customer's father understood that the purpose of the work focused interview would be to assess his son's suitability for work, but explained the severity of his son's illness, and the WFI was deferred for six months. The customer's father was clearly articulate and had been able to convey from the outset the severity of his son's condition to the First Contact Officer.

The second deferred customer had given up part-time work because of post-natal depression, but her job was left open for her to return to. Her SSP had expired and so she applied for Incapacity Benefit by telephoning the Contact Centre. She was not given the option of deferring her WFI at this stage and was booked an appointment at the Jobcentre Plus office. At the office a PA checked her claim forms and asked her about the likelihood of her returning to work in the next few months. The customer explained that she would not be looking to go back to work in the near future, and the PA deferred her for three months. The customer wanted to get her benefit processed and was happy to attend a WFI at a later date.

5 Summary and Conclusions

Overall, further analysis of the transcripts from earlier research shows that the majority of customers had correctly been submitted to attend a WFI (90 per cent) (Table 1).

In total, eight customers were identified who (in the view of the researchers) should have had their WFI deferred, according to the Jobcentre Plus guidance. Most of these customers had health problems. The most common reason why customers should have been deferred was because they had a job to return to when their health improved (four customers), although the research also identified a few customers who were too ill or too distressed. One customer was identified who should have had their WFI waived because he was terminally ill. A further two customers were identified who had had their WFI deferred - both suffered from mental health problems.

Table 1. Summary Table of Transcript Analysis

Customer Category	Customer Group	No. of Cases
Attended a WFI:	Sick/disabled	40
	Lone parents	38
	Carers	27
Should have been deferred:		
- Job to return to	Sick/disabled	4
- Too ill	Sick/disabled	2
- Too distressed	Lone parents	2
Should have been waived:	Sick/disabled	1
Were deferred:	Sick/disabled	2
	Total	116*

The research raises two main issues for deferrals practice in Contact Centres and Jobcentre Plus public offices:

- It appeared that at the First Contact stage FCOs were not exploring customers' circumstances in sufficient depth and were not following up on cues from the customer that there may be a problem. As a result a few customers were being inappropriately asked to attend a WFI.
- There appeared to be some confusion amongst FCOs as to whether customers who were claiming benefits due to health problems, but had a job to return to, should be attending a WFI. Three of the four customers in this group had explained their circumstances to the FCO, but were still booked appointments to see a PA. Amongst PAs there also appeared to be some confusion as to whether these customers should be attending: two customers received a WFI, whilst two were dismissed by the PA. Although the Jobcentre Plus guidance states that customers with a job to return to should be deferred, the findings also show that for some customers, attending a WFI can be a beneficial experience.
- Customers most likely to have been inappropriately submitted to a WFI were those with health problems. Some were appropriately deferred whilst others were not. In some cases it appeared difficult for staff to ascertain, particularly over the telephone, the extent to which a customer's health condition or level of distress, impacts on their ability to attend or benefit from a WFI. This

* Further analysis of the transcripts identified three customers (2 sick/disabled and 1 lone parent) who had not in fact attended a WFI: two were not eligible for Jobcentre Plus benefits so did not see a PA after their FA meeting; one had spoken to a member of staff about claiming Working Families Tax Credit.

research identified a small number of errors, but which could have been minimised through greater exploration of customers' circumstances at the first contact stage, and clarification of deferrals practice in relation to customers with a job to return to.

References:

Jobcentre Plus Live support bulletin: issue 17, 22 April, 2002.

Jobcentre Plus Live support bulletin: issue 18, 29 April, 2002.

Jobcentre Plus Delivery Manager's bulletin: edition 4, 8 May, 2002.

Annex D: Research Tools

A Guide for Observations of Deferrals (and Waivers) in Contact Centres

Notes for Observers

The aim of these direct observations is to provide the research with a concrete understanding of how deferrals and waivers are made. More specifically the objectives are to determine:

- how First Contact Officers make decisions on when to defer or waive customers;
- how FCOs set the length of the deferral period;
- what customers who are deferred or waived are told; and
- the process for recording customers details, re-contacting customers at the end of the deferral period and sending out benefit claim packs.

These observations will have been agreed with the relevant managers but we recommend that you explain to staff that:

- we are conducting an evaluation of Jobcentre Plus on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions;
- the purpose of the research is to understand how the process of deferring and waiving customers works and what it entails; and
- assure staff that we are in no way assessing or evaluating them or their work.

You will need to ask staff to raise your attention when they think they might be about to defer or waive a customer.

IF POSSIBLE, at the end of the telephone conversation spend a few minutes with the First Contact Officer to ask them for information about what the customer said that you were unable to hear and to get their views on how they thought the conversation went.

There are two elements to recording your observations:

1. Record the content of the first contact telephone conversation in full, as it happened. The aim is to provide a 'transcript' of the conversation, with direct quotes where possible, plus commentary on any non-verbal actions the First Contact Officer made. It is recommended that you write your notes as you go along onto a notepad and then transfer these notes onto the observation schedule.
2. Complete the grid which breaks down the content of first contact discussion into its different components. As well as asking for details on the content of the discussion – include quotes and phrases where possible - you are also asked to provide some reflection and additional observations as to how the telephone contact went, including what happened after the telephone conversation to process the customer's details and benefit claim.

1. Record the content of the FCO's conversation with customers who were deferred or waived

Please record the conversation as it occurred, noting any non-verbal actions or expressions made by the First Contact Officer. Use additional pages if required.

2. Thematic Grid for first contact discussions with customers who were deferred or waived

Please complete the grid below in as much details as possible, including quotes and phrases used by the First Contact Officer.

1. The Decision Making Process	
<p>What information is gathered by the FCO at the beginning of the telephone call?</p> <p><i>E.g Personal details Employment history Customer's current circumstances Benefits</i></p> <p>To what extent was the VANTIVE script followed?</p>	<p><i>(note: if not directly observed then ask the FCO what had been discussed)</i></p>
<p>What was the main trigger that prompted the FCO to consider that a deferral or waiver may be appropriate?</p> <p><i>What questions were asked?</i> What information had the customer given? e.g. customer had a job to return to, customer was distressed, customer was due to go into hospital or was undergoing treatment</p>	
<p>What further questions did the FCO ask to enable them to come to their decision?</p> <p><i>E.g. the extent/severity of illness/disability</i></p> <p><i>Did the FCO seem confident in their decision?</i> <i>To what extent was the VANTIVE script followed?</i></p>	

<p>How long was the customer deferred for and how did the FCO come to this decision?</p> <p><i>What information was the decision based on? e.g. length of medical certificate, likely recovery time What questions were asked? Was the deferral period agreed jointly with the customer?</i></p>	
<p>What other resources/help did the FCO use in coming to their decision?</p> <p><i>E.g. sought help/advice from a colleague or manager, referred to training manuals or written guidance</i></p>	
<p>2. Information / Explanations Given to the Customer</p>	
<p>How did the FCO explain what a deferral/waiver was?</p> <p>What words or phrases were used?</p> <p><i>Did FCO seem comfortable/confident with this?</i></p>	
<p>Explanation of next steps re. <u>attending</u> a Work Focused Interview</p> <p><i>How did the FCO explain what would happen next? e.g. that deferred customer would be re-contacted by PA at end of deferral period to arrange an appointment</i></p> <p><i>Note words and phrases used.</i></p>	

<p>Explanation of the <u>purpose</u> of Work Focused Interview</p> <p><i>How did FCO explain the purpose of the interview? What words or phrases were used?</i></p> <p>To what extent was the work focus emphasised / explained? <i>Did FCO seem comfortable/confident with this?</i></p>	
<p>Explanation of next steps re. benefit claim</p> <p><i>Did the FCO explain that benefit claim forms would be issued and explain what the customer needed to do? What words or phrases were used?</i></p>	
3. Internal Contact Centre Procedures	
<p>Recording deferral/waiver decision on VANTIVE</p> <p><i>What details regarding the deferral/ waiver were recorded onto VANTIVE e.g. the reason for deferral/waiver, the length of deferral period</i></p> <p>Were the customers details recorded fully or only briefly?</p>	
<p>Transferring information onto LMS</p> <p><i>Was the information transferred onto LMS? Who did this – e.g. FCO or admin person? When was this done e.g. straight after the telephone call or at the end of the day?</i></p> <p><i>What details were inputted onto LMS? E.g. reason for deferral, length of deferral, type of benefit claimed</i></p>	

<p><i>Were the customers details recorded fully or only briefly?</i></p>	
<p>Setting up the Deferral</p> <p><i>What was the procedure for arranging for the customer to be re-contacted by a PA at the end of the deferral period – how were workflow notes used?</i></p> <p><i>Were customers allocated to a particular PA?</i></p> <p>Who did this – the FCO or admin person?</p>	
<p>What information/forms were sent to the customer?</p> <p><i>E.g. benefit claim packs, letter confirming the deferral/waiver</i></p> <p><i>What information was included in the letter e.g. deferral period, PA name and contact details?</i></p> <p><i>Who did this – the FCO or admin person?</i></p>	
<p>4. Overall</p>	
<p>What did the FCO say about how they felt the conversation and deferral went?</p> <p><i>E.g. comfortable/confident, unsure, an easy or difficult case</i></p>	
<p>Approximately how many minutes did the first contact telephone call last?</p>	<p>Write in number of minutes: _____</p>

<p>Internal Procedures</p> <p>What, if any, problems or potential problems did you notice with the procedures for ensuring that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>customers details were recorded onto both VANTIVE and LMS;</i> 2. <i>deferred customers would be re-contacted at the end of the deferral period;</i> 3. <i>all the necessary forms/information was sent out to the customer?</i> 	
<p>Other</p> <p>Please note down anything else</p>	

Please write in the client group of the caller: (i.e. Lone parent, Carer, Sick/disabled, or Bereaved)

Final Topic Guide for Interviews with Office Managers and Team Leaders at Contact Centres

Research aims/objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore the understanding of key Jobcentre Plus staff on the consistent application of deferrals to non-JSA customers, and the procedures for picking up customers following the issue of improved guidance given to local offices in April 2002. More specifically, the research objectives for the staff research are to:

- explore staff attitudes to the process of applying deferrals and waivers;
- explore staff attitudes and understanding of the new guidance on waivers and deferrals;
- ascertain whether guidance is being adapted at local level, how, and whether it works well;
- obtain examples of good practice;
- determine whether staff think that the systems have improved since the new guidelines have been issued;
- check that the ‘right’ customers are being deferred; and
- see whether systems are in place for picking up deferred customers.

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction- independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - ‘To look at deferrals practice in Contact Centres and Jobcentre Plus public offices, following the issue of additional guidance last year’.
- Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff, and that there are no right or wrong answers
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews
- Ask permission to tape the interviews
- The interview will take about 45 minutes

Part 2: Background

How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus? How long have you been in this particular role?

What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?

And what are your main roles and responsibilities in relation to Jobcentre Plus? *(Collect an overview of the job; specialist roles or responsibilities; team management- size and scope)*

Which Contact Centres/ Jobcentre(s) are you based in/ do you cover?

Can you describe for me how your office is set up and managed? *Prompt: Is there line management? Are there teams? How do you communicate within the office?*

Can you please describe your relationship with the Public Office? How do you communicate with them?

What do you view your role as being in relation to the Jobcentre Plus process?

What is the purpose of the work-focused interview?

Part 3: Staff knowledge of and attitudes to process of applying deferrals and waivers

- **Attitudes to deferrals**

What do you believe to be the purpose of a deferral? And a waiver? *Probe: differences between deferrals and waivers?*

At what stage in the Jobcentre Plus process would a deferral or waiver normally take place? *Probe: differences between deferrals and waivers? Why might a deferral or waiver take place at the Public Office rather than the contact centre?*

- **Making a deferral**

What information would you expect your staff to collect in the course of a telephone conversation?

Who is responsible for making the final decision on whether a deferral/waiver is appropriate?

How would you or your staff decide whether or not to defer/waive a customer's WFI? *Prompt: what would you take into account e.g. the customers' personal circumstances (including health, caring responsibilities), customers' behaviour/ emotional well-being, time considerations in relation to your office/ caseload?*

What role does the customer play in deciding whether a WFI is appropriate?

Are there any groups of customers whose WFI you or staff would defer/waive automatically or as a matter of course? *Prompt: mental, physical or emotional illness. Collect examples.*

Under what other circumstances might a customer's WFI be deferred? *Collect examples*

Are there any particular types of customer that your staff have difficulty in making deferral decisions for, and why? *Prompt: what client groups/ types of characteristic make this the case?*

Have you, or your staff ever deferred a Jobseeker's WFI? Under what circumstances?

- **Following up a deferral**

How do you explain deferrals/ waivers to customers? *Prompt: What information do you give them? Do you indicate the reason for your decision to defer?*

Do you tell customers that the attendance of the re-arranged WFI is a condition of their receiving benefit (unless it is deferred or waived again)?

What is the process for re-booking a customer whose WFI has been deferred? *Probe: How does it work, who is responsible, how effective is this?*

How do you or your staff decide the timescale on which you will re-contact a customer whose WFI has been deferred? *Probe: Do your staff or the customer the timescale on which it would be appropriate to have a WFI?*

Who makes this decision? How specific is the timescale?

What systems in place for activating a workflow (deciding the date of the WFI and agreeing this with the client)? *Probe: how useful are they?*

How do you record the reasons for deferrals? What level of information do you give? *Collect details*

Part 4: Use of guidance

What written guidance or manuals were you given in preparation for Jobcentre Plus? *Prompt: ESCOM? Probe: How frequently do you use them, how useful are they?*

What guidance will staff use on a regular basis? *Please collect samples.*

How are briefings or guidance disseminated within the office? *Probe: whose responsibility is it to ensure that staff are made aware of new policy or delivery developments? How far does this rely on individual initiative? How easy is it to keep up to date with what guidance has been issued?*

What specific guidance was there available in relation to deferrals prior to April 2002?

If an original contact centre: Can you briefly describe your approach to deferrals prior to April 2002?

How familiar are you with the guidance issued as part of the ‘Live Support Bulletins’ in April 2002? And your staff?

What do you think the purpose of the Live Support Bulletins is? What are the key messages?

Live Support Bulletins- Key messages

Please use these as a prompt if the respondent has difficulty in recalling the content of the April Live Support Bulletins. Determine whether the respondent feels that they are aware of the issues outlined, when they became aware of these issues, and if their office/area practice reflects it (please collect evidence).

- Decisions on whether to defer should be made on an individual basis
- It is important not to automatically defer any customer or group of customers
- It is important to collect enough information from a customer to make an informed deferral system
- Specific guidance in relation to maternity allowance cases, customers with mental health problems
- The following customers should be deferred or waived: Customers who are temporarily sick but who have a job to return to; customers claiming maternity benefit only; and lone parents who already have a date to start or return to work

How useful do you and your staff find the guidance? *Probe: Is it easy to use? How relevant is it to everyday situations?*

How familiar are you with the ‘Must Do’s List or the ‘Pit Stop’ guidance? And your staff?

Do you think that this guidance is sufficient? If, not what other guidance or support would they benefit from?

Are you aware of any **local** guidance issued in relation to deferrals (and waivers)? If so, what information does it include? How useful is it to you? At what level is it issued (e.g. District, Pathfinder Area, individual contact centre or public office)?

Probe: What is it? How prescriptive is it?

How easy was it to communicate the guidance on deferrals to staff initially?

How easy was it to communicate the revised guidance to staff?

Are there opportunities to discuss problems, new developments and exchange good practice? *Probe: What are they? Are they working well?*

Do you have an office strategy in place in relation to deferrals? *Probe: What is it? How prescriptive is it?*

Do you feel that you are under pressure at local level to keep deferral and waiver decisions at a certain level? *Probe: why does you feel that you are/are not under pressure? What are you told? Are particular levels of deferral/waiver identified?*

Do you believe that there is a shared understanding in relation to deferral practice within your team, office and district? *Prompt: what is it? How has this understanding been established?*

Are you aware of any local examples of good practice in relation to deferrals/waivers? *E.g. improving staff's knowledge and understanding of deferrals processes. Please collect details.*

Is there any other guidance, training or support that you or your staff would find useful? If so, what, and how might it help?

Part 6: Impact

If an original Contact Centre: Have there been any changes to the way in which you make deferral decisions in the past year as a result of the April 2002 guidance? *Probe: When did these changes occur? Have there been any changes since April 2002?*

Have you adopted the guidance outlined in the 'Live Support Bulletins'? If so, how well does this guidance work?

What impact, if any, has the guidance had on systems for making deferrals and waivers?

If an original Contact Centre: Are there any other factors that have impacted on the way in which you make deferrals and waivers over the past year?

Have the types of clients whose WFI you would or would not defer changed in any way?

Do you think the 'right' customers are having their WFIs deferred – why/why not?

Are there any characteristics or factors specific to your local area that you believe to have an impact on deferral practice? *Prompt: demographics, availability of certain types of support*

Part 6: Systems/monitoring

Do you monitor or review deferral levels at office level? *Probe: at what level- district/office/individual? Why do they monitor them? Have any changes been made subsequent to the Pathfinder Improvement Team's request that systems be put in place?*

Do you have any target deferral levels? What are they? How do you convey them to your staff?

What percentage of cases are currently being deferred? *Has this changed at all over the last year? What are the different levels by customer group?*

Do you think that there is a desirable level of deferral for a Contact Centre? *Prompt: What is it? What is your belief based on?*

Part 7: Summary and close of interview

Have there been any other changes to the delivery of deferrals that we have not already mentioned?

Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to mention?

Thank-you and close

Final Topic Guide for all Non-JSA Customer Groups

This topic guide is intended for use with:

- Customers deferred at Contact Centre Stage;
- Customers deferred at WFI; and
- Customers who were initially deferred, but who have now had a WFI.
- Customers who were not deferred and have had a WFI

Interviewers should take care to tailor the topic guide appropriately.

Research aims/objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore the understanding of key Jobcentre Plus staff on the consistent application of deferrals to non-JSA customers, and the procedures for picking up customers following the issue of improved guidance given to local offices in April 2002. More specifically, the research objectives of the customer research are to:

- check that the ‘right’ customers are being deferred;
- examine customers’ views and experiences of deferrals; and
- see whether systems are in place for picking up deferred customers.

Introduction to Interview

- First of all, thank the individual for agreeing to speak to us.
- Explain that you work for ECOTEC/CRSP, independent research organisations with no links to any government departments or political parties.

The Department for Work and Pensions want to improve the services provided to people claiming benefit. They are funding ECOTEC/CRSP to talk to people like yourself to find out more about your experience of the Jobcentre Plus service. We are particularly interested in finding out whether the service you received was appropriate to your needs.

The interview should last no longer than 30-45 minutes and there are a number of questions I need to ask. Before we start, it is important to emphasise that everything discussed during the interview will be treated as confidential.

Is that all clear? Do you have any questions you’d like to ask before we start?

- Check that it is OK to record the interview – reassure the individual that the tapes will only be used by ECOTEC and will not be passed onto the DWP or any other government department.

Part 1: Personal Information

May I just briefly check some information with you?

- Age
- Current Status
- Household- do you live alone or with family/friends? Do you have any caring responsibilities for these or other individuals?

Part 2: Recent/current claim

Reasons for recent claim: Could you please explain for me the events which led up to your recent claim for benefit? NB: be very specific about which claim you are referring to.

Can you tell me what benefits are you currently claiming? *(Clarify discrepancies with benefit information drawn from sampling data) - use this as an opportunity to explore whether the client started a claim for a different benefit when they entered the Jobcentre Plus and what changes have been made since. Probe: reasons for change, who initiated it and whether the client felt this was appropriate.)*

	Original Jobcentre Plus Claim	Current Benefit	Comments:
Jobseekers Allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Income Support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Council Tax Benefit	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Housing Benefit	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Incapacity Benefit	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Severe Disablement Allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Invalid Care Allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Widows and Bereavement Benefits	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Further comments on any changes to benefits and whether this was appropriate:

What were your immediate plans at the time of making this claim?

- to stay at home
(Probe: is this due to personal circumstances, illness, caring responsibilities, or attitude towards the benefit system/work? How long did they expect to stay at home, and did they have any plans to return to work (and when))
- to look for work
(Probe: motivation, type of work, occupation, nature of activities, part-time or full-time, permanent or temporary, why this choice, what job-search methods were used, how intense were these efforts and how likely does the individual feel they would be in finding work in this area – why they would be likely, and why not (barriers to work).)
- to start some training or education
(Probe: motivation, subject of training/education, part-time or full-time, intended length of course.)

- Other (e.g. Voluntary work)
(Probe: *what and why? Explore motivation for these activities*)

If work was not an immediate plan:

Was work an option for you at the time of your claim?

(Explore the reasons for responses given, such as other responsibilities or personal circumstances. If work was an option, probe level of priority/activity/focus given to work, job-search methods used.)

If work was not an option:

Do you feel that work may be an option for you in the longer term?

(Explore the reasons for responses given, try to ascertain how and when work may become an option - if at all – and the type of jobs the individual would be interested in.)

Part 3: Recent Work, Training & Benefit history

- **Employment History.** Collect details of jobs held, concentrating on the **two most recent** prior to recent contact with Jobcentre Plus. Probe:
 - Number of hours worked (part-time or full-time)
 - Main roles and responsibilities
 - Duration of each job held
 - Reason for leaving
- **Education or Training History.** Collect details of qualifications achieved during compulsory schooling
 - Collect details of any education/ training undertaken over and above compulsory schooling
 - Collect details of highest level of qualification achieved
 - collect details of any recent training/education, and motivation for undertaking it
- **Benefit History.** Concentrate only on benefits claimed or received prior to entry into Jobcentre Plus system.
Probe:
 - reasons for claiming
 - details of different benefits claimed
- If individual suffers from **mental/physical health** problems. ‘How does your health affect you’?
Probe :
 - ascertain the nature and length of the illness
 - ascertain the predictability of the illness i.e. is it a progressive illness, unpredictable illness...
 - how does the mental/physical illness impact on the individual’s work or ability to work?
 - What kinds of job are they able to do, intensity of work, number of hours
- **Other Responsibilities,** including caring for child or other close family relative. Probe: *How do your caring responsibilities affect you? Why?*
 - ascertain the nature and level of caring responsibilities,
 - caring for children, elderly relatives, or another type of caring - specify
 - identify the need for caring responsibilities
 - how extensive are these responsibilities, level of support available from others
 - number of hours involved per week

Part 4: Initial contact and contact with Contact Centre Officer

How did you first make contact with Jobcentre Plus?

Probe: Contact Centre, Jobcentre Plus public office

Can you recall what you were asked during your conversation?
e.g. personal details, benefit claim

How long was your telephone conversation? *Probe: perception of whether it was too long/ not long enough. Did the customer feel that the First Contact Officer had taken time to understand their circumstances?*

What information were you told about attending an interview with a Personal Adviser? Probe: work focus, compulsory, purpose, what would happen

If customer has had a limited explanation of what a WFI is, please explain that a WFI is an interview with a PA at a Jobcentre to discuss your personal circumstances and any support that you might need in moving back into work.

Were you asked about whether you were able to take part in an interview in the next few days?

Do you feel that you understand how the process worked- for example, did you know what the purposes of the work focused meeting were, and the reason why you were being asked to attend? *Please probe for level of understanding.*

Do you feel that the contact centre officer listened to what you had to say?

Was an appointment for a meeting with a Personal Adviser made, or was it deferred?

If customer has had a limited explanation of what a deferral means, indicate that it is a postponement of a work focused interview until a more appropriate time.

Customers who had a WFI arranged for them ⇒ Go to Part 6

Part 5: Customers who were deferred at Contact Centre and have not had a WFI since:

- **How the deferral was made**

Do you understand what was meant by the term deferred? Was the term 'deferral' used?

Can you recall at what point in the conversation you were deferred?

Were you told why you were being deferred? *Probe: If so, did you feel that this was an appropriate reason. If not, how did this make you feel?*

Did you understand at the time that you would be asked to attend a WFI at a later date? Did you understand that attending this WFI was a condition of you receiving benefit?

Did you feel that it was appropriate for you to be deferred instead of having a WFI arranged for you?

Were you told how long you were going to be deferred for? Has this been the case?

Do you know how the decision was made? *Prompt: who decided the timescale? What information/considerations do you think influenced this decision?*

- **Potential appropriateness of WFI**

Please confirm how customer felt about work at the time of the WFI: Do you see yourself as being able to return to work at any point in the future? *Probe: on what time scale? What factors influence your ability to return to work?*

Do you think you would have benefited from a WFI in the period since you were deferred? Why/why not?

Was there any help or advice that you think you would have benefited from at the time of your WFI? *Prompt: work, benefits, personal circumstances.*

Under what circumstances do you feel that a WFI might be appropriate for you?

- **Re-arranging the WFI**

Since the time of your claim have you been contacted and asked to attend an interview with a Personal adviser? (Please check against details of when they were told that they would be re-contacted)

When you were re-contacted what were you asked?

Were you reminded that attending a WFI was mandatory and that it was a condition of their receiving benefit?

Have your personal circumstances changed in any way since the time of your initial claim. *Probe: in what way? Have things become better/ worse.*

Have you had any other contact with the Jobcentre during this period? *Probe: If so, what was it, and who initiated it?*

If invited, did you attend the meeting? (IF YES, go to Part 6) IF NO: go to Part 8.

Part 6: WFI at Jobcentre Plus

- **All customers who attended a WFI:**

Did you expect to be contacted again for a work focused interview to be arranged? *Please probe for reasons.*

When did you have your initial work focused meeting at Jobcentre Plus? How long after your initial claim was this?

Did you feel that it was appropriate for you to be asked to attend a WFI? *Probe: why/why not? Mental/ emotional/ physical health? Personal circumstances?*

Were you aware of your obligation to attend the WFI, and what would happen if you did not attend?

Did you feel that the timing of this meeting was appropriate? *Probe: why/why not?*

Did the PA explain the purpose of the interview to you? *Probe: clients' understanding of the purpose of the WFI?*

Did you feel that the PA was well informed/ prepared for your interview? *Probe : what information/ where from?*

When you first went to your PA meeting what kind of help or advice did you think you needed (if any)? *(Prompt: help with sorting out benefits, finding work, other advice)*

What did you discuss at your WFI? *Prompt: work, benefits, personal circumstances, education and training?*

What advice was given to you?

Did your PA tell you about anything that that you did not know before?

What did you think the function of the WFI was? *(Prompt: to deliver benefits; to help with finding work) Probe: Why did you expect this to be the case? (Prompt: because of previous experience with BA/ Job centre/New Deals?)*

Did the PA mention support available to help you return to work? *(Probe: what did they say? Did the customer feel it was relevant to their own personal circumstances?)*

How long was your WFI?

Do you think your PA understood your individual circumstances? Did you feel that a WFI was appropriate given your individual circumstances?

How do you feel about the way in which your needs were discussed? *(Prompt: enough detail, breadth)*

Did you feel that the PA was comfortable with discussing your personal circumstances with you? *Probe: why do you say this?*

Part 7: Customers who were deferred at WFI Only:

- **Appropriateness of deferral**

Are you aware of having been deferred at the WFI? *(Prompt: what were they told?)*

At what point in the WFI did your PA indicate that they felt it was appropriate to defer you? *Probe: what do you think prompted the PA to make a deferral?*

Did you understand what was meant by the term deferred? Was the term 'deferral' used?

Were you told why you were being deferred? *Probe: If so, did you feel that this was an appropriate reason. If not, how did this make you feel?*

Did you feel that it was appropriate for you to be deferred?

How long were you deferred for?

How was the timescale on which you would be re-contacted decided? *Prompt: who decided the timescale? What information/ considerations do you think influenced this decision?*

How long was this meeting overall? *Probe: perception of whether it was too long/ not long enough. Did the customer feel that the PA had taken time to understand their circumstances?*

Thinking back to this period, do you think there was anything other help or support that would have helped you? *(Probe: How would it have helped you? Explore any relationship to work.)*

Were you offered any further help with another agency or member of staff? *(i.e.: Disability Employment Adviser, Lone Parent Adviser, other training) organisation. Probe: Reason for help being offered, who offered this help, was it appropriate for the client.)*

Have you thought about going back to see your PA for more help or advice? *(Probe: why? What help or support might you have liked?)*

Have your personal circumstances changed in any way since you were deferred at the Jobcentre? *Probe: in what way? Have things become better/ worse.*

Part 8: Impact of WFI

- **Ask if the customer was originally deferred at WFI:**

Had your personal circumstances changed between your first WFI (at which you were deferred), and your re-arranged WFI?

How was your WFI arranged? *(Probe: who contacted you? How was it decided that it was appropriate for you to have a WFI?)*

Did you feel that your re-arranged meeting was more useful/relevant, than your initial WFI? *(Probe: why is this the case?)*

- **Ask all who have attended a WFI:**

Have your personal circumstances changed since the WFI?

Were any actions or decisions taken as a result of your meeting with your personal adviser? *(Prompt: action plan, referral? Probe: what actions/ decisions, who initiated them- the participant or the PA ? Probe on types of advice causing change e.g. in relation to work, childcare, training benefits, health).*

What impact, if any, did these discussions have on your situation? *(Probe: did they make you think differently about benefits or work?)*

How did you feel about your situation/ personal circumstances at the time? *(Prompt: in relation to your personal commitments, work, your financial situation. Was there anything you would have liked to change about them?)*

Thinking back to this period, do you think there was any other help or support that would have helped you? *(Probe: How would it have helped you? Explore any relationship to work.)*

Were you offered any further help with another agency or member of staff? *(i.e.: Disability Employment Adviser, Lone Parent Adviser, other training organisation. Probe: Reason for help being offered, who offered this help, was it appropriate for the client.)*

Did you think about going back to see your PA for more help or advice? (*Probe: why? What help or support might you have liked?*)

Have you had any contact with your PA since your first meeting?

(*Probe: Type/nature of contact, how many times, who initiated the contact, timing of meeting in relation to first contact.*)

Part 9: Plans & Close of Interview

- **Ask all:**

Can you explain what your immediate plans are? (*Prompt: Have you any personal goals, in particular in relation to work? How will you go about doing this?*)

What are your plans for the six months or a year after that? (*Probe: what might prevent you from achieving these aims?*)

- **If the customer attended a WFI:**

Overall, what impact do you feel your Personal Adviser has made on your personal situation or circumstances? (*Did they make it easier to start thinking about work/ stay in work?*)

Is there anything else about Jobcentre Plus you would like to add?

Finally, may I please ask you what ethnic group you consider yourself to belong to?

**Thank you very much for your time and help.
Incentive payment**

Final Topic Guide for Interviews with First Contact Officers at Contact Centres

Research aims/objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore the understanding of key Jobcentre Plus staff on the consistent application of deferrals to non-JSA customers, and the procedures for picking up customers following the issue of improved guidance given to local offices in April 2002. More specifically, the research objectives for the staff research are to:

- explore staff attitudes to the process of applying deferrals and waivers;
- explore staff attitudes and understanding of the new guidance on waivers and deferrals;
- ascertain whether guidance is being adapted at local level, how, and whether it works well;
- obtain examples of good practice;
- determine whether staff think that the systems have improved since the new guidelines have been issued;
- check that the ‘right’ customers are being deferred; and
- see whether systems are in place for picking up deferred customers.

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction- independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - *‘To look at deferrals practice in Contact Centres and Jobcentre Plus public offices, following the issue of additional guidance last year’.*
- Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff, and that there are no right or wrong answers
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews
- Ask permission to tape the interviews
- This interview will last around 45 minutes.

Part 2: Background information

How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus? How long have you been in this particular role?

What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?

And what are your main roles and responsibilities now? (*Collect an overview of the job; specialist roles or responsibilities; team management- size and scope*)

Which Contact Centres/Jobcentre(s) are you based in/ do you cover?

Can you please describe your relationship with the Public Office? How do you communicate with them?

What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?

What do you view your role as being in relation to supporting customers through the Jobcentre Plus process?

What is the purpose of the work-focussed interview?

Part 3: Staff knowledge of and attitudes to process of applying deferrals and waivers

- **Attitudes to deferrals, waivers and WFIs**

What do you believe to be the purpose of a deferral? And a waiver?

Probe: differences between deferrals and waivers?

At what stage in the Jobcentre Plus process would a deferral or waiver normally take place? *Probe: differences between deferrals and waivers? Why might a deferral or waiver take place at the Public Office rather than the contact centre?*

- **Making a deferral**

What information would you collect in the course of a telephone conversation in order to make a deferral?

How do you explain work focused interviews to customers? *Probe: how do they describe the process? word/phrases used?*

How would you decide whether or not to defer / waive a customer's WFI?

Prompt: What would you take into account? e.g. health, caring responsibilities, emotional well-being, time considerations in relation to your office/ caseload or the PA caseloads? Are there any circumstances under which you would make a deferral in order to make sure that the target for booking a WFI within four days is met?

Are there any key questions that you ask yourself, or the customer, in order to determine whether a deferral is appropriate?

What role does the customer play in deciding whether a WFI is appropriate?

Under what other circumstances might you defer/waive a customer's WFI? *Collect examples*

Are there any groups of customers whose WFI you would defer /waive automatically/as a matter of course? *Collect examples prompt: mental, physical or emotional illness. Lone parents, carers, bereaved people?*

How easy or difficult is it to determine whether a work- focused interview would be appropriate, or whether to defer/waive a customer's WFI? *Collect examples*

Are there any particular types of customer with whom you find it difficult to make deferral decisions? and why? *Prompt: what client groups/ types of characteristic make this the case?*

Have you ever deferred a Jobseeker's WFI? Under what circumstances?

- **Following a deferral**

How do you explain deferrals/ waivers to customers? *Prompt: What information do you give them? Do you indicate the reason for your decision to defer?*

Following a deferral, would you ever tell the customer about the possibility of bringing their WFI forward if work becomes an option in the interim period? *Probe: under what circumstances?*

Do you tell customers that the attendance of the re-arranged WFI is a condition of their receiving benefit (unless it is deferred or waived again)?

How do you decide with a customer how long the deferral period should be?

Who makes this decision? How flexible is the timescale? *Is there a range within which deferral periods should sit?*

What is the process for re-booking a customer who has been deferred? *Probe: How does it work, who is responsible, how effective is this?*

What systems are in place for activating a workflow (deciding the date of the WFI and agreeing this with the client) to prompt PAs to re-contact customers at the end of the deferral period? *Probe: how useful are they?*

How do you record the reasons for deferrals? What level of information do you give? *Collect details. Prompt: VANTIVE / LMS?*

How do you think this information is used? By whom?

Part 4: Use of guidance

What written guidance or manuals were you given in preparation for Jobcentre Plus? *Prompt: ESCOM? Probe: How frequently do you use them, how useful are they?*

What guidance do you use on a regular basis? *Please collect samples.*

How is new information disseminated within your office? *Probe: whose responsibility is it to ensure that staff are made aware of new policy or delivery developments? How far does this rely on individual initiative? At what level is it disseminated? How easy is it to keep up to date with what guidance has been issued?*

Can you describe your approach to deferrals prior to April 2002?

What specific guidance was there available in relation to deferrals prior to April 2002?

Are you familiar with the guidance issued as part of the 'Live Support Bulletins' in April 2002?

What do you think the purpose of this guidance is? What are the key messages?

Live Support Bulletins- Key messages

Please use these as a prompt if the respondent has difficulty in recalling the content of the April Live Support Bulletins. Determine whether the respondent feels that they are aware of the issues outlined, when they became aware of these issues, and if their office/area practice reflects it (please collect evidence).

- Decisions on whether to defer should be made on an individual basis
- It is important not to automatically defer any customer or group of customers
- It is important to collect enough information from a customer to make an informed deferral system
- Specific guidance in relation to maternity allowance cases, customers with mental health problems

- The following customers should be deferred or waived: Customers who are temporarily sick but who have a job to return to; customers claiming maternity benefit only; and lone parents who already have a date to start or return to work

How useful do you find the guidance? *Probe: Is it easy to use? How relevant is it to everyday situations?*

What do you think the purpose of this guidance is? What are the key messages?

Are you familiar are you with the 'Must Do's List'? *Prompt: 'Must Do List' is a list of things that key Jobcentre Plus staff **must do** in order to help non-JSA customers return to work as soon as they can.*

Are you familiar with the 'Pit Stop' guidance? And your staff?

Do you think that the guidance available to you is sufficient? If, not what other guidance or support would you benefit from?

Are you aware of any **local** guidance issued in relation to deferrals (and waivers)? If so, what information does it include? How useful is it to you? At what level is it issued (e.g. District, Pathfinder Area, individual contact centre or public office)?

Do you have a local office strategy in place in relation to deferrals? *Probe: What is it? How prescriptive is it?*

Do you feel that you are under pressure at local level to keep deferral and waiver decisions at a certain level? *Probe: why does you feel that you are/are not under pressure? What are you told? Are particular levels of deferral/waiver identified?*

Are you aware of any local examples of good practice in relation to deferrals/waivers? *E.g. improving staff's knowledge and understanding of deferrals processes. Please collect details.*

What training have you had on deferrals? *Identify what has been given. Has deferral guidance been sufficient- why/why not? How could it be improved?*

Is there any other guidance, training or support that you would find useful? If so, what, and how might it help? *Prompt: how else might they get information/advice e.g. manager*

Are there opportunities to discuss problems, new developments and exchange good practice within your team/office? *Probe: What are they? Are they working well?*

Part 5: Impact

Have there been any changes to the way in which you make deferral/waiver decisions in the past year as a result of the April 2002 guidance? *Probe: When did these changes occur? Have there been any changes since April 2002?*

Have you adopted the guidance outlined in the 'Live Support Bulletins'? If so, how well does this guidance work? *Probe: Has existing local guidance been adapted to fit in with the Live Support Bulletins, or have the Live Support Bulletins been adapted to fit in with the local guidance, for example?*

What impact, if any, has the guidance had on systems for making deferrals and waivers?

Are there any other factors that have impacted on the way in which you make deferrals and waivers over the past year?

Have the types of clients they you would or would not defer (or waive) changed in any way?

Part 6: Systems/monitoring

Are you aware of deferrals and waivers being monitored or reviewed? *Probe: at what level-district/office/ individual? Why do they monitor them?*

Do you have any target deferral levels? What are they?

What percentage of cases are currently being deferred at the Contact Centre? *Has this changed at all over the last year?*

Do you think that there is a desirable level of deferral for a Contact Centre? *Prompt: What is it? What is your belief based on?*

Are there any characteristics or factors specific to your local area which you believe to have an impact on deferral practice? *Prompt: demographics, availability of certain types of support*

Do you discuss deferrals with your public office(s)? *Probe: what do you discuss? What information is exchanged?*

Part 7: Summary and close of interview

Have there been any other changes to the delivery of deferrals that we have not already mentioned?

Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to mention?

Thank-you and close

Final Topic Guide for Interviews with Personal Advisers at Public Offices

Research aims/objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore the understanding of key Jobcentre Plus staff on the consistent application of deferrals to non-JSA customers, and the procedures for picking up customers following the issue of improved guidance given to local offices in April 2002. More specifically, the research objectives for the staff research are to:

- explore staff attitudes to the process of applying deferrals and waivers;
- explore staff attitudes and understanding of the new guidance on waivers and deferrals;
- ascertain whether guidance is being adapted at local level, how, and whether it works well;
- obtain examples of good practice;
- determine whether staff think that the systems have improved since the new guidelines have been issued;
- check that the ‘right’ customers are being deferred;
- and
- see whether systems are in place for picking up deferred customers.

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction- independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - *‘To look at deferrals practice in Contact Centres and Jobcentre Plus public offices, following the issue of additional guidance last year’.*
- Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff, and that there are no right or wrong answers
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews
- Ask permission to tape the interviews
- This interview will last around 45 minutes.

Part 2: Background

How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus? How long have you been in this particular role?

What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?

What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?

What are your main roles and responsibilities in relation to Jobcentre Plus? (*Collect an overview of the job; specialist roles or responsibilities; team management- size and scope*)

Which Jobcentre(s) are you based in/ do you cover?

Can you describe your relationship with your Contact Centre? Prompt: How do you communicate with them? Probe: *Do you get feedback on deferrals from the contact centre?*

Are there opportunities to discuss problems, new developments and exchange good practice? Probe: *What are they? Are they working well?*

Part 3: Staff attitudes to process of applying deferrals and waivers

- **Attitudes to deferrals, waivers, and WFIs**

What do you believe to be the purpose of the work-focused interview?

What do you believe to be the purpose of a deferral? And a waiver?

Probe: differences between deferrals and waivers?

What do you view your role as being in relation to supporting customers through the Jobcentre Plus process?

- **Making a deferral**

How much information do you have about a client prior to undertaking a WFI? *Probe: who/where from? When do they receive this information? what type of information? How useful is this in determining whether a WFI might not be appropriate Do they do any preparation for the meeting?*

At what point in the claim process would you expect a deferral (or waiver) to be made? Why is this? *Probe: differences between deferrals and waivers? Why might a deferral or waiver take place at the Public Office rather than the contact centre?*

On what basis would you make the decision on whether to defer/waive a customer's WFI? *Prompt: the customers' personal circumstances (including health, caring responsibilities, customers' behaviour/ emotional well-being, time considerations in relation to your office/ caseload)?*

Are there any key questions that you ask yourself, or the customer, in order to determine whether a deferral is appropriate?

What role does the customer play in deciding whether a WFI is appropriate?

Can you describe the kinds of information you collect in order to make a decision about a deferral/waiver?

Under what other circumstances might you defer/waive a customer's WFI? *Collect examples*

Are there any groups of customer whose WFI you would defer/waive automatically/as a matter of course? *Prompt: mental, physical or emotional illness, pregnancy or recent childbirth, recent bereavement. Collect examples*

Are there any particular types of customer with whom you find it difficult to make deferral decisions? *Prompt: what client groups/ types of characteristic make this the case?*

Have you ever deferred a Jobseeker's WFI? Under what circumstances?

How confident do you feel about deciding whether a work- focused interview would be appropriate, or whether to defer a customer? *Collect examples*

Do you ever feel reluctant to defer a the work focused interview once a customer has come to the office to attend interview?

If you defer a work focused interview, how do you then go about closing the meeting? *Probe: what do you say to the customer?*

Are there any circumstances under which you would continue with a work focused interview when you felt that the customer should have had their WFI deferred or waived? *Prompt: would you conduct this interview differently than usual?*

How do you explain deferrals to customers? *Prompt: What information do you give them? Do you indicate the reason for your decision to defer? Do you tell them how long they will be deferred for?*

How do you explain to customers that the requirement to attend a WFI is mandatory?

- **Following up a deferral**

How do you explain deferrals/ waivers to customers? *Prompt: What information do you give them? Do you indicate the reason for your decision to defer?*

Do you tell customers that the attendance of the re-arranged WFI is a condition of their receiving benefit (unless it is deferred or waived again)?

How do you decide the timescale on which it would be appropriate to have a WFI? *Probe: is this decision made with the customer? How specific is the timescale? Is there a range within which deferral periods should sit?*

What is the process for re-booking a customer than has been deferred? *Probe: How does it work, who is responsible, how effective is this?*

Who makes the decision on whether to defer a WFI? *Probe: does the PA make this decision themselves or might they consult with a team leader/ office manager?*

What systems in place for activating a workflow (deciding the date of the WFI and agreeing this with the client)? *Probe: how useful are they?*

How do you record the reasons for deferrals? What kind of information do you give? *Collect details*

How much do you think that customers understand about deferrals/WFIs? *Prompt: what do they understand? Why? How do you think they feel about it?*

Part 4: Use of guidance

What written guidance or manuals were you given in preparation for Jobcentre Plus? *Prompt: ESCOM? Probe: How frequently do you use them, how useful are they?*

What guidance do you use on a regular basis? *Please collect samples.*

How is new information disseminated within your office? *Probe: whose responsibility is it to ensure that staff are made aware of new policy or delivery developments? How far does this rely on individual initiative? At what level is it disseminated? How easy is it to jeep up to date with what guidance has been issued?*

Can you describe your approach to deferrals prior to April 2002?

What specific guidance was there available in relation to deferrals prior to April 2002?

How familiar are you with the guidance issued as part of the 'Live Support Bulletins' in April 2002?

What do you think the purpose of this guidance is? What are the key messages?

Live Support Bulletins- Key messages

Please use these as a prompt if the respondent has difficulty in recalling the content of the April Live Support Bulletins. Determine whether the respondent feels that they are aware of the issues outlined, when they became aware of these issues, and if their office/area practice reflects it (please collect evidence).

- Decisions on whether to defer should be made on an individual basis
- It is important not to automatically defer any customer or group of customers
- It is important to collect enough information from a customer to make an informed deferral system
- Specific guidance in relation to maternity allowance cases, customers with mental health problems
- The following customers should be deferred or waived: Customers who are temporarily sick but who have a job to return to; customers claiming maternity benefit only; and lone parents who already have a date to start or return to work

How useful do you find the guidance? *Probe: Is it easy to use? How relevant is it to everyday situations?*

How familiar are you with the 'Must Do's List or the 'Pit Stop' Bulletins? *Probe: What do you think the purpose of this guidance is? What are the key messages?*

How useful do you find all of the guidance available to you? *Probe: Is it easy to use? How relevant is it to everyday situations?*

Do you think that the guidance available to you is sufficient? If, not what other guidance or support would you benefit from?

Are you aware of any **local** guidance issued in relation to deferrals (and waivers)? If so, what information does it include? How useful is it to you? At what level is it issued (e.g. District, Pathfinder Area, individual contact centre or public office)?

Do you have an office strategy in place in relation to deferrals? *Probe: What is it? How prescriptive is it?*

Are you aware of any local examples of good practice in relation to deferrals/waivers? *E.g. improving staff's knowledge and understanding of deferrals processes. Please collect details.*

What training have you had on deferrals? *Identify what has been given. Has deferral guidance been sufficient- why/why not? How could it be improved?*

Is there any other guidance, training or support that you would find useful? If so, what, and how might it help?

Part 5: Impact

Have there been any changes to the way in which you make deferral decisions in the past year as a result of the April 2002 guidance? *Probe: When did these changes occur? Have there been any changes since April 2002?*

Have you adopted the guidance outlined in the 'Live Support Bulletins'? If so, how well does this guidance work?

What impact, if any, has the guidance had on systems for making deferrals and waivers?

Are there any other factors that have impacted on the way in which you make deferrals and waivers over the past year?

Has the types of clients you would or would not defer changed in any way?

Part 6: Re contacting Deferred Customers

What systems are in place to ensure that customers are 'picked up' for their deferred WFI? *Probe: Are these systems different depending on whether they have initially been deferred by a FCO or a PA?*

How do you follow up a deferral after the end of the deferral period? *Probe: How quickly after the end of a deferral period will you do this? How consistent is this?*

What do you do if a customer does not attend a rearranged meeting?

Are there any systems in place for following up deferrals (either at office, District, Jobcentre Plus, level)? What are they? How well do they work?

Is there anything that you feel makes it difficult for you to follow up deferrals? *Prompt: other responsibilities, systems, making contact with customers, lack of info on LMS?*

Has anything about the way in which you make deferrals changed?

Do you feel that being able to delay the work focused interview until a time when it is more likely to be appropriate to the customer is valuable? *Probe: why/why not?*

Part 7: Systems/monitoring

Are you aware of deferrals being monitored or reviewed? *Probe: at what level- district/office/individual? Why do they monitor them?*

Do you have any target deferral levels? What are they?

What percentage of cases are currently being deferred? *Has this changed at all over the last year? What are the different levels by customer group?*

Do you feel that you are under pressure at local level to keep deferral and waiver decisions at a certain level? *Probe: why does you feel that you are/are not under pressure? What are you told? Are particular levels of deferral/waiver identified?*

Do you think that there is a desirable level of deferral for a Public Office? *Prompt: What is its? What is this view based on?*

Are there any characteristics or factors specific to your local area which you believe to have an impact on deferral practice? *Prompt: demographics, availability of certain types of support*

Part 8: Summary and close of interview

Have there been any other changes to the delivery of deferrals that we have not already mentioned?

Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to mention?

Thank-you and close

Final Topic Guide for Interviews with Office Managers and Team Leaders in Public Offices

Research aims/objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore the understanding of key Jobcentre Plus staff on the consistent application of deferrals to non-JSA customers, and the procedures for picking up customers following the issue of improved guidance given to local offices in April 2002. More specifically, the research objectives for the staff research are to:

- explore staff attitudes to the process of applying deferrals and waivers;
- explore staff attitudes and understanding of the new guidance on waivers and deferrals;
- ascertain whether guidance is being adapted at local level, how, and whether it works well;
- obtain examples of good practice;
- determine whether staff think that the systems have improved since the new guidelines have been issued;
- check that the ‘right’ customers are being deferred; and
- see whether systems are in place for picking up deferred customers.

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduction- independent research on behalf of DWP
- Purpose of the research:
 - *‘To look at deferrals practice in Contact Centres and Jobcentre Plus public offices, following the issue of additional guidance last year’.*
- Emphasise that we’re not evaluating staff, and that there are no right or wrong answers
- Stress confidentiality of the interviews
- Ask permission to tape the interviews
- This interview will last around 45 minutes

Part 2: Background

How long have you been working for Jobcentre Plus? How long have you been in this particular role?

What was your role before the introduction of Jobcentre Plus?

What is your understanding of the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus?

What are your main roles and responsibilities in relation to Jobcentre Plus? (*Collect an overview of the job; specialist roles or responsibilities; team management- size and scope*)

Which Jobcentre(s) are you based in/ do you cover?

Can you describe for me how your office is set up and managed?

Are there opportunities to discuss problems, new developments and exchange good practice? *Probe: What are they? Are they working well?*

- **Office approach**

Do you have an office strategy in place in relation to deferrals? *Probe: What is it? How prescriptive is it?*

Do you believe that there is a shared understanding in relation to deferral practice within your team, office and Pathfinder area? *Prompt: what is it? How has this understanding been established?*

- **Relationships with the Contact Centre**

How do you communicate with the Contact Centre?

How would you describe your relationship with your local contact centre?

Part 3: Staff attitudes to process of applying deferrals and waivers

- **Attitudes to deferrals, waivers, and WFI**

What is the function of the work-focused interview?

What do you believe to be the function of a deferral? And a waiver?

- **Making a deferral**

At what point in the claim process would you expect a deferral (or waiver) to be made? Why is this? *Probe: differences between deferrals and waivers? Why might a deferral or waiver take place at the Public Office rather than the contact centre?*

On what basis would you expect your staff to make the decision on whether to defer a customer's WFI? *Prompt: the customers' personal circumstances (including health, caring responsibilities), customers' behaviour/ emotional well-being, time considerations in relation to your office/ caseload?*

Are there any groups of customers whose WFIs you would expect your staff to defer automatically/as a matter of course? *Collect examples prompts: mental, physical etc.*

Under what circumstances do you think your staff find it difficult to make deferral/waiver decisions? *Prompt: what client groups/ types of characteristic make this the case?*

Have you, or your staff ever deferred a Jobseeker's WFI? Under what circumstances?

- **Following up a deferral**

How do you explain deferrals/ waivers to customers? *Prompt: What information do you give them? Do you indicate the reason for your decision to defer?*

Do you tell customers that the attendance of the re-arranged WFI is a condition of their receiving benefit (unless it is deferred or waived again)?

What is the process for re-booking a customer whose WFI has been deferred? *Probe: How does it work, who is responsible, how effective is this?*

How do you decide the timescale on which you will re-contact customers whose WFI has been deferred? *Probe: Do your staff or the customer the timescale on which it would be appropriate to have a WFI? Is there a range within which deferral periods should sit?*

What systems in place for activating a workflow (deciding the date of the WFI and agreeing this with the client)? *Probe: how useful are they?*

How do staff record the reasons for deferrals? What level of information do they give? *Collect details*

Is there anything that you feel makes it difficult for your staff to make a deferral decision confidently? *Collect examples*

Part 4: Use of guidance

What written guidance or manuals were you and your staff given in preparation for Jobcentre Plus? *Prompt: ESCOM? Probe: How frequently do you use them, how useful are they?*

What guidance will staff use on a regular basis? *Please collect samples.*

How are briefings or guidance disseminated within the office? *Probe: whose responsibility is it to ensure that staff are made aware of new policy or delivery developments? How far does this rely on individual initiative? How easy is it to keep up to date with what guidance has been issued?*

Can you describe your office's approach to deferrals prior to April 2002?

What specific guidance was there available in relation to deferrals prior to April 2002?

Are you familiar with the guidance issued as part of the 'Live Support Bulletins' in April 2002? Do you think your staff are familiar with this document?

What do you think the purpose of this guidance is? What are the key messages?

Live Support Bulletins- Key messages

Please use these as a prompt if the respondent has difficulty in recalling the content of the April Live Support Bulletins. Determine whether the respondent feels that they are aware of the issues outlined, when they became aware of these issues, and if their office/area practice reflects it (please collect evidence).

- Decisions on whether to defer should be made on an individual basis
- It is important not to automatically defer any customer or group of customers
- It is important to collect enough information from a customer to make an informed deferral system
- Specific guidance in relation to maternity allowance cases, customers with mental health problems
- The following customers should be deferred or waived: Customers who are temporarily sick but who have a job to return to; customers claiming maternity benefit only; and lone parents who already have a date to start or return to work

How useful do you and your staff find the guidance? *Probe: Has it changed the way that they do their job? Is it easy to use? How relevant is it to everyday situations?*

How familiar are you with the 'Must Do's List or the 'Pit Stop' Bulletins? *Probe: What do you think the purpose of this guidance is? What are the key messages?*

How useful do you and your staff find the guidance available to you? *Probe: Has it changed the way that they do their job? Is it easy to use? How relevant is it to everyday situations?*

Do you think that all the guidance available to you is sufficient? If, not what other guidance or support your staff would benefit from?

What training have you and your staff had on deferrals? *Identify what has been given. Has deferral guidance been sufficient- why/why not? How could it be improved?*

Are you aware of any **local** guidance issued in relation to deferrals (and waivers)? If so, what information does it include? How useful is it to you and your staff? At what level is it issued (e.g. District, Pathfinder Area, individual contact centre or public office)?

Are there any local examples of good practice in relation to deferrals/waivers? *E.g. improving staff's knowledge and understanding of deferrals processes. Please collect details.*

Are there any characteristics or factors specific to your local area that you believe to have an impact on deferral practice? *Prompt: demographics, availability of certain types of support*

Part 5: Impact

Have there been any changes to the way in which you and your staff have made deferral decisions in the past year as a result of the April 2002 guidance? *Probe: When did these changes occur? Have there been any changes since April 2002?*

Have you adopted the guidance outlined in the 'Live Support Bulletins'? If so, how well does this guidance work? *Probe: Has existing local guidance been adapted to fit in with the Live Support Bulletins, or have the Live Support Bulletins been adapted to fit in with the local guidance, for example?*

What impact, if any, has the guidance had on systems for making deferrals and waivers?

Has anything about the way in which you make deferrals changed?

Are there any other factors that have impacted on the way in which you make deferrals and waivers over the past year?

Have deferral levels changed in since the introduction of the guidance? *Probe: Has it increased/decreased, for which client groups?*

Do you know if there have been any changes in deferral levels at the contact centre?

Part 6: Re contacting Deferred Customers

How do staff go about following up a deferral after the end of the deferral period?

How quickly after the end of a deferral period will they do this?

Are there any systems in place for following up deferrals (either at office, District, Jobcentre Plus level?)

Is there anything that you feel makes it difficult for you/your staff to follow up deferrals? *Prompt: other responsibilities, systems, making contact with customers, lack of information about customers on LMS?*

Part 7: Systems/monitoring

Do you monitor or review deferral/waiver levels at office level? *Probe: at what level- district/office/individual? Why do they monitor them? Have any changes been made subsequent to the Pathfinder Improvement Team's request that systems be put in place?*

Do you have any target deferral levels? What are they? How do you convey them to your staff?

How do deferral levels for different types of customers differ in your office? *Probe: why is this?*

What percentage of cases are currently being deferred? *Has this changed at all over the last year? What are the different levels by customer group?*

Do you think that there is a desirable level of deferral for a Public Office? *Prompt: What is its? What is your belief based on?*

Part 10: Summary and close of interview

Have there been any other changes to the delivery of deferrals that we have not already mentioned?

Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to mention?

Thank-you and close