



National Audit Office

JOBCENTRE PLUS
Delivering effective services through
Personal Advisers

LONDON: The Stationery Office
£13.50

Ordered by the
House of Commons
to be printed on 27 November 2006



SUMMARY

For millions of people, Personal Advisers are the face of government. Jobcentre Plus has 9,300 advisers who conducted 10.8 million jobseeker interviews in 2005-06 at a salary cost of £238 million. Interviews last from 20 minutes to an hour, depending on the particular programme the customer is part of and what stage of looking for work they have reached. Advisers help people find work by diagnosing barriers to employment and assisting them to overcome them. They also have a responsibility to protect the integrity of the benefits system by ensuring those who should be doing so are actively seeking work.

The Government aims to increase the employment rate to 80 per cent, which will require many more of the harder-to-help (in particular, those on Incapacity Benefits) to enter employment. Personal Advisers will be crucial for achieving this and demands for their services are likely to increase under the proposals outlined in the 2006 Welfare Reform Bill.

Overall value for money assessment

Overall, our findings are encouraging. There is evidence that Personal Advisers have contributed to the high employment rate in the United Kingdom, as well as the relatively low levels of unemployment. In particular:

- customer research shows advisers have a positive impact by raising customers' confidence, equipping them with improved job-seeking skills and assisting with job applications;
- the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development found significant improvements in unemployment levels in the United Kingdom and other countries with similar policies related closely to the adoption of active job-seeking measures such as those organised through Personal Advisers;
- independent research suggests the use of Personal Advisers is associated with greater numbers leaving benefits; and
- third party employment advisers commented favourably on the ability of Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers.

The amount of time Personal Advisers spend advising customers is crucial to their effectiveness. Currently, around 52 per cent of adviser time is spent interviewing. Other time is spent in training, performance monitoring and completing paperwork, some of which is clearly necessary. However, there are a number of barriers to maximising the amount of time spent with customers. In particular:

- customers are often late for interviews or fail to turn up at all. In 2005-06, customers did not attend around 1.8 million scheduled interviews at an estimated cost of £16 million;
- a range of other factors reduce the productivity of staff, including limitations of the IT system, some unnecessary paperwork and interruptions during interviews. Errors made by contact centres have knock-on effects in Jobcentre Plus offices and overruns in Financial Assessor interviews can affect Personal Advisers.



Jobcentre Plus has already made improvements to processes to assist Personal Advisers such as introducing new Diary/Administrative Support Officers from September 2006 to undertake routine work, altering the target regime (which has reduced the burden of performance measurement), and trialling changes to the process such as the part played by the Financial Assessor. Jobcentre Plus could further improve productivity of advisers. In particular, it should:

- identify and remove unnecessary paperwork and introduce simple improvements such as reducing the need to write customer details on many forms, and reducing the number of forms by amalgamating similar ones;
- make the most of the role of Diary/Administrative Support Officer to manage adviser diaries, answer calls during interviews, complete routine paperwork and monitor targets;
- emphasise more clearly to customers their responsibility to attend interviews, share best practices in securing high attendance rates such as reminding customers of impending appointments by phone or text, and using unambiguous language in letters with customers;
- longer term, make better use of locally available data to plan better the use of adviser time, and introduce improvements to its IT to remove actions which do not add value.