

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 611

Qualitative Evaluation of the Adult Learning Option

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A report of research carried out by BMRB Social Research on behalf of the
Department for Work and Pensions

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First Published 2009.

ISBN 978 1 84712 649 8

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the research team at the Department for Work and Pensions for their help and support with this project, in particular Rowan Foster, Dan Ramsey and Gillian Burgess. Additionally, we would like to extend our thanks to the Research Steering Group who also provided information and guidance throughout.

We would also like to express our gratitude to all the individuals who participated in the research for the time they gave and for sharing their views and experiences, including Jobcentre Plus customers, Jobcentre Plus advisers, nextstep advisers, Skills Coaches, LSC training providers and District Officers.

Furthermore, we would also like to acknowledge and thank the BMRB field management team and the network of recruiters who worked on this study for their hard work and effort throughout.

Finally, our thanks go to the remaining members of the research team: Jane Durham, Alper Hulusi, Ruth Rajkumar and Matthew Williams.

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Glossary of terms

Converted customers	Customers who were initially enrolled on a training course and subsequently took up ALO.
Customer re-visits	Customers who were interviewed having taken up ALO in the first year of the pilot and were re-interviewed in the second year to ascertain impacts of the pilot over time.
District officers	Professionals responsible for co-ordinating the delivery of ALO in each pilot district.
Nextstep Advisers	Professionals responsible for delivering information, advice and guidance to customers regarding training and employment options.
Non-participating customers	Customers eligible to take-up ALO, but who chose not to.
Skills Coaches	Professionals responsible for delivering information, advice and guidance to customers regarding training and employment options.
Staff re-visits	Professionals responsible for delivering ALO, who had been interviewed in the first year of the pilot and re-interviewed in the second year to ascertain impacts over time.
Staff replacements	When a re-visit could not be arranged (due to staff leaving their position) a replacement interview was conducted with the person who had taken on their role.

Training providers

Professionals responsible for delivering training to ALO customers, such as colleges, other further education institutions and businesses that offered work experience placements.

Abbreviations

ALO	Adult Learning Option
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
IES	Integrated Employment and Skills
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
Level one	National Vocational Qualification Level one
Level two	National Vocational Qualification Level two
Level three	National Vocational Qualification Level three
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NDfS	New Deal for Skills
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
WFI	Work Focused Interview

Summary

The Adult Learning Option (ALO) was one strand of the New Deal for Skills (NDfS) which was launched in March 2004 and jointly developed by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). The ALO strand of the NDfS aimed to provide customers claiming benefit (inactive and Jobseeker's Allowance) for whom a lack of skills or qualifications was the main barrier to employment, with the opportunity to take up a Level two entitlement.

The ALO pilot ran from September 2006 until August 2008 across five Jobcentre Plus districts in England, including: Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon; Birmingham and Solihull; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth; Greater Manchester East and West; and Central London. Subsequent developments to Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) policy and delivery resulted in ALO not being rolled out nationally.

DWP commissioned British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) Social Research to undertake a longitudinal qualitative evaluation of the pilot to inform future IES initiatives. The research comprised two stages. The first stage explored experiences and views of staff and customers involved in the pilot. Stage two built on this research and considered the impact of the pilot and how experiences had changed over time. A total of 209 depth interviews were conducted with staff and customers from across the five Jobcentre Plus districts (105 in stage one and 104 in stage two).

Take-up

Take-up of ALO was affected by levels of staff understanding in relation to the eligibility criteria, financial supports available and the willingness of staff to refer customers onto training. The willingness of staff to refer customers onto ALO centred on training not being viewed as a priority and the perceived administrative burdens associated with customer referrals.

Additionally, the attitudes of customers towards ALO and their ability to participate also affected take-up rates. Customers were generally enthusiastic about taking

up ALO and saw the pilot as a good opportunity to gain a qualification. However, the eligibility criteria were often viewed as restrictive and this was thought to have impacted on take-up.

Take-up rates increased in the second year of the pilot due to the greater experience of all staff in referring customers, better contacts being made between agencies and a greater awareness of the pilot among eligible customers. Despite this, referrals were still falling short of targets set at the beginning of the pilot.

Delivery of ALO

Customer referrals onto ALO did not always follow a set pattern and a number of customer trajectories were found. Despite this, referrals always involved contact with Jobcentre Plus at some stage and always finished with the customer attending a training provider. Contact at Jobcentre Plus tended to involve a discussion of the ALO offer. However, these discussions between Jobcentre Plus advisers and customers varied according to the amount of information provided at this stage. Referrals were said to involve a large amount of paperwork, which caused confusion for all staff involved and, on occasions, led to delays in payments for customers. Despite this, referrals were generally viewed as smooth processes by customers.

The principle of involving nextstep and Skills Coaches was viewed positively, although this was not perceived to work in practice as their involvement was thought to complicate the process. Nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches were described as having limited involvement in the pilot and their involvement was seen to have decreased over time.

Training provision was favoured by customers, especially where work experience or a work placement was involved. However, the training was described as being intensive, which led some customers, especially those with caring responsibilities, to drop out before completing their course.

Levels of customer contact with Jobcentre Plus advisers during training varied and contact post-training was generally limited. Customers tended to have a low recall of Jobcentre Plus advisers proactively arranging Work Focused Interviews (WFI) with them, particularly in the later stages of the pilot. However, advisers suggested that WFIs did take place.

Relationships between agencies were identified as needing improvements with regards to communication, working practices and data sharing. Despite this, staff suggested that some improvements occurred over time, due to the increased experience among staff. Particular examples of good working practices and communication were found, but depended on the individuals involved. Jobcentre Plus District officers and ALO co-ordinators were commonly found to improve relationships, communication and working practices.

Impact of ALO

Customers described a range of immediate impacts of undertaking training under ALO. These included gaining a Level 2 qualification, acquiring hard skills, such as general and course specific knowledge, as well as soft skills, such as personal and interpersonal skills. Acquisition of skills gave customers confidence as they felt their employability had increased as a result of participating in ALO. ALO also had longer-term impacts on customer outcomes through enabling them to secure employment in chosen professions and move on to further training. Longer-term impacts of ALO contributed towards customers realising their ultimate employment ambitions.

However, some limited impacts were also associated with ALO. These tended to focus on the perception that gaining a Level 2 qualification was often not enough to secure employment in a chosen profession. As such, customers found they would need to complete a Level 3 course which, for some, was difficult due to the training costs associated.

Withdrawing from the pilot had various impacts on customers, with some returning to the benefits system, others attempting to restart their Level 2 training and others finding work independently of Jobcentre Plus.

All staff involved in the pilot described varying levels of impact that ALO had on them. Specifically, Jobcentre Plus advisers described how ALO significantly impacted on workloads, with the pilot being a 'full-time commitment'. Training providers suggested that ALO had impacted on their jobs, but that it was not burdensome. Nextstep and Skills Coaches described how ALO had limited impacts on their work, although this is likely to be due to the limited involvement of nextstep and Skills Coaches.

Conclusions

Jobcentre Plus advisers' experience of ALO increased over time and enabled them to streamline the customer referral process. Specifically, this resulted in a lesser use of nextstep and Skills Coaches as these were seen to slow the process down. However, administrative problems, such as burdensome paperwork, apparent in earlier stages of the pilot, persisted over time. Despite this, as staff became more experienced and familiar with the process, problems began to reduce.

Staff felt that gaining a Level 2 qualification in a relatively short timeframe through full-time training, provided a structured routine to customer's lives, especially for those who had been unemployed for more than 18 months. However, the full-time nature of the training meant that certain customers, such as lone parents, found it difficult to juggle outside commitments with training, resulting in drop-outs.

It was suggested that relationships, communications and understanding could have been improved through formally introducing contacts from other agencies at the outset of the pilot. Furthermore, comprehensive training prior to the launch of the pilot would have supported staff understanding, improving how ALO was sold to and targeted at eligible customers.

Marketing and publicity of ALO was felt to be a key barrier to identifying eligible customers. Providing clear information displayed in a variety of locations with appropriate lead in time before enrolment periods was suggested by Jobcentre Plus advisers, training providers and customers as something that would have helped improve customer take-ups of the pilot.

Impacts on customers showed that further training, specifically NVQ Level 3, was often seen to be required for the customer to enter into a desired form of employment. Future initiatives may wish to consider the value of supporting customers to undertake Level 3 training courses to ensure sustainable employment outcomes. Furthermore, customers could benefit from being made fully aware of the consequences of undertaking training in future initiatives, such as the intense workloads involved before committing to take-up as this would reduce drop-out rates.

1 Introduction

British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) Social Research was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to carry out an evaluation of the Adult Learning Option (ALO) pilot. The pilot was launched in September 2006 and ended, as planned, in August 2008. Subsequent developments to Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) policy and delivery resulted in ALO not being rolled out nationally. However, the evaluation of the pilot continued to inform the Government's skills and training strategy. This report outlines findings from longitudinal qualitative research with customers and professionals responsible for delivering ALO.

1.1 Policy background

The ALO was a pilot strand of the New Deal for Skills (NDfS), which was launched in March 2004 and jointly developed by the DWP and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). The NDfS comprised a package of measures designed to support customers move from welfare into sustainable and productive employment, by providing customers with no or low skills with the opportunity to improve their skills.

The ALO strand of the NDfS aimed to provide customers on benefits with the opportunity to take-up their National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 2 entitlement. The entitlement provided access to fee remission to learning for all those studying for their first full Level 2 qualification which, under ALO, was required to have a specific work focus. ALO also enabled customers on benefits to remain on benefit while studying and receive a top-up payment.

Jobcentre Plus customers who had either no qualifications or qualifications below Level 2 and for whom a lack of skills or qualifications was identified as the main barrier to employment, were eligible to take part in the pilot. Customers claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) who had been in receipt of benefits for at least six months, and inactive benefit claimants (those on Income Support or Incapacity Benefits from day one of their claim) were eligible. ALO participants claiming JSA were eligible to receive a Jobcentre Plus training allowance equivalent to their existing benefit plus £10 per week. Those on inactive benefits could choose

whether to transfer to a training allowance with a £15 per week supplement or to remain on benefit.

Jobcentre Plus advisers were intended to be the main gateway to taking up ALO. Following this, customers were to be referred to nextstep for information, advice and guidance regarding their training options and subsequently onto a Skills Coach if more in-depth advice on skills was deemed necessary.¹ Once on ALO, participants were required to comply with a learning agreement, set out between the college and the student, which detailed the type of course, hours of study and proposed qualification. Following completion of the course, customers were required to attend a Work Focused Interview (WFI) at the Jobcentre Plus office.

The ALO pilot ran from September 2006 to August 2008 in five Jobcentre Plus districts: Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon; Birmingham and Solihull; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth; Greater Manchester East and West; and Central London.

1.2 Research objectives

DWP commissioned BMRB Social Research to carry out a qualitative, longitudinal evaluation of the ALO pilot, with a view to informing the development of future IES initiatives. The research considered the pilot from the perspective of customers and professionals responsible for delivery and specifically aimed to explore the following:

- Key drivers underpinning referrals and take-up of ALO across the pilot.
- The overall effectiveness of the delivery of ALO, including any changes to delivery of ALO over time.
- The outcomes for customers who had undertaken training, including both immediate and longer-term impacts.
- The added value of ALO, including views on the experience and principle of the measures, and the benefits and disbenefits of undertaking extended training compared to shorter courses.
- The impact of the withdrawal of ALO for customers and how this varied between customers.
- Details of the relationship and working practices between Jobcentre Plus and other stakeholders (training providers, nextstep, Skills Coaches and Train to Gain). This includes a consideration of data sharing and informed consent.
- Suggestions for change regarding ALO, from the perspective of all respondent groups.

¹ However, this was not the only referral route that customers took to take up the ALO (see section 3.1).

1.3 Research methodology

The research was wholly qualitative in nature and comprised a total of 209 depth interviews with customers and professionals responsible for delivering ALO. Interviews were conducted in two stages:

- **Stage one** took place between June and August 2007 and focused on participants' experiences and views of the first year of the pilot; and
- **Stage two** took place from May 2008 to March 2009 and explored how ALO had 'bedded in' and evolved over time, and the impact of the pilot on customer outcomes.

Research was conducted with the following range of groups across the five Jobcentre Plus pilot districts:

- **Jobcentre Plus customers who had taken up ALO.** In total, 84 face-to-face depth interviews were conducted with customers who had taken up ALO. Customers were split between:
 - those who had taken up ALO in the first year of the pilot. Where possible these customers were interviewed twice – once during the first year of the pilot to explore their views and experiences of ALO, then revisited during the second year of the pilot to assess the impact of ALO over time;
 - those who had taken up ALO during the second year of intake. These customers were interviewed only once, to explore how their views and experiences differed from those participating in earlier stages.
- **Non-participating customers** who were eligible for ALO, but who had either not been offered or not taken up the offer to participate in the pilot. In total, 20 non-participating customers were interviewed during the first year of the pilot².
- **Professionals responsible for delivering ALO.** A total of 105 depth interviews were conducted with professionals responsible for delivering ALO, including Jobcentre Plus advisers and district level officers, nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches, and training providers. Where possible, staff were interviewed twice – once during the first year of the pilot and then revisited during the second year, to assess how their views and experiences had changed over time.³

² An additional small sample of non-participating customers were re-contacted by telephone during the second stage of research to assess changes over time. It was found that there had been little impact on these customers not taking up the pilot and therefore further interviews did not take place.

³ In cases where re-visits could not be arranged, replacement interviews were conducted with staff that occupied the same role as the respondent interviewed in stage one.

The table below provides an outline of the interviews conducted across both stages of the research. Detailed sample profiles of all respondents interviewed are provided in the technical appendix.

Achieved interviews	Stage one (June–August 2007)	Stage two (May–Sept 2008 and March 2009)	Combined totals
Customers: Year one intake	60 ^a	24 ^b	84
Customers: Year two intake	-	20	20
Jobcentre Plus advisers	15	25 ^c	40
Jobcentre Plus District level officers	-	5	5
Nextstep advisers/Skills Coaches	15	15 ^d	30
Training providers	15	15 ^e	30
Totals	105	104	209

^a Includes 20 non-participating customers.

^b Of whom all 24 were re-visits.

^c Of whom 11 were re-visits, 3 were replacements and 11 were newly recruited.

^d Of whom 12 were re-visits and 3 were replacements.

^e Of whom 12 were re-visits and 3 were replacements.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure coverage of key sub-groups within the target population so that variations in experience between groups could be explored⁴. Customers were recruited via a sample supplied by DWP, while ALO staff were recruited via gatekeepers provided by DWP in each of the five pilot districts.

More detailed sample profiles broken down by respondent groups are included in the technical appendix. Further information regarding the conduct of the research and the processes used can also be found in the technical appendix.

It is important to note that the methods utilised for this research are wholly qualitative in nature. This approach was recommended to allow individuals' views and experiences to be explored in detail. Qualitative methods neither seek, nor allow, data to be given on the numbers of people holding a particular view or having a particular set of experiences. The aim of qualitative research is to define and describe the range of emergent issues and explore linkages, rather than to measure their extent. In addition, while this report aims to draw out differences in views between sub-groups of participants (specifically relating to Jobcentre Plus advisers, Jobcentre Plus district officers, nextstep staff and Skills Coaches and training providers), where no differences emerged, views are attributed to 'staff' to signify all staff groups involved in the evaluation.

⁴ Sample quotas used are outlined in the technical appendix.

1.4 Report outline

This report is divided into six chapters:

- **Chapter 1** provided background to the research and summarised the methodological approach adopted.
- **Chapter 2** explores the take-up of the pilot and considers how this was affected by staff understanding of ALO and their willingness to refer customers onto the pilot. Additionally, it outlines the role that customers played, focusing on their attitude towards ALO and their ability to take up training.
- **Chapter 3** discusses the delivery of the pilot to customers, focussing on the customer journey and the role played by each agency in delivering ALO.
- **Chapter 4** outlines the impact of taking part in ALO on customers and staff, particularly focusing on immediate and longer term impacts as the pilot progressed over time.
- **Chapter 5** concludes the report and summarises the main findings and recommendations.

2 Take-up of ALO

This chapter considers the take-up of Adult Learning Option (ALO) and examines the key drivers underpinning referrals and starts. Take-up was a particularly important focus of the evaluation as a result of initial low take-up rates. Despite increases during the second year of enrolment, customer referrals were reported as persistently falling below target levels.

A number of factors were found to affect the take-up of ALO across the duration of the pilot and these related to both staff responsible for delivering ALO and customers. Levels of understanding of the pilot among staff and their willingness to refer customers on to ALO were highlighted as key factors, as were customer attitudes towards the pilot and their ability to participate, underpinned by eligibility restrictions and course-specific requirements.⁵ These issues are considered below in relation to two broad areas, specifically staff referrals and customer take-up.

2.1 Staff referrals to ALO

Professionals responsible for delivering ALO described a range of factors affecting the referral of customers onto the ALO pilot. In particular, staff awareness and understanding of the pilot, and the extent to which they were willing to refer customers were cited as significant factors affecting take-up. While Jobcentre Plus advisers' awareness and understanding of ALO generally increased over the course of the pilot, their willingness to promote ALO and refer customers was found to be affected by a range of factors, including the priority placed on training at district and adviser level, and perceptions of burden and complexity associated with the referral process. These issues are explored below.

⁵ Customers eligible for ALO were Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers and those claiming inactive benefits. Furthermore, these customers must have had less than a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 2 qualification and a lack of skills and qualifications must have been identified as the main barrier to work.

2.1.1 Staff understanding of ALO

Staff exhibited a consistently high level of awareness of the pilot over time, with all staff groups recognising the term. Despite this, understanding of ALO was found to be mixed. Lower levels of understanding were particularly evident among nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches, and among Jobcentre Plus advisers who had not been involved in ALO from the beginning of the pilot. In these situations, professionals claimed they had not been informed about the pilot.

'I was never properly told what the purpose was because it had already been going, it was ongoing.'

(Nextstep adviser, Greater Manchester East and West, Staff replacement)

In the early stages of the pilot, Jobcentre Plus advisers described receiving training through various methods to increase their understanding of the pilot and its processes. These included presentations, meetings and information packs, all of which were felt to have positively impacted on their confidence in delivering ALO to customers. However, as the pilot progressed it was found that more and continuous training was not offered. As such, staff coming into the pilot midway through and those wishing to refresh their memories needed to train on the job and informally liaise with colleagues to understand elements of ALO about which there were gaps in their knowledge. It was suggested that more training should have been provided, especially between intake periods, to maximise understanding and confidence in delivery and minimise any gaps in knowledge.

Gaps in knowledge and understanding were noted in relation to a number of areas, specifically concerning the purpose of the pilot, customer eligibility criteria and the incentives and support available to customers. All staff groups were generally confident in their understanding of the overall **purpose of ALO**, which was commonly viewed as an initiative to help customers get back into work without losing their entitlement to benefits. It was understood that training was provided and funded as a means to this, and that customers were supported financially through training allowances and through provision of childcare, travel costs and course expenses. However, there were occasional instances where staff from all agencies involved were unsure of the specific purposes of ALO, such as the qualification level it aimed to provide or the entitlements involved.

Staff understanding of the **customer eligibility criteria** generally improved over the course of the pilot due to their increased experience of making referrals. However, some confusion persisted throughout the pilot in relation to the following issues:

- **Type of benefit claimants eligible and required duration of claim** – Earlier in the pilot it was found that Jobcentre Plus advisers incorrectly believed that ALO was only available to specific customer groups such as lone parents. This lack of understanding meant eligible customers were not always being referred to ALO courses and this had an obvious impact on take-up. In contrast, misunderstanding of the eligibility criteria also led certain advisers to believe

the pilot was available to all Jobcentre Plus customers or all those with 'low qualifications'. These misunderstandings were also identified at later stages of the pilot, although were generally limited to staff (across all staff groups) who had minimal involvement and experience of ALO.

- **Course level and pre-existing qualifications** – Confusion was also expressed in relation to which courses or qualifications were included within the ALO pilot, with advisers suggesting they had referred customers onto Level 1 and Level 3 courses, rather than the Level two entitlement associated with ALO. Confusion was also evident regarding pre-existing qualifications held by customers. This was particularly evident when advisers referred customers who had gained qualifications abroad or had obtained a Level 2 qualification a long time ago or in a different subject to the ALO course being applied for.
- **Conversions** – Jobcentre Plus advisers were generally uncertain whether customers were entitled to 'convert' to ALO having already enrolled on a training course. In some cases, converted customers described being told conflicting information by different staff regarding their eligibility to take-up ALO, with advisers telling them they were ineligible and training providers disputing this.

The uncertainties expressed by staff in relation to ALO eligibility criteria were found to have transferred to customers. While participating customers were often able to identify a key reason for their eligibility, such as being unemployed or a lone parent, they tended to lack a more comprehensive understanding of the criteria. This theme continued over the course of the pilot, with the final wave of customers being referred onto ALO still not always fully understanding why they had been eligible for the pilot. However, this lack of understanding was not identified as a specific concern by either customers or staff.

'I don't know [who is eligible] because I was a lone parent so that's why I was getting the £15 a week'

(Inactive benefit customer, Birmingham and Solihull, September 2007 intake)

Jobcentre Plus advisers and training providers generally understood which **incentives and supports** were available to customers. However, it was less common for them to know how these incentives were administered and what the customer needed to do to obtain them, particularly in earlier stages of the pilot. Examples of payment delays resulting from a lack of understanding of how to administer payments were cited by staff and customers. These delays tended to occur to customers' initial payment, occasionally resulting in negative impacts on customers. Despite this, the incentives and supports available for customers, particularly the provision of childcare and the travel incentives were widely noted by Jobcentre Plus advisers as factors positively impacting on customer take-up of ALO (see Section 2.2.1).

Overall, staff understanding regarding the purpose of the pilot, the eligibility criteria and the incentives and supports available for customers improved over time. This increase in understanding was mainly brought about through greater

levels of experience in referring customers and, to a lesser extent, training that had been received. Greater understanding of the referral process was felt to have positively impacted on take-up of ALO, primarily as this had improved the advisers' ability (and confidence) to 'sell' ALO to customers. Furthermore, as the pilot bedded down over time, Jobcentre Plus advisers developed much stronger links with other stakeholders, such as training providers, and found more efficient ways to refer customers onto training, which was seen to save time and increase take-up rates in the second year.

'It was like a learning curve for the advisers as well as customers, and if the advisers didn't know they couldn't really sell it to the customers, so basically it took a while...I think you know if it went on for longer it would have been better, there would have been better results.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Central London, staff re-visit)

2.1.2 Willingness to refer customers to ALO

The willingness of Jobcentre Plus advisers to refer customers to ALO was another key factor affecting take-up of the pilot. Primarily, willingness to refer customers centred around two factors:

- less established training initiatives, such as ALO, not being viewed as a priority within Jobcentre Plus; and
- the pilot not being proactively sold to customers due to perceived administrative burden and the complexity of the referral process.

Training through the ALO pilot was not always perceived by customers, district officers, training providers and Jobcentre Plus advisers to be a priority for Jobcentre Plus and this had an obvious impact on take-up. Jobcentre Plus priorities were often said to be more focused on getting customers immediately back into work or onto other more established training schemes, such as the New Deal programmes. These competing approaches were felt by customers and Jobcentre Plus advisers to result in advisers not always proactively promoting ALO to customers. In some cases advisers described prioritising ALO in situations where customers' lack of training was identified as a specific barrier to gaining employment. However, this view was not consistently expressed by all advisers and appeared to depend upon the individual's understanding and attitude towards ALO rather than denoting a district level approach.

'It obviously wasn't a priority because it wasn't first on everybody's mind, to get somebody into work is the first thing. To actually get them on some sort of training or support that will give them a chance in the future is the second thing, so yes in some respects it is a priority because if that's the barrier then we overcome that barrier and then obviously we're on a winner then.'

(District officer, Greater Manchester East and West)

During earlier stages of the pilot, Jobcentre Plus advisers described feeling discouraged from selling ALO to customers because of the perceived **administrative burden** associated with the referral process. This was a theme that continued throughout the pilot and was noted by advisers from all districts. Administrative burdens in the referral process focused on the paperwork involved, highlighting both the complexity of the paperwork and the time taken to complete it.

The paperwork involved in the referral process was felt to be extensive and this was said to have impacted on the workload of advisers, for example, for each referral advisers suggested they were required to complete between five and ten forms. Furthermore, staff were not always fully aware of what paperwork needed to be completed and signed off by particular stakeholders, and this led to paperwork being sent back and forth between training providers and Jobcentre Plus advisers, further adding to workloads. Although experience and understanding of paperwork generally began to improve over time, problems of this nature were still evident in the second year of the pilot. Unfamiliarity with the associated paperwork and perception of it as a time consuming process resulted in Jobcentre Plus advisers being less enthusiastic about promoting ALO to customers and this impacted on take-up.

Although these concerns were particularly emphasised in the earlier stages and with staff that had become involved with ALO midway through the pilot, staff that had been involved from the beginning also exhibited confusion over these aspects of the referral process. This was, in part due to the low numbers that were referred initially, which meant that advisers were never able to fully understand or streamline the process.

'You think "how do I do that again?", because you didn't do that many to make it an everyday occurrence so it wasn't something that you knew how to do immediately.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon, staff re-visit)

Referrals were also felt to be affected by the lack of lead-in time given before ALO courses began. This was especially salient at the beginning of the pilot although the problem also persisted into the second year. Staff, particularly Jobcentre Plus advisers, felt they had not been given enough time in which to complete the referral process and the associated administration work. The perceived lack of adequate time to prepare for a specific enrolment period, coupled with the fact that some advisers believed they could not convert customers already in training, led to some eligible customers not being able to take-up the pilot.

'It was the time, they would descend on you and you would have customers already booked in, but you had to fit them in, because they were starting on courses...we had got people coming to us that had already started the course, and we were told once they had started you couldn't fund it.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Greater Manchester East and West, staff replacement)

Advisers also acknowledged that during these busy periods immediately prior to college enrolment deadlines, eligible customers were not always referred onto ALO as a result of the perceived administrative burdens associated with the referral process. This had an impact on take-up as advisers were turning away eligible customers due to their increasing case loads.

2.2 Customers taking up ALO

Customers also played a key role in relation to the take-up of ALO. Both participating and non-participating customers described a range of factors affecting their decision about whether to take-up ALO, specifically related to their attitude towards the pilot and their ability to participate, due to eligibility criteria and course restrictions. Each of these areas is considered below, incorporating the views of both customers and staff.

2.2.1 Attitude towards ALO

Participating customers were broadly enthusiastic about taking up ALO, particularly those who had spontaneously raised their desire to train with their Jobcentre Plus adviser without prior knowledge of ALO. Although non-participating customers did not take-up ALO, they were generally left with a positive impression of the pilot. Similarly, advisers described the disappointment of customers who had been informed of ALO by friends or other staff and were then found to be ineligible.

All customers' attitudes towards ALO were found to be linked to their awareness of the pilot and how and when they found out about it. Customers initially became aware of ALO in a number of ways. Most commonly they were informed through Jobcentre Plus advisers when attending regular benefit meetings, such as the fortnightly JSA 'signing on' meeting and occasionally through picking up ALO leaflets from Jobcentre Plus offices and colleges where these were available. Becoming aware of ALO through these channels enabled customers to feel confident about what ALO was and allowed them to ask questions if in a meeting with an adviser. Customers who had already enrolled on college courses prior to referral (converted customers) and those that had expressed an interest in taking up training independently of ALO also found out about the pilot through training providers. This was either through personal tutors or through college admission services at open days or in enrolment periods. Becoming aware of ALO in this way resulted in positive attitudes towards ALO. These customers felt that their participation would be worthwhile as ALO would contribute financially towards a decision to take-up training that had already been made.

Less commonly, customers became aware of ALO through friends or students already participating on an ALO course. However, gaining awareness this way became more typical over the course of the pilot. In some cases, customers made aware through these channels described having to push to receive further

information from their Jobcentre Plus adviser. Customer attitudes resulting from gaining awareness through others already on ALO were less positive, as it was felt that Jobcentre Plus advisers should have done more to inform them of ALO.

'[I heard about it] from a friend...she was told when she went down to the same Jobcentre and somebody else that she saw told her about it...if I hadn't have done, when I had my interview originally he didn't tell me, so I wouldn't have known. I wouldn't have got it.'

(Inactive benefit customer, Birmingham and Solihull, September 2006 intake)

The time at which respondents became aware of the pilot also affected their attitude to taking up ALO. Those that became aware soon before enrolment periods found that they needed to make their decision to take-up ALO quickly and without much consideration. Conversely, those that found out about ALO long in advance of enrolment periods were initially enthusiastic about the opportunity, but did not want to wait to start, leading to a loss of patience and interest in taking up ALO. These themes were found to occur over the course of the pilot and were felt by Jobcentre Plus advisers to have a significant effect on take-up rates.

Despite this, participating customers were very enthusiastic about taking up ALO and there were a number of reasons for this. Primarily, participating customers expressed a pre-existing desire to take-up training of some kind. It was felt that training would lead to further opportunities within the labour market that were currently unavailable to them through their lack of skills and qualifications. Furthermore, participating customers displayed a desire to improve their skill set as it was acknowledged that through training they would increase their chances of earning a higher salary. These views tended to be supported by 'Better Off Calculations' provided by Jobcentre Plus advisers, demonstrating potential salaries that could be achieved after gaining a Level 2 qualification.

'I'm not going on these courses just to get a little extra money, it's to better my chances for the future.'

(Inactive benefit customer Birmingham and Solihull, September 2007 intake)

Another factor affecting participating customers' enthusiasm to take-up ALO was the incentives provided as part of the offer. Incentives were viewed positively by all respondents and were especially important for convincing those who were apprehensive about taking up training to participate in ALO. The concept of providing incentives allowed customers to feel supported and encouraged to stay on ALO and were generally valued by all customers. Notwithstanding this, variations emerged between participating customers about which benefits were felt to be the most attractive. Training allowances were generally seen as a 'bonus' to taking up ALO, while childcare, travel and equipment payments were viewed as more substantial supports enabling customers to take-up training. In particular, the provision of childcare payments were described as a significant factor affecting lone parents' ability to take-up the training.

'What made me really go into it was the fact that I thought I didn't have to worry about my childcare, because originally I had tried to go to college before but childcare wasn't issued...so you couldn't do a course'⁶

(Inactive benefit customer, Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth, January 2008 intake)

These views were repeated by Jobcentre Plus advisers who were inclined or felt able to promote ALO, with suggestions that the 'whole package' of ALO was good and encouraged take-up. As with participating customers, a range of specific incentives were identified as encouraging customers to take-up ALO, but for Lone Parent advisers, childcare was considered to have a particular impact on lone parents. Despite this, it was commonly felt that although the incentives had an impact on levels of take-up, they were not seen as the ultimate deciding factor for taking up training under ALO.

'Some people wanted to learn...regardless of deal incentives...It was an enabling factor. I don't know that it was ever the real big decision maker.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon, staff replacement)

Staff also identified other factors that could have contributed to the low take-up of the pilot. Primarily, these centred around older customers being unenthusiastic about the idea of returning to training after being out of education for so long. Among other non-participating customers, Jobcentre Plus advisers perceived a lack of willingness to take-up training to further their employment prospects. Some eligible customers wanted to return to the labour market as soon as they could and did not want to spend a year training on a full-time course, even if this did mean improving their chances of finding work.

'Lots of them just didn't want, didn't feel training, and a lot of people, they feel they've done school, they hated school and they don't want to go into that training environment, that classroom environment.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth, staff replacement)

Non-participant customers suggested how other factors affected their attitude towards taking up ALO. Despite the provision of childcare being included in the pilot, lone parents described how personal commitments, such as looking after particularly young children, affected their decision not to participate or to drop-out. Furthermore, lone parents who declined to participate were discouraged from taking up ALO due to the full-time nature of the courses available. Further reasons for non-participation centred on the nature of the training being offered, which some non-participants considered to be irrelevant to their employment goals or uninteresting. It was also found that some non-participating customers who had

⁶ NB Training providers have resources available for hardship funding, which includes funds for childcare requirements.

wanted to take-up training were subsequently put off due to bad experiences during the referral process, for example, through becoming impatient waiting for a course to start. Other non-participants described how lack of awareness of the pilot, due to ineffective promotion of ALO, coupled with personal confusion about the details of ALO led to their unenthusiastic attitude towards take-up.

2.2.2 Ability to take-up ALO

Customers' ability to take-up ALO was another factor identified as affecting referral rates, and related to both eligibility and course restrictions associated with the pilot. In particular, the eligibility criteria for referrals to ALO were often viewed as being fairly restrictive, with all types of staff and customers suggesting that many more Jobcentre Plus customers would have taken up ALO if not for being outside of the criteria.⁷

'I think anybody that wants to gain a Level 2 qualification would benefit from it.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Greater Manchester East and West, staff replacement)

Elements of the criteria were felt by some staff to be 'restrictive' and impacted on take-up. Staff identified a number of customer groups who they felt would benefit from being involved in ALO. However, these customers were excluded from participating in the pilot due to not meeting the eligibility criteria. These groups included:

- customers not having claimed JSA for six months or more; including some that had, but due to a break in their claim were rendered ineligible for ALO;
- customers having Level 2 qualifications, but from a long time ago, which were not considered to be as relevant to the current labour market. It was felt that customers with 'old' Level two qualifications would have benefited from ALO through 'updating' their qualifications; and
- customers having Level 2 qualifications, but in an unrelated subject to the proposed ALO course; this was particularly relevant for customers with academic qualifications who wanted to gain specific vocational qualifications.

In addition to eligibility criteria, staff and customers identified further restrictions relating to the training that affected customers' ability and desire to take up ALO. These included:

⁷ NB. Jobcentre Plus customers eligible for ALO were those in receipt of inactive benefits and those who had been claiming JSA for more than six months without a break in their claim. Furthermore, these customers must have had less than a Level 2 qualification and a lack of skills and qualifications had been identified by their personal adviser as the main barrier to employment.

- the limited range of courses covered by ALO, with some customers not interested in the courses offered or not able to attend due to course oversubscription; and
- customers not having the necessary skills to join specific courses, particularly where courses were oversubscribed and therefore training providers were only able to select the highest achieving customers.

2.3 Summary

A variety of factors were found to affect the take-up of ALO, including staff understanding, perception and willingness to refer eligible customers on to ALO and customers' attitude, awareness and ability to take it up. A summary of specific findings are outlined below:

- Staff understanding of ALO varied, although Jobcentre Plus advisers and those involved in the pilot since the beginning tended to know more.
- Staff understanding of ALO generally improved over the course of the pilot due to increased experience.
- Comprehensive understanding of the eligibility criteria, such as the type of customer eligible, the course level and pre-existing qualifications held was found to be limited.
- Comprehensive understanding of how incentives were administered to participating customers was also found to be limited, particularly regarding the delivery of initial payments.
- In some cases, Jobcentre Plus advisers were found to be unwilling to refer eligible customers due to ALO not being perceived as a priority, the administrative burdens associated with the referral process and the lack of lead time before enrolment periods.
- Participating customers were, on the whole, enthusiastic about taking up ALO due to their desire to undertake training and through the financial incentives included in the offer.
- The time between becoming aware of ALO and enrolment affected customers' attitudes towards taking up the pilot.
- The ability of customers to take-up ALO was affected by 'restrictive' eligibility criteria and training limitations, such as course oversubscription and selection criteria.

3 Delivery of ALO

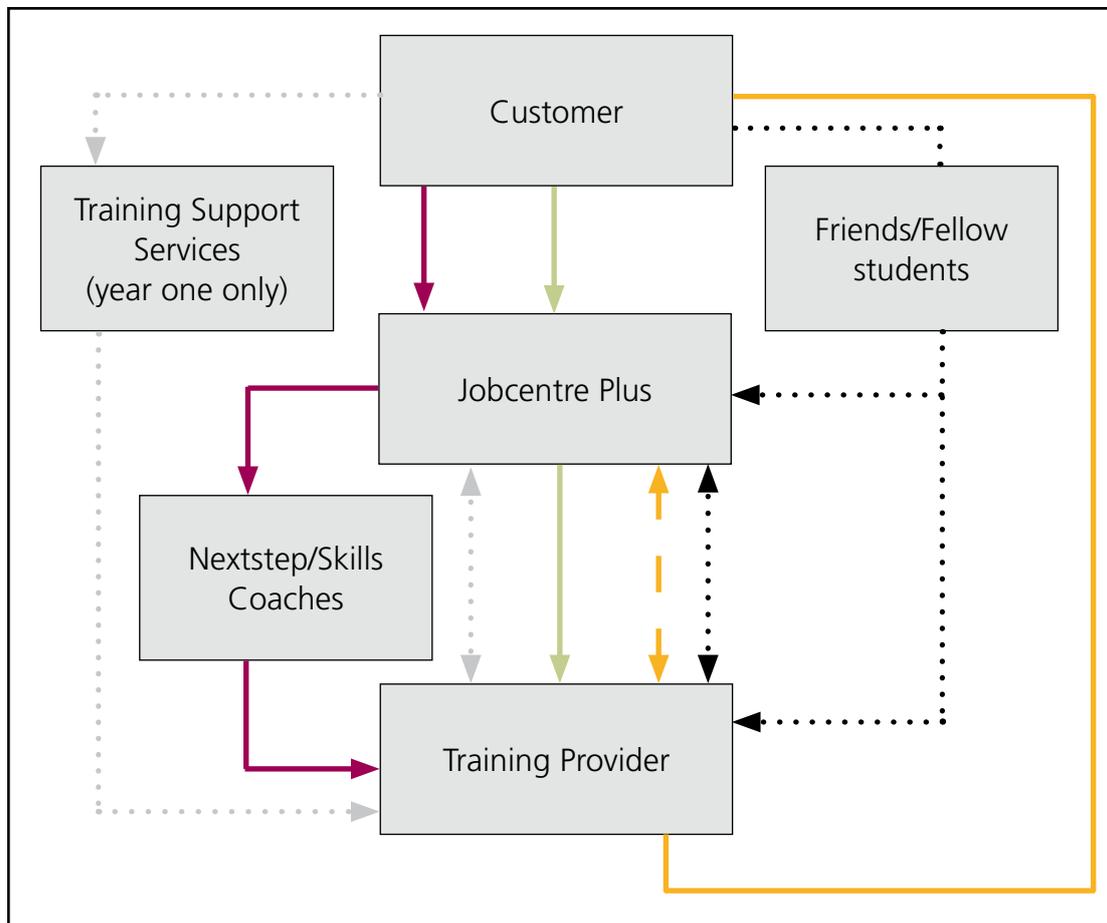
This chapter considers the effectiveness of the delivery of Adult Learning Option (ALO), including changes to delivery over time. The chapter focuses on each step of the journey considering initial discussions about the pilot; onward referrals encompassing the role of nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches; movement onto training; and attending training provision. Finally, relationships between staff in agencies involved in the delivery of ALO are considered, drawing on views from both staff and customers.

3.1 Referral trajectories

As noted in Chapter 1, Jobcentre Plus advisers were generally intended to be the first point of contact regarding taking up ALO. Following this, eligible customers were to be referred to nextstep for information and advice regarding their training options and subsequently onto a skills coach if more in-depth advice on skills was deemed necessary. However, it was always anticipated that referrals could come through different routes, such as speaking to training providers prior to being interviewed by Jobcentre Plus, and that customers did not need to be referred to nextstep or skills coaching if this was not pertinent.

Indeed, referrals onto ALO did not always follow the set pattern of: initial contact with Jobcentre Plus advisers; referral on to nextstep advisers or skills coaches; and engagement in training. Rather, journeys were much more fluid with a number of trajectories being described by both customers and staff (as demonstrated in Figure 1.1).

Figure 3.1 Showing possible customer trajectories on to ALO



Despite the variety of trajectories shown in Figure 1.1 there were generally three main routes through which customers were referred onto ALO:

- **the customer attended a Jobcentre Plus interview**, during which the adviser confirmed eligibility; the customer then visited a college on an open day or enrolment period to begin training (**green arrow**);
- **the customer was identified as eligible for ALO by a training provider**, who then subsequently referred the customer to Jobcentre Plus to discuss ALO in more depth. Customers were then referred back to the college to begin or continue with their course (**orange arrow**); and
- **the customer was identified as eligible for ALO by either Jobcentre Plus or a training provider, attended a Jobcentre Plus interview and then referred onto a nextstep adviser or Skills Coach** to confirm eligibility and to discuss course options. Customers were then referred to the college to begin their course (**red arrow**).

Regardless of the referral route taken by customers, a meeting with a Jobcentre Plus adviser to discuss ALO was always initiated at some stage and the process was always completed by visiting a college, either to enrol on a course or to continue with study for converted customers. The following sections discuss each stage of the customer journey onto ALO.

3.2 Initial conversation with Jobcentre Plus

As noted above, all customers were required to have an initial discussion with a Jobcentre Plus adviser in order to be referred on to ALO. In situations where customers had no prior knowledge of ALO, it was usually mentioned by advisers after the customer had spontaneously expressed an interest in training, or the adviser felt that the customer would benefit from training to achieve their employment ambitions. Alternatively, if customers were already aware of ALO, either through a friend or a training provider, the subject of training tended to be raised by the customer.

In either circumstance, advisers would assess the eligibility of the customer prior to discussing the pilot in further detail. If the customer expressed doubts about training, advisers would refer them to nextstep for additional guidance or provide a leaflet for them to take home and read in their own time and to arrange a meeting to discuss the pilot further.

'I personally give out leaflets so that the customer can take it away and see what we actually do, you know. It gives them an insight, and gives them enough of an insight to come back and say okay here's what I'm interested in.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Central London, staff re-visit)

Jobcentre Plus advisers identified potential ALO customers in accordance with their understanding of the eligibility criteria. In addition to the issues described in section 2.1.1 resulting from advisers' lack of understanding of the eligibility criteria, advisers also reported difficulty assessing customers' eligibility in relation to whether they held any previous National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 2 qualifications. In these situations, advisers had the option to refer customers to either a nextstep adviser or a Skills Coach for further assessment. However, limited use of this option (reasons for which are explored in section 3.3) meant that advisers reported having to 'take the customer's word for it' about not already holding a Level 2 qualification.

'If the customers don't tell us, we don't know really the level of qualification they have, so it's up to them to tell us.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Central London, staff replacement)

Some customers described having to 'hassle' advisers into accepting their eligibility for ALO. Customers with these experiences tended to think that the adviser did not understand ALO or could not be bothered to refer them. However, the enthusiasm of these customers to get on to training and their persistence with their advisers eventually achieved referrals. Notwithstanding this, these customers were left feeling annoyed about having to push advisers to refer them.

Following eligibility assessments, discussions with Jobcentre Plus advisers tended to focus on providing information about ALO. Variations were found to exist in how the pilot was discussed between advisers and customers and what information

was disclosed at this stage. Throughout the pilot, it was common for advisers to hold back information about the incentives available as part of ALO until later on in the discussion in order to assess customers' commitment to training, rather than to the financial benefits available. In some instances, advisers provided information about specific benefits where these were felt to affect barriers to taking up training, such as childcare or travel costs payments. In the later stages of the pilot, advisers moved towards more proactive 'selling' of ALO, increasingly informing customers of the incentives upfront in discussions to encourage take-up. The typical view throughout the pilot was that advisers held back giving information about financial incentives, although proactive 'selling' of ALO was found to have increased in the second year of the pilot.

Customers' commitment to training was also tested by advisers through asking them to attend college open days and research Level 2 courses they would be interested in taking up. Advisers suggested that by encouraging customers to do these activities 'off their own back', it demonstrated an enthusiasm to take-up training and proved the commitment of the customer to ALO. This was viewed by advisers as an effective method of understanding which eligible customers were really interested in training and which were not.

Once customers were identified as eligible and were seen to be committed to taking up training, advisers would then most commonly inform customers of the benefits of ALO. Advisers outlined the incentives available and discussed projected earnings or a 'Better Off Calculation' upon gaining a Level 2 qualification. Customers found this to be a particularly positive and motivating feature of the initial discussion with Jobcentre Plus advisers as they realised that there was added value in taking up ALO.

'We'll do Better Off Calculations...so then they think, well hang on, if I do a bit of training, I'll be even more better off, so that sort of gets them thinking that way.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth, staff re-visit)

Throughout the pilot, customers described experiences of advisers' uncertainty about eligibility criteria, resulting in confusion about whether they would be able to take-up training. These experiences were broadly confirmed by staff who emphasised the complexity of the referral process and, in some cases, acknowledged a lack of understanding of eligibility criteria (see Section 2.1.1).

3.3 Nextstep and Skills Coaches

Limited reference was made by respondents regarding the role of nextstep and Skills Coaches in the delivery of ALO. Jobcentre Plus advisers only tended to refer customers to nextstep advisers or Skills Coaches in cases where a customer was unsure about training or course selection, or where their skill level was in question. The involvement of nextstep and Skills Coaches around assessing the skill level of a customer was most commonly used when a customer could not recall or recite what qualifications they had to a Jobcentre Plus adviser.

Where contact had been made it was found that nextstep and Skills Coaches performed a number of roles in delivering ALO, including: offering careers advice to customers; providing further information on ALO; outlining applicable courses to customers; providing support with improving and updating customers' CVs; and conducting assessments such as a 'skill check' to ascertain possible courses the customer could take.

However, over the course of the pilot Jobcentre Plus advisers described making fewer referrals to nextstep advisers or Skills Coaches. Reasons given for this included: the extra time it took during the referral process; customers not requiring the advice; and lack of understanding of ALO eligibility criteria exhibited by nextstep advisers or Skills Coaches compared to Jobcentre Plus advisers. This latter point was felt to result from the small number of ALO customers handled by nextstep advisers or Skills Coaches.

Views regarding nextstep advisers and Skills Coach advisers' understanding of ALO meant that Jobcentre Plus advisers made fewer referrals to these services. Over the course of the pilot this led to a reduction in their role in delivering ALO and further compounded their lack of experience and understanding of ALO. While the principle of providing careers and training support was favoured by Jobcentre Plus advisers, in some cases the actual experience was felt to complicate the referral process. Exceptions were noted, however, in situations where nextstep advisers made regular visits to Jobcentre Plus to allow advisers to quickly refer customers to their services if needed.

Skills coaches and nextstep advisers generally did not experience as many referrals later in the pilot as they had in the first year, but were unclear as to the reasons for this. As a result, it was felt as though their understanding of ALO had not improved over time as their involvement was said to be minimal and did not allow them sufficient experience to understand the process.

'We didn't actually refer a lot of people to ALO in fairness so we didn't have to have a great understanding of it, it is not like I was using the service every single day. If I had used it every single day obviously my awareness of the service would have been greater.'

(Skills coach, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon, staff re-visit)

3.4 Moving onto training

Customers' recall of their movement onto training was mixed, but it was generally felt to involve a high volume of paperwork and liaison with colleges and Jobcentre Plus. As with the referral process, participating customers did not always follow a set process onto training. Variations included customers being directly enrolled on to training from their discussion with a Jobcentre Plus adviser; customers needing to complete aptitude tests before commencing training; and some attending induction days at colleges.

Oversubscription on some courses, such as gas installation, led to the introduction of English and mathematics tests prior to candidate selection to ensure that only the best students got a place. Such courses tended to be over subscribed before ALO students had chosen to take them up, due to a lack of lead in time between eligible customers becoming aware of ALO and course start dates. Often, participating customers were not aware of such tests until they had registered their interest with colleges and this resulted in added stress.

Jobcentre Plus advisers encountered problems with other popular courses, such as hairdressing and beauty therapy, due to lack of demand in local labour markets to justify the level of interest. In these cases, advisers either allowed customers to take up the training, with the caveat that it would be difficult for them to find employment upon completion and that self-employment might be a possible option, or informed customers that they must choose an alternative course due to the saturation of skilled people in these areas.

Having selected a course at a participating college, customers were required to return to Jobcentre Plus to sign and complete several forms. Customers were typically uncertain of the purpose of these forms, although Jobcentre Plus staff and training providers confirmed that these were a 'letter of undertaking' and a 'REF 2' form. These documents outlined to the college who the customer was and why they had been referred onto training. Customers were required to take these forms to the college when enrolling on a course.

An 'SL2' or 'starter and leaver' form was also provided to participating customers by Jobcentre Plus. This form established the incentive payments the customer was to receive and needed to be signed by both Jobcentre Plus and the college to ensure that payments commenced. Advisers gave differing accounts of when this form was handed to training providers, including at point of enrolment, and once the customers' place on a course had been confirmed. Problems with the SL2 form were said by Jobcentre Plus advisers to centre on colleges being slow to return the form to Jobcentre Plus, resulting in payment delays for customers. Delays in payments were a continuing theme throughout the pilot and said to be caused by colleges not understanding the importance of the SL2 for the provision of customers' incentives and course equipment. These delays resulted in distress and inconvenience to these customers, in some cases requiring them to borrow money from family and friends to cover costs thought to be administered by Jobcentre Plus.

'We won't issue any payments and we won't make payments until we've received an SL2 back...But still they [colleges] dragged it, you know, they dragged their heels.'

(District officer, Central London, new cohort staff)

The final form that needed to be completed by participating customers was a 'learning agreement'. This was provided by the college and established the obligations of the customer and the college. No problems were mentioned with

this form and although customer recall of the form was low, most could remember signing the form once probed.

With the exception of the difficulties experienced in obtaining payments, customers tended to view the process of being moved onto training positively, describing it as 'smooth'. This was found to continue over time and aside from the problems in obtaining payments, the process of moving onto training was seen to improve as the pilot went on.

3.5 Training provision

On the whole, the training delivered as part of ALO was viewed favourably by all respondent groups. Despite variations between customers, courses undertaken and colleges providing the training, customers generally found their courses to be hard work, but extremely rewarding. Limited changes were noted over the length of the pilot about how the training courses were viewed, although this is likely to be due to courses remaining similar over the pilot period.

Customers were enthusiastic about training received, although courses were consistently described as 'demanding' and 'intensive'. Indeed, many customers found the intensity of the training to be a factor contributing to their commitment to continue with the course, increasing their sense of achievement associated with achieving a Level two qualification. However, for some customers, particularly lone parents, the level and amount of work proved too demanding when coupled with their home responsibilities and resulted in them dropping out before completing the course. Whilst college tutors and Jobcentre Plus staff were described as 'supportive', it was acknowledged that there was only a limited amount that could be done to help these customers outside of the college environment.

'[After the work in college] Then you were supposed to go home and study. In my circumstance that was hard for me because of my situation.'

(Inactive benefit customer, Central London, September 2006 intake)

Courses generally consisted of a combination of both theory and practical exercises. The practical elements were favoured by most customers who valued the transferable vocational skills they gained from these sessions. For similar reasons, courses that had a strong vocational element or included work experience placements were particularly favoured by customers and were seen to be valuable learning experiences. For customers on courses without work experience, it was suggested that this would have added to the positive experience they had while on ALO.

Work experience placements outside of the college were often built into the course timetable and generally consisted of a specified day during the week rather than a certain number of hours that had to be undertaken per week. This allowed the management of time to be easier for customers. However, some training providers had fully functional areas where students could engage in real work for genuine

customers, such as working motor garages, hairdressing salons and institutional kitchens where meals were prepared for the college canteen. Placements were organised by college tutors and customers favoured this approach as it was acknowledged that arranging the experience themselves would be difficult and daunting.

In addition to learning transferable skills, customers' views of the training were affected by their experiences of college tutors and other course attendees. Customers described mixed views of college tutors throughout the pilot. Contrasting views of tutors tended to depend upon the following issues:

- **Clarity of explanation** – How well the tutor explained course content, including how often one-to-one assistance was offered when customers were experiencing difficulties understanding aspects of the course.
- **Consistency** – How consistent the tutor's teaching and attendance was. Occasionally, customers described how some lessons were better planned than others. It was felt that some lessons were too brief to warrant the effort in attending college and were viewed unfavourably by customers. Customers also criticised tutors if they failed to attend classes, resulting in inconveniences to customers.
- **Knowledge** – How knowledgeable the tutor was, including customers' perceptions of their understanding and experience of a particular subject.
- **Support and approachability** – How supportive the tutor was regarding college work and understanding customers' other commitments and how approachable they were. In addition, customers reported that some tutors were more 'friendly' than others, which resulted in customers feeling more comfortable about asking questions or asking for further assistance.

'Any problems that you may face, or anything, they were the ones that you were able to speak to, to find out how do I deal with this, how do I get along...'

(Inactive benefit customer, Birmingham and Solihull, September 2007 intake)

Other course attendees also affected customers' views of the training provision. In particular, older customers (in the group aged 36+) who had already expressed concerns about returning to education after a long period found the younger age of fellow students to be problematic. These problems mainly centred on perceptions of younger students being less committed to training and therefore disrupting other's learning. The effect on customers' experiences of training was acknowledged by Jobcentre Plus advisers and training providers, who claimed to have warned customers of the potential impact of other students. Yet despite this, some customers, particularly those aged 36+ expressed surprise that courses were age inclusive.

'I thought it would be kind of, an older persons kind of...everyone would be kind of older in there...but I found that you're put in a class with 16 year olds which made it very difficult to actually do an awful lot because you had these 16 year olds playing up,...it was just bedlam.'

(Jobseeker's Allowance customer, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon, September 2006 intake)

Customers also described favourable experiences of other students and ALO customers on their courses, with 'making new friends' cited as one of the benefits of undertaking training. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that being in an environment where talking to others was necessary facilitated the development of 'softer skills', such as social interaction, confidence building and team working (see section 4.1.2).

3.6 Contact between customers and Jobcentre Plus

Contact between customers and Jobcentre Plus advisers was explored in relation to two areas: contact during training; and contact after completion of training.

3.6.1 Contact during training

During training, ongoing support offered by Jobcentre Plus advisers tended to vary between customers. The nature of the support appeared to vary between the pilot districts and individual advisers, ranging from no contact to regular, structured support. Specifically, the nature of contact between customers and Jobcentre Plus advisers varied as follows:

- **No contact with customers** after they had enrolled on a training course.
- **Regular weekly, fortnightly or monthly contact**, mainly for the purpose of reimbursement of expenses. However, advisers also used this time as an opportunity to 'catch up' with customers.
- **Ad hoc contact**, mainly through telephone calls made by advisers to check customers were still training and could therefore continue claiming their training allowance. As above, these phone calls were also used as a chance to touch base regarding training progression, problems encountered and the course itself.
- **Six-monthly learning reviews** at the Jobcentre Plus to discuss any issues and to gauge customer plans upon completion of their course.

It was usual for customers to have at least some degree of contact with Jobcentre Plus advisers throughout their course, although for those who suggested such contact was absent, this was not seen to be an issue. Those without any contact believed that they did not need to discuss anything with their advisers. It was stated that an adviser's input would not have assisted them with their college work and that if they did need to discuss something it was known that they could contact them.

One benefit of taking up ALO for all customers was an exemption from attending regular Jobcentre Plus meetings, such as the fortnightly 'signing-on' meetings for those claiming JSA and the six monthly Work Focused Interviews (WFI) for lone parents. Customers described how not needing to attend these meetings enabled them to focus on their courses and allowed them to have an uninterrupted routine of learning. It was suggested that had they been required to regularly attend regular Jobcentre Plus meetings, their attention would have been disrupted from their studies and could have led to adverse affects on their work.

3.6.2 Contact after completion of training

Upon completion of training, all customers were supposed to have a WFI with their Jobcentre Plus adviser or a progression interview with a nextstep adviser or Skills Coach. The terminology used to describe the nature of the interview varied according to the pilot district, with advisers from the Greater Manchester district referring to them as 'action plans', those from the London and Birmingham districts describing them as 'WFIs' and those from Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon terming them 'crossroad meetings'.

Customer recall of these interviews tended to be low and only limited references were made to them. In particular, interviews with customers who took up ALO in the later stages of the pilot appeared to suggest that progress meetings of this nature were a rare occurrence. For those who felt they were not proactively approached by their Jobcentre Plus adviser for a progress meeting at the end of the process, the service was perceived to be disjointed.

'I think that [having a post-training WFI] would have been a very good idea because that would have...informed me like what are my options now... Just to put me in the right direction, just to see where I am in terms of getting a job, whether I'm prepared...'

(Jobseeker's Allowance customer, Birmingham and Solihull, September 2007 intake)

In contrast, Jobcentre Plus advisers and nextstep advisers had a better recall of these interviews, suggesting that customers still in receipt of benefits frequently confused progress meetings with other Jobcentre contacts, such as 'signing on'. Advisers were confident that, despite customers' limited recall, post-training interviews would generally cover a discussion about the course, the next steps for the customer, a 'Better Off Calculation' and a job search based on the newly acquired qualification. It was suggested by advisers that the interviews were effective as they enabled the customer to see how ALO had widened their opportunities in the labour market.

'All of them I have been touch with [...] when they are coming towards the end of a course they are waiting for their results and really how much they would expect to earn [...] We talk about whether or not the placements are going to take them on and pay them you know that kind of thing.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon, staff re-visit)

Moreover, customers felt that their own contact with agencies, particularly Jobcentre Plus, following completion of training, could have been improved. Of primary concern was that customers did not recall receiving post-training WFIs. This phenomenon was found to become more prolific over time as the pilot wound down, with most customers that started courses in September 2007 or January 2008 not recalling a WFI after ALO had finished.

3.7 Relationships between agencies

Overall, staff and customers felt that relationships between professionals involved in delivering ALO could have been improved, with better communications and joint working practices potentially leading to more effective service delivery for customers and a more efficient process for staff. Notwithstanding this, there were examples of successful joint working, in particular involving staff who were passionate about ALO, such as ALO co-ordinators in each district. In addition, specific elements of joint working were identified as underpinning success, including personal relationships, communications and shared working practices. Each of these elements is considered below according to the views and experiences of both staff and customers.

The success of relationships between agencies appeared to greatly depend upon the individual relationships between Jobcentre Plus advisers and training providers. Staff identified a number of factors that affected the success of a relationship:

- **A named contact:** This helped staff quickly gain access to individuals with relevant knowledge of ALO, improving efficient communications.
- **Face-to-face meeting:** Having a face-to-face meeting between staff involved in delivering ALO allowed them to develop rapport and better understand each other's processes and expectations of the pilot. Relationships that were not based on such meetings resulted in staff feeling disjointed from each other, seeing their contacts as 'strangers' or 'just a name'.
- **Knowledge and experience:** Having a relationship with an adviser or training provider who was knowledgeable about technical issues and had experience of ALO customers meant that individuals could draw on this experience to ensure the process ran smoothly. Having these attributes in a relationship also meant issues were efficiently and effectively resolved.
- **Accessibility and reliability:** Staff from both sides reported that '*chasing up*' contacts in stakeholder agencies was a frustrating and time consuming process. Having a contact that was easily accessible and reliable improved the efficiency of service delivery.

During the early stages of the pilot, a lack of personal relationships between staff in different agencies, and communications systems not being in place, were identified as barriers to service delivery, resulting in forms being misdirected and delayed communication channels. However, as the pilot progressed, relationships

between agencies appeared to improve. In particular, where a personal relationship was established early on in the pilot, this supported service delivery throughout the pilot. In cases where individuals left their position or where there were problems with the relationship at the start of the pilot, issues highlighted early on in the pilot tended to persist, although this was dependent on individual relationships.

Communication between agencies was another key factor affecting successful joint working. Relationships between agencies that involved no contact at all, or very limited contact, resulted in a lack of understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. Communication problems were particularly evident when direct communication between Jobcentre Plus advisers and college tutors was required, due to their different contact availability during working hours. This led to relevant information not being disclosed, such as course attendance figures, required by Jobcentre Plus advisers to ensure that training allowance payments could continue.

'I think the first year we didn't have hardly anybody take-up on it, so it didn't really become a problem. But last year it did become more of a problem that the college weren't informing us if people stopped attending or were having problems with the hours or things like that, we were relying more on the students to tell us.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon, staff replacement)

Customers also identified communication problems between agencies during the pilot, with gaps in understanding felt to result from poor information sharing between agencies. For example, some customers felt Jobcentre Plus and colleges did not effectively share information, such as information about the intensity of training courses or customers' background of having been out of education for many years. This led, in some cases, to customers withdrawing from courses as they were not made aware of the workload involved.

'I didn't [expect it to be as hard as it was]. We did a four and a half year apprenticeship in nine months. That's how intense it was.'

(Inactive benefit customer, Central London, September 2006 intake)

Connected to communication levels, Jobcentre Plus staff noted that relationships were often affected by a lack of understanding of the priorities of different agencies. For example, Jobcentre Plus advisers required colleges to return forms after the student had enrolled and Jobcentre Plus advisers stated that colleges did not understand the importance of these forms for customers' incentive payments (see section 3.4). This problem was found to occur in all districts and over the course of the pilot.

'An adviser was having to contact the college on you know a daily basis to get our paperwork back. So without the paperwork back to say they'd started on the provision they couldn't set up a system for their payments to be regularly paid to them'

(District Officer, Birmingham and Solihull, new cohort staff)

In addition to relationships between individuals, joint working was also affected by the presence of a contact who was particularly knowledgeable about ALO, such as a District officer or a professional involved in the pilot from the start. It was found that staff with the greatest knowledge of ALO were particularly motivated to make the pilot work and often went beyond their responsibilities to increase referrals and resolve issues that were troubling other members of staff. In particular, District officers were said to have been helpful in answering queries about the pilot.

'There is somebody from the district who's name is [omitted]...He's my major, major, major link. Any problems he's the man I go to.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Central London, staff re-visit)

In addition to Jobcentre Plus, certain colleges and training provider sites were also reported as having ALO co-ordinators or '*champions*' who were renowned for their knowledge and would often be the main contact for other members of staff. These individuals were unofficially known as '*champions*' by those working in other agencies involved, and it was commonplace for '*champions*' to assume this role, rather than be designated it. Staff from one agency reported that once they had located and contacted '*ALO champions*' in other agencies, they were more confident of being able to maintain a good relationship. The emergence of '*ALO champions*' became more pronounced over the course of the pilot, and in the second year acted to maximise referrals by undertaking roles that went beyond their expected responsibilities. Examples included '*ALO champions*' from Jobcentre Plus proactively attending college open days in an attempt to boost referrals, and '*ALO champions*' from colleges supplying their colleagues from Jobcentre Plus with lists of potentially eligible students already undertaking courses in an attempt to convert them onto ALO.

'I went down for one of the afternoons on an enrolment day...we picked a couple up actually.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Greater Manchester East and West, new cohort staff)

3.8 Summary

Overall, the delivery of ALO varied and was not seen to follow a set pattern in terms of the referral process, the movement of customers onto training and contact during and after training. Due to these variations, the effectiveness of delivery for a customer greatly depended on the level of knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm of the individual staff members involved. Notwithstanding this, it was apparent that the delivery generally improved and became more effective as ALO bedded down over time and staff gained more experience of the pilot. A summary of specific findings are outlined below:

- The referral process did not always follow a set pattern. However, there were three main referral routes, including: referral from Jobcentre Plus directly onto training; converting from training onto ALO; and referral from either Jobcentre Plus or a training provider via nextstep and Skills Coaches.

- Initial discussions varied according to the amount of information disclosed to the customer about the pilot, such as available incentives and the extent to which ALO was 'sold' to customers.
- Participating customers that completed their Level 2 qualification were enthusiastic about training and suggested that childcare and travel incentives enabled them to take-up and maintain training, while the training allowance received in addition to their benefit payments was viewed as a 'bonus'.
- The role of nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches' in ALO was limited. Other agencies felt that the inclusion of these professionals was a good idea, but that they were not utilised effectively and therefore had a limited understanding of the process. This was felt by all agencies involved, including nextstep and Skills Coaches.
- Training was viewed as intensive, but rewarding by customers; contact between participating customers and Jobcentre Plus advisers during and after training was generally considered to be limited by customers.
- Contact between agencies was generally limited, but improved over time. Poor contact was identified as a factor reducing the effectiveness of delivery.
- Certain individuals in each pilot district increasingly became identified as 'ALO champions' over the course of the pilot and greatly contributed to the effective delivery of the pilot.

4 Impact of ALO

This chapter explores the impact of Adult Learning Option (ALO) on customers and staff. Specifically, it discusses the immediate impacts of training on customers, focusing on hard and soft skills gained and the immediate consequences of undertaking training under ALO. Longer-term impacts are also considered, outlining customer outcomes in terms of employment and further training, and impacts on future aspirations. These issues were explored with customers over the course of the pilot, including during revisits to customers who had undertaken training in the first year of intake. The aim of this repeated exploration was to identify any longer-term impacts of ALO on customers. The impact on customers of withdrawing from the pilot is also considered. Finally, the impact of ALO on staff involved in the pilot is discussed, focusing particularly on staff workloads.

4.1 Immediate impacts of ALO on customers

Customers described a range of immediate impacts of undertaking training under ALO. These included impacts on both 'hard' skills, such as general and course specific knowledge, as well as 'soft' skills, such as confidence and motivation. Generally, it was suggested that the acquisition of these hard and soft skills led to an overall boost of confidence and sense of achievement among participating customers, ultimately 'opening doors' by increasing opportunities for further training and employment. Additionally, ALO had the impact of allowing all eligible customers an opportunity to train while remaining on benefits and receiving additional incentives. The immediate impacts of ALO are considered from the perspective of customers following the completion of training, as well as from the viewpoint of staff.

4.1.1 Hard skills

The acquisition of hard skills was felt to be a key impact of ALO on customers. Throughout the pilot, customers reported being proud of improving their skills and specifically gaining a Level 2 qualification, as these were perceived to be useful in securing employment. Hard skills ranged from those based around general education, such as improved numeracy, literacy and Information Technology (IT)

competence, to more vocational skills. Vocational skills encompassed industry specific knowledge and increased understanding of general working practices, such as customer service and shift working.

Gaining these hard skills worked to increase confidence and make customers feel generally 'better equipped' to compete for jobs in the labour market. In particular, having a Level 2 qualification was judged to be a key factor in feeling 'better equipped' as it was thought to be widely recognised by employers. Work placements were also valued for improving customers' understanding of working practices and work environments more generally.

'Since doing the course I've looked into and I'm learning all the time basically, knowing more and more about this industry and all the options, all the avenues are opening up as I go along.'

(Jobseeker's Allowance customer, Birmingham and Solihull, September 2007 intake)

All staff interviewed echoed the sentiments of customers, suggesting that ALO had created opportunities, particularly through undertaking work experience, that would otherwise not have been available to customers. It was also suggested that the acquisition of qualifications and hard skills led to greater employment prospects.

4.1.2 Soft skills

Aside from the acquisition of hard skills, participating customers felt that ALO also helped them gain soft skills, such as personal and interpersonal abilities. Improvements to customer's personal and interpersonal skills were also noted over time by staff delivering the pilot.

Personal skills gained included:

- **Confidence** – Customers, training providers and Jobcentre Plus advisers reported that, regardless of outcome, attending a training course and interacting with professionals and other learners increased their self-esteem. This was true of all customers, but particularly those who had been unemployed for more than 18 months or that had not been in education for many years. For those who completed training, this feeling was heightened by a sense of pride and achievement in gaining their Level 2 qualification.

'You feel that you have achieved something, you feel good "Oh I have got my NVQ2"'

(Inactive benefits customer, Birmingham and Solihull, September 2006 intake)

- **Motivation** – The training experience increased customers' motivation and desire to gain employment or continue training. This was particularly salient for customers who had been on benefits for more than six months and felt training had given them the motivation just to 'get out of the house'. Customers felt

that ALO enabled them to make positive changes to their lifestyle, which for some had involved being 'stuck in a rut' for many years. Moreover, those who completed training suggested that they were now more motivated to pursue higher employment aspirations.

'I think it's given them all the motivation to just pursue something and get on with something as opposed to just sitting on benefits.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon, staff replacement)

- **Management** – Taking up ALO gave participating customers an increased sense of responsibility which led to improvements in their time keeping and reliability. For many, the training routine gave a sense of purpose and structure to their lives. Additionally, the incentives provided through ALO gave customers the opportunity to strengthen their money management skills through the need to provide receipts of payments to Jobcentre Plus advisers.

'It gave me some stability...It kind of gave me some routine, because [previously] I had no routine'

(Inactive benefits customer, Central London, September 2006 intake)

Interpersonal skills developed by customers as a result of participating in ALO centred around:

- **Communication** – Being in a learning environment with others enabled customers to improve on and in some cases rediscover communicational skills. Improvements in conversation, listening and written communication were suggested by some customers and Jobcentre Plus advisers as having particularly strong impacts, especially among lone parents for whom 'adult conversation' had been limited before taking up ALO.
- **Friendships** – An improvement in constructing new, and building on established, relationships was noted by some customers as being a key impact of ALO. Customers were able to meet new people and make friends with others on the course, which, particularly for lone parents, was an opportunity that they did not have beforehand.
- **Team-working** – Working in groups occasionally enabled customers to gain teamwork skills and improve their understanding of others' views and opinions. Customers suggested that team working enabled them to 'broaden horizons' with respect to their views about working with other people.
- **Family relationships** – ALO had knock-on impacts for customers in regards to the dynamic of their family life. Customers reported improved relationships with their children through using skills gained on courses to help children with homework. Customers and staff said learning through ALO had the effect of creating more positive role models within households, with children proud of their parents attending college and gaining new skills.

'In my family, like when the kids come and say "help me with this", I wouldn't know, now when they tell me...I could tell them things because it did give me that confidence, before I'd be like "don't tell me, I don't know nothing about this".'

(Inactive benefits customer, Birmingham and Solihull, September 2007 intake)

4.2 Longer-term impacts of ALO on customers

Customers were revisited over the course of the pilot to ascertain how immediate impacts and perceptions related to longer-term impacts. Customers generally had favourable views about the longer term impacts of ALO, citing experiences of moving towards their career goals. Notwithstanding this, there were also exceptional cases where customers described less positive impacts.

Overall, longer-term impacts centred on customers gaining work, taking-up further training, future aspirations and more general personal and interpersonal skills. Longer-term impacts according to the views and experiences of staff and customers are discussed in the following sections.

4.2.1 Gaining employment

Throughout the pilot, all customers acknowledged that the aim of undertaking ALO was to improve their opportunities for gaining employment. Follow up interviews with customers revealed successful examples of gaining employment, including customers who had been offered positions following on from their work placements. In general, customers tended to move into work in positions that were either directly or closely related to the subject of their Level 2 training. For example, customers who participated on a gas engineering course in some cases went on to find work in this area, occasionally within the same company where they conducted their work placement. Customers who participated in beauty therapy courses under ALO also described finding subsequent employment in the beauty industry.

Customers who were working in sectors not closely related to the subject of their Level 2 training course had generally attempted to gain employment in positions related to their courses, but had been unsuccessful, typically due to further training requirements that they were unwilling or unable to take-up. Notwithstanding this, customers were happy to be in employment and were aware of what they would need to do to move towards realising their career ambitions, should they decide to build upon their progress made throughout ALO.

Customers who had moved into work overwhelmingly described how they had achieved a 'better' job to any held prior to taking up training under ALO. This was primarily due to customers believing that through participating in ALO, they were 'better equipped' to undertake more challenging jobs. This was due to the acquisition of both hard and soft skills, specifically improved qualifications and confidence.

'I would be better, a lot better equipped to deal with it, although before I imagine with the right training I could have dealt with it anyway, but I feel a lot more confident now.'

(Inactive benefit customer, Greater Manchester East and West, September 2007 intake)

Despite these successes, some Jobcentre Plus advisers described the impact of ALO on some customers' employment opportunities as limited. For those interviewed while their customers were still in training, it was felt that some of them would return to the benefits system as ALO did not prepare them for the world of work. Furthermore, advisers who had experience of their customers completing training and then returning to benefits confirmed what was thought by some staff interviewed earlier in the pilot – that customers would need to obtain a Level 3 qualification before entering into work.

'I don't think they're job ready. They're not going to go into work. If they complete their course they're going to still be on benefit.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Birmingham and Solihull, staff re-visit)

4.2.2 Taking up further training

The research suggested that customers who engaged with ALO occasionally went on to take up further training following completion of their course. Factors driving customers to undertake further training included both the desire to continue learning and the perceived need to gain higher level or more specific skills in order to enter the labour market. Customers who gained a Level 2 qualification occasionally moved on to take a Level 3 qualification. Pursuing further training was mostly viewed as a positive move for customers who described ALO as a 'stepping stone' on to other areas. For example, a customer who undertook a beauty therapy course on ALO decided that she would like to gain more knowledge and experience of the industry and undertook a Level 3 course in the same area at a local college. Another customer who participated in a business administration course as part of ALO subsequently went on to undertake a private secretary's diploma, as her ALO course had facilitated an interest in secretarial work.

Customers often reported the need for a Level 3 qualification in order to enter a desired field of employment. This was commonly because customers had been rejected for jobs, such as nail technician or hairdresser because their Level 2 did not give them the skills they required to work unassisted in a salon. It was common for employers to ask for the greater degrees of work experience, and skills that a Level 3 course would teach them. For example, a customer who undertook a beauty therapy course under ALO stated that she had applied for a job only to be told that the Level 2 had only covered skills on particular types of nails and that she would need to know about other types of nails in order to be offered employment. It should be noted, however, that these sentiments were suggested by customers as being dependent on the quality of teaching and work experience provided by individual colleges (see Chapter 3).

There were also customers who found they would need to undertake further training to gain employment, but were not able to pursue this. Exceptionally, the initial enthusiasm of customers who felt they required further skills had been depressed when it became apparent that this was not sufficient to secure work in their desired profession. This was a surprise, as it was felt that the purpose of ALO was to train to gain employment and had the effect of dampening customer confidence. Where customers had a desire to take up a Level 3 course to gain employment, the fact that this was not available under ALO was cited as a potential barrier. Despite this, customers had occasionally used their new found confidence to proactively research funding for further training and were waiting to hear the outcomes on this.

'[It has not impacted] immensely at the moment because I've still got to complete Level 3 direction to qualify to a level which is recognised [by the industry]'

(Inactive benefit customer, Central London, September 2007 intake)

On the whole, customers undertaking or considering further training felt they required a Level 3 qualification to obtain their desired job and, more exceptionally, a Level 3 was required as a condition of a job offer accepted after completing their Level 2 on ALO. In certain cases, customers who undertook Level 3 training continued to receive support from Jobcentre Plus. For example, advisers had helped prepare customers for job interviews following their training or supported customers in identifying possible career options.

'I told her that I was on the Level 3 course and she did say to me that we could start looking for admin jobs nearer the end of my course...so I think I'm going to start looking then, so it's quite helpful really...'

(Inactive benefit customer, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon, September 2007 intake)

4.2.3 Impact on future aspirations

Customers revisited over the course of the pilot described the impact of ALO on their career aspirations. In particular, those who initially described feeling 'unsure' about their future plans subsequently were able to outline a far clearer idea of their goals as a result of their engagement in the pilot.

For customers who entered training or work following ALO, this involved a realisation that they would need to constantly update their skills to stay ahead of the competition and continue to work at the highest level of their ability. Some customers suggested that they would like to pursue their ambitions further, by taking up more senior and managerial positions than originally targeted.

'...As soon as I get better I'm going to go back to work and I'm going to do that. Because then you can go to the management position as well.'

(Inactive benefit customer, Central London, September 2006 intake)

If they were not already in employment, customers generally had a clearer idea of what positions and industries they would like to pursue. Above all, ALO enabled customers to see how they and their employment opportunities had progressed and evolved over time. This was illustrated by some customers feeling that they had developed beyond employment roles they had previously undertaken and felt that through ALO they were better equipped to undertake more challenging forms of employment.

'It's unusual, I've always done shop work, always, I was manager of shop work and I have really, had a total difference, I don't think I'd ever go back to shop work again. Never.'

(Inactive benefit customer, Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth, January 2008 intake)

4.2.4 Longer-term impacts on personal skills

Customers described how confidence that had been immediately gained from participating in ALO generally continued into the longer term. Confidence was harnessed and transferred into areas such as interview skills and improved family relations. Customers who had completed a training course through ALO reported being more assured in interviews of their own ability to carry out a role due to the qualifications they had gained and through their improved personal and interpersonal skills. As noted previously, customers also reported having better relationships with family members, especially with children. It was regularly suggested that customers felt more able to help children with homework, having greater confidence in their own knowledge.

In exceptional cases, however, customers reported that the immediate benefits of participating in ALO had declined in the longer-term. Customers described how they were led to believe that gaining a Level 2 qualification would enable them to gain employment. Subsequent difficulties finding a job, typically blamed on the need for higher qualifications and greater work experience, led to customers losing confidence. Customers suggested that if they had been provided with realistic information about their career prospects based on a Level 2 qualification, this could have been avoided. However, this is not to suggest that customers were less confident as a result of taking up ALO.

'...[I had confidence] in the beginning but now that is waning. I think the confidence does take a knock after a while if you're applying...it's like back to square one really.'

(Inactive benefit customer, Greater Manchester East and West, September 2007 intake)

Despite the requirement for further qualifications and experience impacting on employment opportunities, it should also be noted that the economic downturn may have played a role in the limited availability of jobs in the later stages of the pilot. Customers who had taken up trade courses, such as plumbing and gas installation reported that employers were not recruiting or advertising apprenticeships due to lack of business.

4.3 Impact of withdrawing from ALO

A small number of customers interviewed as part of this research described having 'dropped out' of ALO training⁸. In general this was explained as due to 'personal circumstances'. Specifically, customers who failed to complete their courses reported having difficulties in adjusting to juggling training and their home life, especially where customers had young children and were required to complete course work outside college hours. It was suggested that had there been greater flexibility in the timing and nature of provision, particularly around the need to undertake full-time training, these customers may not have dropped out.

'It was too hard, I couldn't do it really. It's very hard when you've got the children...It wasn't just going to college, I [also] had to go home and do the study, then all practice and I was with my children so it was very difficult.'

(Non-participating customer, Central London, took up ALO but did not complete training)

The impacts of withdrawing from ALO varied, but customers typically continued on benefits. While some customers had attempted to restart their course, being informed by their Jobcentre Plus adviser that they would need to fund the training themselves generally forestalled these attempts. Less commonly, customers became employed through finding work independently of Jobcentre Plus.

4.4 Impacts of ALO on staff

Overall, ALO had varying degrees of impact on each of the staff respondent groups involved in the research.

For **Jobcentre Plus advisers**, ALO was described as a 'full-time commitment' and impacted on increased workloads through 'vast amounts' of paperwork involved in the customer referral process. It was suggested that paperwork took time to complete and distribute among other agencies involved in the pilot. This was especially prominent in earlier stages due to staff unfamiliarity with the processes involved. As the pilot progressed and staff became more experienced and efficient at conducting referrals, the workload became more manageable and accepted as an aspect of their job. This was despite increases in take-up in the second year of the pilot.

'It got very stressful at the beginning, a lot to do, a lot of paperwork coming in...until I got it into some sort of routine...then I sort of had to set a process up so it was manageable for me and my normal day.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon, staff replacement)

⁸ Approximately five customers over the course of the pilot described having 'dropped out' of their ALO training course.

In addition to the quantity and complexity of paperwork, advisers also described how training up new team members on ALO impacted upon their role. It was suggested that informing new advisers about ALO took a great deal of time as there was so much to learn.

As with Jobcentre Plus advisers, **training providers** stated that ALO had a relatively greater impact on them earlier on in the pilot due to the time taken to become accustomed to the processes involved. Despite the increases in take-up in the second year, it was found that improved contact with other agencies and a greater experience of ALO customers led to more efficient referrals. Despite an increased volume of paperwork and administration commitments associated with ALO, training providers suggested that ALO was never burdensome and did not have any major impacts on their workloads.

Nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches suggested that ALO did not have a great impact on them in any way. In the first year of the pilot this was attributed to low take-up and, as the pilot progressed, it was suggested that minimal impacts were a consequence of customers not being referred onto them.

Irrespective of these views, the withdrawal of the pilot was perceived to be a disappointment. Although it was acknowledged that problems existed in the delivery of ALO, it was generally felt by all staff interviewed that they had 'turned a corner' and problems were becoming less frequent. Indeed, some staff, particularly Jobcentre Plus advisers, described feeling 'irritated' that the pilot had been withdrawn just as they had begun to understand it.

'Like, you know with any new thing, anything new you need time to adjust and the with ALO, before we got used to it, it just sort of came to an end.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Central London, staff re-visit)

Respondents suggested that the withdrawal of ALO would lead to more Jobcentre Plus customers remaining on benefits, as they did not have the skills to enter into sustainable employment and were restricted from accessing training due to the costs involved⁹. Customers who gained employment following participation in ALO felt they would not have been able to achieve their position without the provision of free and incentivised training. This sentiment was particularly evident among lone parents and Lone Parent advisers, due to the impact of childcare payments on their ability to take-up training.

'Most of the people that I referred, at least half of them have got little children. You have to pay nurseries, it's quite expensive, they are not at school, so they couldn't have done it without this option.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser, Central London, staff replacement)

⁹ These perceptions were given by respondents of the possible implications of withdrawing the ALO pilot. The authors and members of the steering group are aware that individuals claiming benefits would be entitled to fee remission (and funding, subject to status) should they decide to participate in training.

4.5 Summary

Overall, ALO had broadly positive impacts and outcomes for participating customers. Customers suggested that they felt they had a greater chance of being employed as a result of developing skills throughout their training courses. Specifically, the pilot impacted on customers and staff in the following ways:

- Allowing eligible customers to take up training while remaining on benefits and having access to the provision of childcare, travel fees and course equipment.
- Facilitating the acquisition of hard and soft skills, which were felt to enhance the employability of the customer.
- Allowing customers to realise their ambitions and enabling them to work towards these through enrolling on further training courses and taking up 'better' jobs.
- Increased workloads for Jobcentre Plus advisers throughout the pilot and increased workloads for training providers in earlier stages.
- The withdrawal of ALO was viewed as disappointing, with all types of staff acknowledging that they were only recently able to deliver it effectively and customers suggesting that many others would have benefited from ALO or a similar scheme.

5 Conclusions

This final chapter outlines the conclusions of the research in relation to the main aims and objectives. Specifically, it focuses on the key drivers underpinning referrals and customer flows in the second year of the pilot; the effectiveness of the delivery of the Adult Learning Option (ALO); and the impacts of the pilot on staff and customers. Furthermore, implications for Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) are discussed, focusing on what can be learnt from the pilot.

5.1 Key drivers affecting take-up of ALO

A variety of factors were found to affect the take-up of ALO. These tended to relate to staff understanding, perception and willingness to refer eligible customers on to ALO, and customers' attitude, awareness and ability to take it up.

As the pilot developed, take-up levels were said to have increased and this was very much seen as a consequence of the increased understanding and knowledge of advisers in relation to the pilot. Advisers were found to have gained experience over the first year and this had enabled them to gain a more detailed understanding of the pilot, such as referral process requirements and eligibility criteria. This experience had also begun to improve advisers' links and working practices with training providers. However, relationships with nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches had not developed. Notwithstanding this, lack of understanding, ability to 'sell' the pilot and willingness to refer eligible customers onto ALO also acted as key drivers affecting take-up. The increased experience of ALO co-ordinators, or 'champions', allowed pilot districts to draw on key contacts who were particularly knowledgeable and passionate about ALO. Specifically, these ALO co-ordinators linked up with providers to increase take-up rates, for example by attending college open days to identify eligible participants and by liaising with colleges to gain lists of potentially eligible students to convert onto ALO.

As ALO bedded down, referrals were increasingly driven by customers who wanted to engage in the training after becoming aware of the pilot through recommendations. This type of customer had heard about ALO from other participating customers and this had the effect of increasing interest and referrals for those eligible to take up ALO.

Despite these improvements in take-up, it was widely felt by respondents that ALO would have benefited from being more comprehensively publicised and marketed. All staff and customers suggested that many more customers would have been eligible to take-up training under ALO than were identified and that the potential of ALO referrals had not been realised. This was made apparent through the increased referrals made in the second year, where customers had been informed of the existence of ALO through other participants and furthered efforts by ALO co-ordinators to increase take-up rates.

5.2 Key factors affecting delivery of ALO

Jobcentre Plus advisers' experience of ALO improved over time and enabled them to streamline the referral process. In the second year of the pilot use of nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches was said to have decreased. This was very much seen as a consequence of the improved knowledge of advisers in relation to delivering ALO as well as the perception that nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches lacked knowledge. It was also seen as a consequence of the time constraints placed on Jobcentre Plus advisers to refer participants within course enrolment deadlines.

Staff, particularly Jobcentre Plus advisers and training providers, reported difficulties administering aspects of the customer referral process. In particular, the paperwork required to enrol a customer onto a training course and to obtain support payments was seen as extensive and complex with training providers reportedly slow to return SL2 forms to Jobcentre Plus, resulting in payment delays to customers. It was suggested that problems identified with administration and paperwork in the first year of the pilot largely persisted into the second year. However, the impact on workload was said to have decreased as advisers became quicker and more familiar with the processes.

The training provision provided as part of ALO was seen to be effective, by both staff and customers over the course of the pilot. Customers described how they gained many skills that enhanced their employability as a result of participating in a training course. Courses that involved work experience or placements were described as being particularly effective in developing skills that were perceived to be valued by employers.

The effectiveness of delivering post-ALO support was generally found to be limited by customers, especially those taking up training in the later stages of the pilot, although the reasons for this were unclear. Customers who did not experience a post-ALO Work Focused Interview (WFI) suggested that having this would have been helpful in harnessing the confidence gained through training in finding employment.

ALO generally had positive impacts and outcomes for customers who completed training courses. Training allowed customers to learn new skills, develop existing skills and gave customers confidence to realise and pursue their employment ambitions. Many customers found employment after participating in ALO and

others pursued further training due to the positive experiences they had on their Level 2 courses.

Customers who remained on benefits after completing training often felt they would require further qualifications and work experience to follow their employment ambitions. These customers generally expressed an interest in continuing training and in particular described aspirations to achieve a Level 3 qualification, which was felt to be necessary to gain their desired employment. Yet despite the desire to continue training, the cost of undertaking further training was identified as prohibitive in certain cases. This had the effect on some customers of reducing the confidence that had been gained over the course of ALO as they knew they would need to train further, but could not afford it. Customers who participated in ALO during the later stages of the pilot found that barriers to employment were also based on lack of work due to fewer employment opportunities being available.

5.3 The added value of ALO

The principle of ALO was viewed in a positive light by all respondents and was felt, for the most part, to have worked in practice. Respondents believed that had the pilot been extended, problems would have continued to decline as the experience and knowledge of all staff involved increased and relationships across agencies developed.

The benefits of ALO described by customers were numerous. Customers felt that gaining a Level 2 qualification in a relatively short timeframe through full-time training provided them with a structured routine and enabled them to concentrate on something constructive. Being able to train full-time without the need to attend regular Jobcentre Plus meetings was felt to work well as it allowed customers' attention to be constantly focused on their training. Furthermore, the ability to remain on benefits and to receive additional financial support was viewed positively by all customers.

However, the full-time nature of the training meant that certain customer groups, such as lone parents, found it difficult to juggle outside commitments with training. For these customers, full-time training was often described as being too intense, especially when factoring in the work required outside college hours, and it was suggested that, on reflection, part-time training would have been more suited to their needs.

5.4 Impact of withdrawal of the pilot

Participating customers felt that ALO helped them to pursue their employment ambitions and that it could also help others in similar circumstances, such as those for whom lack of skills was a barrier to entering employment. It was suggested that ALO was a great opportunity to take up training that could lead to employment and customers felt 'lucky' to have been able to participate. For these reasons,

participating customers often expressed disappointment that the pilot had been withdrawn.

Staff, particularly training providers and Jobcentre Plus advisers, also expressed a level of disappointment that ALO was being withdrawn. Initial concerns about the administrative burden associated with ALO decreased over the course of the pilot and staff felt that they were just beginning to fully understand the processes involved. They too believed that it was a good opportunity for customers to have access to training provision and felt that the 'whole offer' of ALO was worthwhile for customers. Jobcentre Plus advisers believed that generally positive customer outcomes were an encouraging sign that the pilot was working.

5.5 Relationships and working practices

Overall, staff, particularly those from Jobcentre Plus, described little comprehensive understanding of the role of other agencies involved in the ALO process. It was suggested that relationships could have been improved through formally introducing contacts from other agencies at the outset of the pilot as this would have improved understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

The role of nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches in ALO was limited. Other agencies felt that the inclusion of these professionals was a good idea, but in practice had not been utilised effectively. It was suggested that nextstep and Skills Coaches would have needed to have been more integrated into the process for this system to have worked successfully. This was felt by all agencies involved, including nextstep and Skills Coaches.

Respondents provided examples of good practice in relation to joint working and these tended to centre on the work conducted by ALO co-ordinators, or 'champions'. ALO champions were unofficially titled and were found to be key contacts for all agencies within the pilot districts, liaising with staff involved in the pilot and providing information about issues that were often found to be confusing, such as administering initial payments. ALO champions from Jobcentre Plus offices attempted to increase take-up rates in the second year by working with training providers and attending college open days to identify potentially eligible customers. Similarly, ALO champions based in colleges attempted to increase referrals by liaising with their Jobcentre Plus colleagues by supplying them with lists of potentially eligible students for advisers to pursue.

Data sharing practices between agencies were generally found to be limited. This was largely due to an overall feeling of uncertainty regarding the responsibilities of specific agencies and individuals in providing information. In particular, uncertainty about information requirements between Jobcentre Plus advisers and college tutors caused delays in returning forms and providing course attendance information. These problems were particularly evident where agencies had failed to establish personal relationships between individuals involved in the delivery of ALO.

5.6 Recommendations for other training programmes

Throughout the course of the evaluation, respondents made a number of suggestions and recommendations for how ALO could be improved. In addition, a variety of implicit recommendations could be drawn out of the findings. These recommendations have implications for the development of IES. The recommendations outlined below are divided between those explicitly mentioned by respondents and those implicitly inferred from the findings.

5.6.1 Explicit recommendations

- The understanding of all professionals responsible for delivering ALO was identified as a key barrier to customer referrals and take-up. It was suggested that more comprehensive training and information prior to the launch of the pilot would have supported staff understanding, thereby improving how ALO was sold to, and targeted at, relevant customers. Specific suggestions for training included:
 - holding formal, face-to-face process meetings between all agencies in each district at the beginning of the pilot;
 - providing refresher training courses between the first and second years of intake to enable staff, such as Jobcentre Plus advisers, to improve their understanding and allow new members of staff to be trained through formal channels, rather than ad hoc or on the job training.
- A longer lead-in time between staff responsible for delivering the pilot becoming aware of the pilot and the course start dates would enable them to improve their understanding of ALO and get to grips with administrative processes.
- Financial incentives were not found to have been the deciding factor for customers taking up training. Instead, the overall feeling from customers was that they required a motivation and willingness to undertake training in the first instance. Whereas childcare payments and travel cost supports were found to have enabled customers to take up training, the additional training allowance on top of benefit payments was not commonly viewed as an incentive that encouraged take-up.
- The marketing and publicity of ALO was felt to be another barrier to identifying eligible customers. Specific suggestions to improve the marketing of ALO included:
 - providing clear information to eligible customers of what ALO entailed and outlining the full eligibility criteria;
 - providing information in more visible and wider ranging locations, such as Jobcentre Plus offices, colleges, doctors surgeries, Citizens Advice Bureau centres, and in a range of forms, including leaflets, posters, and television and radio adverts. Media campaigns, such as those utilised by other Learning and Skills Council (LSC) skills initiatives, may have increased awareness and thus take up, especially in the earlier stages of ALO; and

- providing information in these forms from the start of the pilot, and in good time for course enrolment periods.
- Customer eligibility was felt to be restrictive. Specific suggestions for extending criteria and opening up the course to other participants included:
 - increasing the number and range of courses, in terms of subject matter available to customers, including the provision of part-time courses;
 - allowing more flexible course start dates would ensure customers' interest and momentum to undertake training was maximised;
 - allowing courses to be undertaken on a part-time as well as full-time basis. This would tailor future IES initiatives to the customer and allow a greater range of customers to participate;
 - changing the level of course offered to encompass Level 1 and Level 3 qualifications;
 - ALO being available to customers with 'breaks' in their claim history; and
 - ALO courses being available to customers with 'old' Level 2 qualifications or those holding Level 2 qualifications in unrelated subject areas.
- It was felt that relationships and communication between staff in different agencies could have been improved, particularly at the start of the pilot. Specific suggestions once again included introducing face-to-face meetings between contacts in agencies at the beginning of the pilot and each subsequent year of intake.
- Training courses that were work-related, such as those that included work experience or placements, were clearly favoured by customers.
- Simplified paperwork and administrative processes were suggested to streamline the process and improve service delivery.

5.6.2 Implicit recommendations

The implicit recommendations made are outlined below:

- The success of 'ALO champions' suggests that other training programmes should consider dedicated members of staff responsible for supporting their colleagues through any problems or concerns. Identifying these champions within each agency in each district would enable smoother delivery for customers.
- Over the course of the ALO pilot Jobcentre Plus advisers provided more upfront information about the incentives and supports available, rather than withholding this information to test customers' commitment to training. This was done with the aim of increasing take-up. Future IES initiatives may want to incorporate this approach if take-up is identified as a priority.
 - It was found that an effective way to engage customers with the idea of taking up training was to conduct a Better Off Calculation with them, which demonstrated the value of undertaking training and allowed the notion of achieving qualifications to become more meaningful to customers.

- Customers did not appear to be fully aware of the consequences of taking up ALO after the initial discussion at Jobcentre Plus. IES initiatives may wish to consider fully explaining to customers the levels of work, and commitment involved, in training courses and the likely employment outcomes after gaining qualifications.

Appendix A

Technical appendix

A brief outline of the research design and conduct is given in chapter 1 of this report. This appendix provides further details of the research methods used in this study.

Research design

The evaluation of the Adult Learning Option (ALO) was wholly qualitative in design and was conducted across two stages. Stage one took place between June and August 2007, and focused on participants' experiences and views of the first year of the ALO pilot; stage two took place from May 2008 to March 2009, and explored how these issues evolved over time. Both stages comprised three main components, enabling DWP to gain a detailed understanding of ALO from the different viewpoints of those engaged in it.

Pilot districts involved in the research were:

- Birmingham and Solihull;
- Central London;
- Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon;
- Greater Manchester, East and West; and
- Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth.

A qualitative approach to the research, consisting of in-depth interviews and telephone depths, enabled respondents to raise issues of importance in their own words and vocabulary, in the context of their own circumstances and, with probing by the moderator, ensured issues were explored and examined in full. As qualitative methods permit researchers to adapt their approach during the interviews, they are able to be sensitive to the needs and circumstances of the people taking part.

Stage one of the research comprised three main components. Research with:

- **Jobcentre Plus customers who had taken up ALO.**

In total, 40 face-to-face depth interviews were conducted with customers who had taken up ALO. Customers were recruited to include a range of sample characteristics such as: the type of benefit the customer was claiming, length of inactivity, perceived reason for inactivity, age and gender.

Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted between June and August 2007.

- **Professionals responsible for delivering ALO.**

In total, 45 depth interviews were conducted across the five pilot areas with professionals responsible for delivering ALO, including: Jobcentre Plus advisers, nextstep advisers/ Skills Coaches; and training providers.

Interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face, although a small number of telephone interviews were conducted where requested by staff. Initially, nine interviews were meant to take place in each district, but due to staff unavailability this could not be achieved in Central London. Where this was the case, a member of staff from an alternative pilot area was interviewed instead.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted between July and September 2007.

- **Non-participating customers who were eligible for ALO.**

Research with non-participants consisted of 20 face-to-face and telephone interviews with customers from all five pilot areas who either; chose not to take up ALO at invitation; declined involvement at some point during the referral process; or embarked on training, but gave up their ALO course prior to completion.

Interviews lasted between 15 to 30 minutes and were completed between September and October 2007.

Stage two of the research also comprised three components. Research with:

- **Re-visits of Jobcentre Plus customers who had taken up ALO in the first year of the pilot.**

In total, 24 face-to-face depth interviews were conducted with customers who had taken up ALO in the first year of the pilot and re-interviewed in the following year to assess changes and impacts over time. Customers who gave permission to re-contact during the first stage of research were re-contacted to arrange a follow up interview.

Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted between May and September 2008.

- **Customers that had taken up ALO in the second year of the pilot.**

In total, 20 face-to-face depth interviews were conducted with customers who had taken up ALO in the second year of the pilot. Customers were interviewed to assess the impact of ALO over time. Customers were recruited to include a range of sample characteristics such as: the type of benefit the customer was claiming, length of inactivity, perceived reason for inactivity, age and gender.

Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted in March 2009.

- **Professionals responsible for delivering ALO.**

In total, 60 depth interviews were conducted across the five pilot areas with professionals responsible for delivering ALO, including: Jobcentre Plus advisers, Jobcentre Plus District level officers; nextstep advisers/Skills Coaches; and training providers.

- Of Jobcentre Plus advisers, 11 were newly recruited, 11 were re-visited from stage one and three were replacements of staff interviewed in stage one. Replacements occurred where the original contact had left their post and been replaced by another individual.
- One District officer per pilot district (five in total) was interviewed to ascertain how cross-organisational working was managed at a district level.
- Of nextstep advisers and Skills Coaches, 12 were re-visited from stage one and three were replacements of staff interviewed in stage one.
- Of training providers, 12 were re-visited from stage one and three were replacements of staff interviewed in stage one.

The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted between May and September 2008.

In addition, a small sample of three non-participating customers were re-contacted and interviewed during stage two in an attempt to assess the impact of non-participation over time. It was found that non-participation in ALO had little impact on these customers over time and therefore further interviews were not seen as having a significant impact on the overall findings. As such, these three respondents were not counted in the overall sample profile of 209 interviews.

Detailed sample profiles are provided in Appendix B.

Sample design and selection

As is usual in qualitative research, the sample was designed to ensure full coverage of the key sub-groups within the target population, to identify and explain variations in views and experiences between them. Purposive sampling is designed to ensure coverage of key sub-groups within the target population so that variations in experience between groups may be explored.

Prior to the commencement of the recruitment, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) wrote to the five Jobcentre Plus District Managers to obtain consent for the research to be undertaken in their area. Respondents were then purposively selected by British Market Research Bureau (BMRB's) in-house team of specialist field recruiters as follows, using the quotas outlined above and agreed with DWP.

- Participating customers and non-participant interviews with customers who declined to take part in ALO, were recruited via a sample of customers supplied by DWP.
- Non-participant interviews with those who were eligible but not invited to participate in ALO were recruited in the Jobcentre using a free-find approach.
- Following consent for the research to be undertaken in each of the five pilot areas, a list of gatekeepers was provided by DWP. The gatekeepers supplied contact details of appropriate staff on the ground who were subsequently recruited, though snowballing was necessary at times.
- Staff and participating and non-participating customer re-visits were arranged with respondents who agreed to be re-contacted upon completion of their interview in stage one. Respondents were sent an opt-out letter, giving them the opportunity to refuse a follow-up interview.

The recruitment was managed by the BMRB Qualitative Research field management team who used recruiters across the stages to select the respondent sample. The field managers were fully briefed on the project and provided with detailed recruitment instructions and screening questionnaires to assess respondents' eligibility to participate in the research. Respondents were recruited using telephone recruitment, apart from those recruited using a free-find approach in the Jobcentre. The recruiters were members of the IQCS (Interviewers Quality Control Scheme) at the time of recruitment.

Conduct of the fieldwork

The in-depth interviews and telephone depth interviews were moderated by a team of eight qualitative researchers over the course of the research, who have extensive experience of carrying out qualitative research and have been trained in the techniques of non-directive interviewing.

All the fieldwork was exploratory and interactive in form, so that questioning could be responsive to the experiences and circumstances of the individuals involved. Interviews for each stage were guided by a topic guide developed by BMRB, in close liaison with the DWP. Although topic guides ensure systematic coverage of key points across interviews, they were used flexibly to allow issues of relevance to respondents to be covered through detailed follow-up questioning.

The wording of the questions and the conduct of interviews were designed to be appropriate to the needs and circumstances of the people being interviewed. All members of the research team took part in a briefing to ensure the interviewing approach was consistent across the sessions.

Adopting a qualitative approach has made it possible to report on the range of views, experiences and suggestions reported by adviser, providers and customers. The purposive nature of the sample design as well as the sample size, however, means that the study cannot provide any statistical data relating to the prevalence of these views, experiences or suggestions.

The interviews with customers who had taken up ALO were conducted in their homes; face-to-face interviews with staff were held at their place of work; and interviews with non-participating customers (those who were eligible to take up ALO but who had not been invited to) took place at Jobcentre Plus offices. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim; respondents were notified of this at the time of their recruitment and again at the start of the interview.

It is customary practice to use respondent payments when carrying out most qualitative general population research and as such the customer respondents were all given £15 as a 'thank you' for giving up their time to take part in the research.

Analysis

Material collected through qualitative methods is invariably unstructured and unwieldy. Much of it is text based, consisting of verbatim transcriptions of interviews. Moreover, the internal content of the material is usually in detailed and micro-form (for example, accounts of experiences and inarticulate explanations). The primary aim of any analytical method is to provide a means of exploring coherence and structure within a cumbersome data set while retaining a hold on the original accounts and observations from which it is derived.

The analysis of the interviews was undertaken using a qualitative content analytic method called 'Matrix Mapping' which involves a systematic process of sifting, summarising and sorting the material according to key issues and themes.

The first stage of 'Matrix-Mapping' involved familiarisation with the data (in the form of verbatim transcripts) and identification of emerging issues. Based on this preliminary review of the data as well as the coverage of the topic guide and the researchers' experience of conducting the fieldwork, a thematic framework was constructed.

The subject headings included in the **staff** matrix were as follows:

1. Background details and awareness of ALO
2. The referral process – taking up ALO
3. The referral process – nextstep/ Skills Coaching
4. Delivery of ALO – training provision
5. Views on the delivery of ALO
6. Impact of ALO – immediate and longer-term
7. Suggestions for improvements
8. Quotations

The subject headings included in the **customer** matrix were as follows:

1. Background details
2. The referral process – taking up ALO
3. The referral process (2) – *if applicable*
4. The referral process (3) – *if applicable*
5. Delivery of ALO – training provision
6. Views on the delivery of ALO
7. Impact of ALO – immediate and longer-term
8. Suggestions for improvements
9. Quotations

The analysis then proceeded by summarising and synthesising the data according to this thematic framework that comprised a series of subject charts displayed in Excel.

Material from each transcript was summarised and transposed under the appropriate subject heading of the thematic matrix. The context of the information was retained and the page of the transcript from which it came noted, so that it is possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or to extract text for verbatim quotation. Once the data had been sifted, a map was produced which identified the range and nature of views and experiences.

The mapping process is similar regardless of the topic being considered. The analyst reviews the summarised data; compares and contrasts the perceptions, accounts, or experiences; searches for patterns or connections within the data and seeks explanations internally within the data set. Piecing together the overall picture is not simply aggregating patterns, but weighing up the salience and dynamics of issues and searching for structures within the data that have explanatory power, rather than simply seeking a multiplicity of evidence.

Appendix B

Sample profiles

Stage one participating customers

	Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon	Birmingham and Solihull	Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth	Greater Manchester, East and West	Central London
Customer's benefit status					
Inactive	5	6	4	7	4
JSA	3	4	1	3	3
Reason cited for inactivity					
Ill-health/disability			9		
Caring responsibilities			15		
Lack/low level of skills			9		
Other			7		
Length of unemployment					
18 months or more			24		
Less than 18 months but more than 6			9		
6 months or less			7		
Sex					
Male	2	2	0	5	4
Female	6	8	5	5	3
Age					
18-35	6	6	4	5	1
36-RA	2	4	1	5	6
Total			40		

Stage two participating customers

	Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon	Birmingham and Solihull	Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth	Greater Manchester, East and West	Central London
Customer's benefit status					
Inactive	5	7	6	8	6
JSA	3	1	1	5	2
Reason cited for inactivity					
Ill-health/disability			8		
Caring responsibilities			17		
Lack/low level of skills			13		
Other			6		
Length of unemployment					
18 months or more			23		
Less than 18 months but more than 6			7		
6 months or less			6		
Sex					
Male	4	1	1	6	6
Female	4	3	10	7	2
Age					
18-35	5	2	8	9	1
36-RA	3	2	3	4	7
Total			44		

Stage one Non-participating customers

	Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon	Birmingham and Solihull	Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth	Greater Manchester, East and West	Central London
Non-participants	4	5	0	7	4
Point at which customer became a 'non-participant'					
At 'invitation'	10				
Referred but no take up	6				
Took up training but did not complete course	4				
Total	20				

Stage two Non-participating customers (re-visits)*

	Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon	Birmingham and Solihull	Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth	Greater Manchester, East and West	Central London
Non-participants	1	1	0	1	0
Point at which customer became a 'non-participant'					
At 'invitation'	2				
Referred but no take up	1				
Took up training but did not complete course	0				
Total	3				

*NB. Not included in final total of 209 respondents as these were interviews designed to scope for potential longer-term impacts

Stage one staff

	Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon	Birmingham and Solihull	Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth	Greater Manchester, East and West	Central London
Jobcentre Plus Advisers	3	3	3	3	3
Nextstep Adviser Skills Coaches	4	3	3	4	1
Training Provider	3	4	3	2	3
Total	45				

Stage two staff

	Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon	Birmingham and Solihull	Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth	Greater Manchester, East and West	Central London
Jobcentre Plus Advisers	5	4	5	5	6
Jobcentre Plus District level officers	1	1	1	1	1
Nextstep Adviser Skills Coaches	5	3	3	3	1
Training Provider	3	4	3	2	3
Total	60				

