

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 485

Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres

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A report of research carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations

BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
BOCs	Better Off Calculations
CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
CIS	Children's Information Services
CPM	Childcare Partnership Manager
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
EYDCPs	Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships
IB	Incapacity Benefit
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IES	Institute for Employment Studies
LA	Local authority
LMS	Labour Market System
NAO	National Audit Office
NCH	National Children's Homes
NDLP+	New Deal for Lone Parents Plus
NRF	Neighbourhood Renewal Fund
PCT	Primary Care Trust
PSA2	Public Service Agreement
SENCOs	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators
WFIs	Work Focused Interviews

Summary

This report presents results of research into Jobcentre Plus' involvement in Children's Centres. The main research reported here was a qualitative study undertaken in the first half of 2007 in nine Jobcentre Plus districts but it is supplemented throughout by the results of a survey of all 50 such districts conducted in late 2006.

Jobcentre Plus had rarely been involved at the set-up stages of the many Phase 1 Children's Centres. Nevertheless, being in at the start seems to be beneficial, in terms of developing relationships but also in terms of influencing the form of Jobcentre Plus involvement in a Centre. The establishment of satisfactory relationships seemed to turn on the work of particularly active or capable Childcare Partnership Managers (CPMs), on Jobcentre Plus responding actively and positively to invitations to join partnership at an early stage and on the slowly developing understanding among other partners about Jobcentre Plus' intentions/provision.

CPMs have typically been the main contact between Children's Centres and Jobcentre Plus and in many cases this involves both strategic and operational level engagement. The expansion in the number of Children's Centres has placed their day-to-day contact under some strain.

By delivering a mix of services (early learning combined with full day care provision for children, child and family health services, including ante-natal services, parental outreach, family support services). Centres were developing strong links with communities, and building on them to offer additional services to somewhat broader (and much more locally varied) constituencies. Although formally the development of effective links with Jobcentre Plus forms part of their core agenda, in practice this has been extremely varied.

Although there is a wide range of Jobcentre Plus services that could potentially take place in Children's Centres, in practice, those provided are largely focused on a relatively narrow range, as follows:

Fairly passive and generalised information dissemination, through literature/leaflets. Over half of all Children's Centres were stocking Jobcentre Plus leaflets or leaflet stands at the time of the survey (in late 2006). There was a fair consensus that the ready availability, visibility and up-to-dateness of both

specific and general Jobcentre Plus literature was an important need and marked a minimum level of engagement that Jobcentre Plus ought to deliver.

More targeted labour market information, through vacancy boards. The provision of job search opportunities, such as vacancy boards, was less commonly provided, with less than a fifth of Children's Centres displaying vacancy boards.

A range of IT-based means of providing more labour market information through job points, warm phones, internet access. Job points and, to a lesser extent, warm phones appear to be relatively uncommon and are widely (though not exclusively) felt not to be cost effective.

Sponsorship of, or participation in, one-off events. The main type of event being held was jobs fairs, and these took advantage of the Children's Centre close to potential Jobcentre Plus customer groups, while avoiding, or at least minimising, the problem of their every day user flow not drawing in large numbers of immediately relevant individuals.

Adviser outreach delivering services in the Children's Centres. At the time of the survey fewer than 200 Centres across Britain offered regular Jobcentre Plus adviser presence, with around 100 more having Advisers present on an ad hoc basis. A key feature of adviser presence in the Centres is that while it is quite widely seen as desirable, experience suggests that it can also be costly. In addition to certain operational constraints, it is clear that with the total number of Children's Centres being planned, it would be impossible for a Jobcentre Plus adviser to visit each on a regular basis. An interesting attempt to bridge this gap between expensive presence and limited funds is the development of a 'linked adviser' role; with a nominated Jobcentre Plus staff member responsible for orchestrating all the contacts between specific Jobcentre Plus offices and Children's Centres.

The minority of Children's Centre users who had used, or thought that they might use, Jobcentre Plus services, found the ability to do so physically convenient, culturally undemanding and non-stigmatising. They appreciated being able to approach the issues of work and benefits at their own pace and on their own terms and terrain. They also appreciated working face-to-face with a known adviser who would be responsive without forcing the pace. However, most Children's Centre users were indifferent to the existence of Jobcentre Plus activities in their Centre; they were not there to use such services, and were not always even aware of them.

The research identified a number of factors that have contributed to the success of Jobcentre Plus in working effectively through Children's Centres. These included using CPMs as Jobcentre Plus ambassadors; getting involved early; promoting reasonable expectations and delivering against them; and having clear working arrangements.

Factors inhibiting this work are largely the converse of those which facilitate it, but also included a lack of understanding among other partners about Jobcentre Plus' role and intentions; a lack of clarity about the respective inputs of the CPMs and local Jobcentre Plus offices; limited resources and narrow objectives; and a lack of realism about the CPM role and remit.

The effect of Jobcentre Plus involvement on individual Children's Centres, as perceived by staff respondents in the Centres themselves and in Jobcentre Plus, was reported to vary greatly, both from one Centre to the next, according to the extent of Jobcentre Plus activity in those Centres, and from one user to the next, depending on their interest, or potential interest, in work. Important effects were identified in terms of:

- slowly improving attitudes of Centre users towards Jobcentre Plus, leading to their increasing engagement with Jobcentre Plus; having a Jobcentre Plus presence in Children's Centres was seen to be making Jobcentre Plus more accessible to communities and hard-to-reach groups who would be reluctant to visit Jobcentre Plus offices or who would find it logistically difficult to do so;
- concrete evidence of job outcomes and softer labour market outcomes. The research provides examples of users taking up training and employment, moving towards the labour market, expressing greater interest in it and demonstrating increased confidence and aspirations.

There was felt to be considerable potential impact of Jobcentre Plus in these areas, as Jobcentre Plus becomes more fully established within Children's Centres. It was recognised that generational employment would take many years to change but the work that Jobcentre Plus did now could help to reduce and minimise the impact of unemployment culture on the next generation.

Positive effects of working together were observed, both in terms of partnership working and more directly on staff who had had the opportunity to work closely and/or regularly with Jobcentre Plus.

The immediate impact within Jobcentre Plus was felt to be mainly in terms of capacity-building, with particular emphasis placed on the good working relationships that were being built up between Jobcentre Plus, the Children's Centres themselves and the other key partners, including local authorities. Although direct impacts in terms of numbers entering work were felt to be relatively low, outreach work in Children's Centres was seen as helping Jobcentre Plus to meet its targets, particularly around engaging with priority groups such as lone parents.

To develop the Jobcentre Plus offer to Children's Centres in the future, a tiered approach may be helpful, with **a minimum offer**, of fairly low cost elements delivered consistently to all such Centres, and **an enhanced offer** for those which offer greater potential.

The research showed that the ready availability, visibility and up-to-dateness of both **specific and general Jobcentre Plus literature** was an important need

and marked a minimum level of engagement that Jobcentre Plus ought to deliver. In addition, **Jobcentre Plus vacancy boards** demonstrated the value of Jobcentre Plus as an accessible source of potentially relevant vacancies to the typical Centre user, as well as providing genuinely useful help to the jobseeking minority. The survey suggested that only just over half of all Children's Centres were stocking Jobcentre Plus leaflets or leaflet stands and less than a fifth were displaying vacancy boards. In our view, this combination should provide the **minimum offer** which Jobcentre Plus should make to all Children's Centres. While certainly not cost free, this basic offer seems to us to combine a maximum exposure of Jobcentre Plus' existence, availability and ambition to help Centre users, with a relatively modest delivery cost.

The research has suggested a number of criteria which Jobcentre Plus could use to identify Centres where it would be worthwhile concentrating more resources, in the form of an **enhanced offer**. These include the size and footfall of the Centre, the demographic make-up of the local population likely to provide a strong representation of potential Jobcentre Plus customers, locations which are not well served by existing jobcentres. In selected locations, where the existence of a sizeable volume of likely users had been demonstrated or was expected, the minimum offer could usefully be supplemented by somewhat more costly, IT-based provision, which might involve providing more labour market information through **job points, warm phones, internet access**.

In addition, the research showed that a practical and useful means of bridging the gap between the (expensive) on-site presence of a Jobcentre Plus adviser and limited resources is the development of a **'linked adviser'** role, i.e. providing a nominated Jobcentre Plus staff member responsible for orchestrating all the contacts between specific Jobcentre Plus offices and Children's Centres, whether this be in the form of the minimum, or the enhanced, offer. Once CPMs stepped away from their involvement with individual Children's Centres, linked advisers had been key to maintaining and developing this. Given sufficient resources, they had been fairly successful in improving working links between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres, both at the level of the individual jobseeker and more generally between the two organisations.

These basic levels of support could be supplemented by:

- **sponsorship of, or participation in, one-off events, such as a jobs fair or a course to build confidence and skills.** These events offer a good opportunity to build awareness of Jobcentre Plus' presence in, or accessibility through, the Centre;
- **adviser outreach delivering services in the Children's Centres.** A key feature of adviser presence in the Centres is that while it is quite widely seen as desirable, experience suggests that it can also be very costly. As a result, priority could be given to providing the larger and more productive Centres with regular adviser outreach, and the more marginal ones with occasional visits at potentially propitious times.

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of a qualitative study of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) for the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). The research was carried out between December 2006 and July 2007, with the fieldwork starting in February and ending in June.

The overall aim of the project was to provide information on good practice to support future partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and Sure Start Children's Centres, to enable both to fulfil their legal obligations under the Childcare Act. This study will feed into the development of local guidance on how Jobcentre Plus can best engage with Children's Centres to fulfil these obligations.

DWP and Jobcentre Plus already had some limited and ad hoc information about the extent and nature of partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres. However, what was needed was a more in-depth and up-to-date picture of activity across the country. An important part of this would be looking at clients' experiences of Jobcentre Plus activity in Children's Centres, as well as the views and experiences of a range of key stakeholders. It was not planned that the study would provide hard evidence of the impact of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres on employment rates. Indeed, it is rather early to make a proper assessment of this.

With this in mind, the three main research objectives for this project were to explore:

- the extent and nature of Jobcentre Plus' involvement in Children's Centres;
- effective working relationships between stakeholders; and
- the experiences of DWP and non-DWP customers using Jobcentre Plus services in Children's Centres.

1.1 Policy background

The Government launched the Sure Start programme in 1998. This was based on evidence that early childhood experiences influence the future life chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including their educational achievement, health and chances of employment.¹ The programme aimed to improve the health and well-being of children before and after birth, to contribute to their development until the time they start school and to support parents with parenting and in entering or returning to work.

Over 500 Sure Start Local Programmes were established in deprived areas across England. These brought together a range of childcare and early years services, health provision and family support. Outreach and community development were an important part of their approach.

In 2003, as part of the *'Every Child Matters'* Green Paper, it was announced that Sure Start Children's Centres would be set up in the 20 per cent most deprived wards in England. These have since been redefined as the 30 per cent most disadvantaged Super Output Areas. These Centres were to combine childcare and early years provision, family support, employment advice and health services. In December 2004, the ten-year strategy for childcare set a target of a Children's Centre for every community by 2010 – 3,500 in total.

By September 2006, 1,000 Centres had opened – nearly all were in the most deprived wards. The majority had developed from facilities developed through previous initiatives. The National Audit Office (NAO)² estimate that of these 1,000, around 500 had their origins in Sure Start Local Programmes, 430 in previous Neighbourhood Nurseries and 70 in Early Excellence Centres.

It is planned to roll out Centres in three phases:

- The first phase, up to March 2006, and as discussed above, aimed to establish Centres in the 30 per cent most disadvantaged areas of the country. Their aim was to provide a wide range of services on-site, while also signposting users to other local relevant provision.
- Phase 2 (2006/08) aims to reach the target of 2,500 Centres – these will cover the remaining disadvantaged areas as well as setting up Centres in less disadvantaged communities. Many of these are planned to be on, or near, school sites; some are new build and others conversions.

¹ Melhuish, E.C. (2004), *A literature review of the impact of early years provision on young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds*, London: NAO.

² NAO (2006) *Sure Start Children's Centres*, London: NAO.

- Phase 3 will aim to increase the number of Centres to meet the 2010 target. It is anticipated that these will nearly all be located in more affluent areas and that their main role will be to provide information and advice and signpost families to services provided elsewhere.

By July 2007, there were 1,262 Children's Centres.³

Since April 2006, the Department for Children, Schools and Families has provided funds to local authorities for Children's Centres. Local authorities are responsible for deciding how they will achieve the programme's aims, although the Department has set requirements for minimum services to be provided. Partnership working will be key to delivery in Children's Centres, given the range of services they are expected to provide.

Children's Centres in the most disadvantaged areas are required to provide the following services:

- good quality early learning, combined with full day care provision for children;
- good quality teacher input to lead the development of learning within the Centre;
- child and family health services, including ante-natal services;
- parental outreach;
- family support services;
- a base for a childminder network;
- support for children and parents with special needs;
- effective links with Jobcentre Plus to support parents and carers who wish to consider training or employment.

In more advantaged areas, local authorities will have some flexibility in which services they provide, according to local need. However, all Centres will be expected to provide a minimum level of services including:

- appropriate support and outreach services to parents/carers and children who have been identified as in need of them;
- information and advice to parents/carers on a range of subjects, including local childcare, looking after babies and young children, local early years provision and education services for three and four year olds;
- support to childminders;
- drop-in sessions and other activities for children and carers at the Centre;
- links to Jobcentre Plus services.

³ Written answer to a Parliamentary Question by Beverley Hughes, Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Jobcentre Plus' role is to provide parents with easier access to training and employment opportunities. There are no explicit rules laying down the level or nature of Jobcentre Plus' involvement in Centres. Currently, the level and nature of involvement is at the discretion of the Jobcentre Plus District Manager and also depends, to some extent, on the approach and role of the CPM. In all districts, CPMs are the main point of contact between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres. Most districts, whatever their size or geographical spread, have one CPM. In New Deal for Lone Parents Plus (NDLP+) pilot areas funding has been provided for additional CPMs. In a few very dispersed districts, a district level decision has been made to have two CPMs.

The CPM role was introduced in April 2003 to co-ordinate Jobcentre Plus programmes and strategies with local childcare development plans and strategies. This involves working with other staff in Jobcentre Plus, local authorities, Childcare Partnerships, Children's Information Services (CIS) and other local childcare organisations and providers. The role of CPMs is to:

- improve access to, and co-ordination of, information on childcare for providers, parents and employers;
- keep Jobcentre Plus advisers up-to-date on childcare issues and initiatives and, in particular, to help them identify and overcome childcare problems experienced by users and to encourage jobseekers with children to look for work;
- offer career and recruitment advice on aspects of childcare work.

CPMs were, therefore, well placed to become the main contact between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres.

The importance of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres has been further emphasised through more recent developments, including the Harker⁴ and Freud⁵ reports, the review of the child poverty strategy⁶ and the new Green Paper on welfare reform⁷.

1.2 Research methodology

During the autumn of 2006, DWP conducted a questionnaire survey of all Jobcentre Plus districts to obtain an overview of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres. The survey asked questions about the extent of Jobcentre Plus'

⁴ Harker, L. (2006), *Delivering on child poverty: what would it take?*, Independent report to the Department for Work and Pensions.

⁵ Freud, D. (2007), *Reducing dependency, increasing opportunity: options for the future of welfare to work*, Independent report to the Department for Work and Pensions.

⁶ Department for Work and Pensions (2007), *Working for children*.

⁷ Department for Work and Pensions (2007), *In work, better off: next steps to full employment*.

involvement in Children's Centres and provided a backdrop to a qualitative research study which explores the nature of Jobcentre Plus' involvement and Children's Centre user experiences in greater depth. Findings from the survey have been included in the report where relevant.

For the second stage of qualitative research, it was decided to adopt a case study approach as this would enable interactions between partners to be explored, as well as the attitudes and experiences of a range of stakeholders and users. It was initially decided that the case study unit would be Jobcentre Plus districts and the survey data were used to select districts with a range of characteristics (these are outlined below). However, on starting the fieldwork, it very quickly became clear that it would be necessary to focus on particular areas within each district. This was for both operational and substantive reasons. A key aim of this study was to explore partnership working, between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres but also between the wider range of organisations involved in Children's Centres. Jobcentre Plus districts are simply too large to be researched as whole units and fully explore the interactions and issues. Most partnerships are developed at local level around one or a few Children's Centres and many organisations are locally limited in their operations – focusing on one or two local authority (LA) areas in each Jobcentre Plus district was, therefore, felt to be more effective. Furthermore, the sheer number of interviews that would have been necessary, as well as the travel involved, made focusing on a whole district impractical. Interviews with CPMs did, however, range more widely across the district rather than focusing just on the Children's Centres being visited.

1.2.1 Survey of districts

In November 2006, a questionnaire was sent to all 50 Jobcentre Plus districts across England (40), Scotland (6) and Wales (4).

The questionnaires were initially sent to Jobcentre Plus regional management, who then cascaded them to Districts Managers. The questionnaire preamble suggested that the questionnaire be completed by whoever had best access to the relevant information. Districts were told that if this meant that a number of people completed different parts of the questionnaire, this was not a problem. In the majority of cases the CPM took responsibility for completing the questionnaire but in a number of districts other stakeholders such as the District Manager, External Relations Manager, Advisory Services Manager and Lone Parent Advisers were also involved.

Questionnaire respondents were asked to select the Jobcentre Plus services being provided in Children's Centres across their district, from a pre-coded list. The coded list was based on the types of service that the NDLP+ evaluation had previously identified as being commonly available. Respondents were asked to list all the Children's Centres in their district and to indicate which specific services were provided in each. It is important to note that there were disparities in the data between the number of Centres stated to exist within the district and those

for which details of Jobcentre Plus service provision were given. This may be because of Phase 2 Centres which were yet to be fully rolled out or may be a result of measurement error. It is impossible to know for sure, therefore statistics on the **number of Centres** providing Jobcentre Plus services should be treated as indicative only. Statistics relating to **the number of districts** providing a service in one or more of their Children's Centres are likely to be more reliable.

A lack of prior evidence on Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres meant that, in a number of cases, it was not possible to pre-code survey questions. To avoid measurement error, some questions were presented as open-ended in the questionnaire, then coded into closed categories once the data had been collected. This coding process involved identifying key issues within each response and collating these into a list of important factors or 'second level codes'. These second-level codes were then grouped into higher-level common themes or 'general category codes'. A coding grid was then drawn up and each response coded against the generic category codes. A separate variable was created for each category and respondents were given a 'yes' code on variables they had selected/mentioned and a 'no' code for those they had not. Respondents tend to answer open-ended questions in some detail, thus multiple categories can be identified within one response.

It is important to note that the coding process is very subjective, as it relies on the analyst to both define and code the categories, and is thus subject to bias. In this analysis both the categorisation and coding processes have been 'quality assured', however, conclusions drawn from these questions should be treated with some degree of caution.

1.2.2 Case study areas

The aim of this study was not simply to explore the level of Jobcentre Plus activity in Children's Centres but rather, to collect information that could be used to facilitate the further development of Jobcentre Plus activities in Centres. The sample selection, therefore, focused on districts where the DWP survey suggested that quite a lot was going on: innovative/proactive approaches were being adopted; and the addressing of specific barriers was mentioned.

Case study areas were selected to cover a range of criteria including:

- Former Sure Start areas and former Early Years settings – all Jobcentre Plus districts in England include some Sure Start areas. This was, therefore, not a criteria in the selection of districts, but across all districts it was ensured that the Children's Centres selected for interview covered both settings.

- Children's Centres with a range of different Jobcentre Plus activities – the DWP survey data suggested that in some districts, a standard set of activities is provided across all Centres; in others, the range of activities varies. Districts were therefore selected to cover this variation. The range of activities provided by Centres was one factor in the selection of those to be visited. However, there was also a focus on Centres where more was going on in relation to Jobcentre Plus involvement.
- Most Jobcentre Plus districts include a range of different geographical characteristics and those reflecting a cross-section of different types of area were selected. Within districts, Children's Centres were selected so that locations varying from rural/small town, through suburban settings, outer housing estates to inner cities were included. Most Children's Centres are currently located in more deprived areas; however, the sample also included those (usually more recently opened) where deprivation levels were lower.
- Districts where employment services are being provided through Employment Zones or other private or voluntary sector agencies – Employment Zones do not cover whole Jobcentre Plus districts; therefore, districts were selected that do, and do not, include an Employment Zone and this was taken into consideration when selecting where to focus the fieldwork within a district.
- New Deal Plus pilot areas and non-New Deal Plus pilot areas – as with Employment Zones, New Deal Plus pilot areas do not cover whole Jobcentre Plus districts. Districts were therefore selected that do, and do not, include a pilot. When selecting within these districts, this was taken into account.

It was specified by the DWP that seven case study districts should be in England, and one each in Wales and Scotland. For reasons of confidentiality, the Jobcentre Plus districts in which case study interviews were conducted are named below but the local authorities on which case studies were based are not identified.

The DWP wrote to the nine District Managers informing them that their district had been selected for the detailed qualitative study and all agreed that their district would participate. The CPM was the first point of contact in each district when arranging the fieldwork. A telephone conversation helped focus on a particular part (or parts) of each district and identified the key management and stakeholder respondents for interview. In most areas, the CPM arranged a programme of interviews for IES. In a few cases, all or some of the interviews were arranged by IES, using contact information provided by the CPM. Virtually all the key respondents identified agreed to be interviewed.

1.2.3 Respondents in each area

A range of respondents were interviewed in each area:

- At Jobcentre Plus district level – Jobcentre Plus District Manager or Assistant District Manager and CPMs (in areas where there are two, both were interviewed).

- At Jobcentre Plus local level – Customer Service Managers and Personal Advisers – some of these worked with Children’s Centres in some way, others did not. All were lone parent advisers. In areas where there was NDLP+, these advisers were interviewed.
- Three Children’s Centres were visited in each district, 24 in all – interviews were usually conducted with the manager, but also with other staff, usually those involved with family support or community development.
- Other stakeholders – these included Employment Zone providers, those with responsibility for the development of Children’s Centres in local authorities, representatives of childcare organisations (usually CIS) and those running projects supporting people into work.
- DWP and non-DWP clients using Children’s Centres.

Interviews with DWP and non-DWP customers were approached in a different manner. Permission had to be obtained from Children’s Centre Managers (or another respondent) to interview users and in many cases they facilitated access.

Where a Jobcentre Plus adviser visited a Centre, they arranged appointments with users, who sometimes came in especially for the interview. In other Centres, a manager or other member of staff facilitated access to users who were using the Centre when the researcher visited. In general, our visits were timed to coincide with play sessions or other events to maximise the number of potential interviewees in the Centre. A smaller number of users were accessed by a researcher approaching them in the ‘public’ areas of the Centre, such as the reception or café, and asking if they would be interested in taking part. However, the interviewing was more successful when users were directed to us. They could leave their children with Centre staff whilst the interview took place in a separate room and also they often felt more comfortable having been introduced to the interviewer. In many Centres, the security surrounding nurseries and/or lack of open areas within the building, combined with the fact that parents were often picking up children and were in a hurry, made it difficult to conduct opportunistic interviews.

Obtaining a spread of users proved more complicated than initially envisaged. When interviews were facilitated by Jobcentre Plus advisers, the interviewees were almost all DWP customers and when Centre staff introduced potential interviewees to the research team, they were not always aware of whether they were DWP customers or not, as this information is not collected by Centres. However, the eventual sample included the full range of DWP and other customers who used Jobcentre Plus services as well as those who did not. Interviews were conducted with:

- 25 DWP customers using Jobcentre Plus services in Children’s Centres;
- 17 DWP customers not using Jobcentre Plus services in Children’s Centres;
- 17 non-DWP customers using Jobcentre Plus services in Children’s Centres;
- 19 non-DWP customers not using Jobcentre Plus services in Children’s Centres.

In addition, 18 interviews were conducted in Glasgow. All there were using either Employment Zone or another provision to help them return to work; 15 were DWP customers and three were not. There are no Children's Centres in Scotland and hence, a different approach had to be taken to obtain interviews in this district.

1.3 The structure of this report

The remainder of this report falls into six subsequent chapters, as follows:

Chapter 2 focuses on setting up Children's Centres;

Chapter 3 considers the services provided in the Children's Centres;

Chapter 4 looks at the employment and training services provided in Children's Centres;

Chapter 5 reviews partnership working around the Children's Centres;

Chapter 6 considers the impact and success of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres.

The final chapter presents a discussion and conclusions drawing on the research findings.

2 Setting up Children's Centres

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the general background around setting up Children's Centres. It looks at where the decisions are made about who to involve and where to place Children's Centres and the form they take. It goes on to explore the range of organisations involved and the role of Jobcentre Plus.

2.2 The process of setting up Centres

The lead responsibility for developing Children's Centres was always with the local authority (LA), and most had a designated manager responsible for co-ordinating the roll-out of Children's Centres. The majority of Centres were run by the LA, although a few had a Primary Care Trust (PCT) lead. In some areas, running the Centres had been put out to tender and voluntary organisations such as Barnardo's and National Children's Homes (NCH) had won the contract to develop a Centre. These were not normally involved in decisions as to the location of Centres, but rather, took strategic and operational responsibility for running them.

There was considerable variety in the ways in which Children's Centres had been set up and subsequently these have been evolving with the experience of those involved and as the key stakeholders develop an understanding of each other and working relationships.

At one extreme, and this was more common in the early stages of establishing Children's Centres, a relatively small group of what were regarded as key stakeholders were brought together to develop a Centre. There might be wider publicity about the setting up of a Centre but these were the key organisations involved in planning, opening and steering a Centre.

In other areas, local public meetings were held with all those interested in a Centre. These would be put together through formal invitations to some, networking in

an area to identify key local players and general publicity. There was nearly always significant local interest where such meetings were held, especially as the setting up of Centres progressed. Nearly all Centres have been opened with as much local publicity as possible to advertise their services and start bringing users in. Local celebrities or national celebrities with some sort of local connection were invited to attract people. One Centre had been opened by Gordon Brown and his presence had attracted much interest.

Typically, following a public meeting, those attending would be involved in different ways. Some became members of steering groups, others provided support as and when needed and others were kept informed. While it was generally recognised that it was important to have a range of local organisations involved, the process also has to be manageable. Many respondents commented that steering groups that are too big, either have low attendance levels or become too unwieldy to operate properly.

The kinds of organisations that were typically involved and the roles they typically played, are discussed in Section 2.3.

2.2.1 Physical location and premises

The majority of Centres visited during the course of this study were Phase 1 Centres, and therefore located in the most deprived areas. A few were Phase 2 and mostly located in areas with slightly lower levels of deprivation. Within each local community, there was an assessment of the most appropriate place to locate a Children's Centre. This was usually based on the availability of existing buildings and their appropriateness; also the existing provision of services.

Centres had grown from Sure Start local programmes, Early Excellence Centres, Neighbourhood and other existing nurseries that met the necessary quality criteria. A few had previously been family centres of one sort or another. These had often been dealing with families experiencing problems and Social Services were usually involved in some way. There were some concerns about how these would be accepted as having a wider function by the local community.

A number of Centres have had several reincarnations. For example, one began as a nursery; in 1998, it became an Early Excellence Centre, with full integration in 1999. It was opened as a Children's Centre in 2005, and was already at that time providing all the core services.

Other Centres were utilising buildings such as old churches and community centres, with some conversion and extension. While some of these had been developed to provide childcare and other core services on-site, others were part of a cluster. For example, one old community centre was providing drop-in and other activities but the childcare provision was nearby – an existing nursery. Another Centre utilised a nearby neighbourhood resource centre for all employment and training provision.

In rural areas in particular, the Children's Centre itself was the hub, but a range of other locations were being used to provide services to outlying communities. For example, drop-in sessions; parenting activities might be run in church and village halls where they could be accessed by local people who would either find it difficult to travel to the Centre itself or be reluctant to do so.

Where possible, the childcare and early years provision was located on, adjacent to, or near school sites. This was to facilitate the provision of wraparound childcare, out-of-school and holiday care. It could also contribute to smoothing the transition between different childcare, early years and education settings. For example, a Children's Centre in Wales was located between a Welsh and English speaking primary school. The Centre provided two full day care and early years settings – one for Welsh speakers and the other for English. Children were placed in one or the other and progressed through from the baby room to pre-school. On approaching reception age, they were taken to school assemblies and lunches in the appropriate school so that they became used to the idea of moving on.

There is a capital budget available for new builds and some of the Centres visited in the course of this study did fall into this category. A number of Centres did start operating before their new or extended buildings became available, eg from a nearby existing building or part of their building. This enabled services to begin to become available and existence of the Centre to be publicised before fully starting up.

There were pros and cons in regard to using both new and existing buildings. Existing buildings did not always have all the necessary space or capacity to cope with a wide range of activities. A lack of space for private and confidential meetings was an issue in some. In others, there were few rooms, or only small rooms, for running drop-in and other sessions. Some of this was addressed through utilising other local buildings. However, this could then create problems in accessing childcare. In some regards, new buildings were more likely to meet all user requirements. However, even with these, there were some issues. For example, with restricted budgets and rising building costs, it was not always possible to include everything that was originally planned. Again, rooms for private meetings and large rooms for group activities were sometimes limited.

2.2.2 Early involvement of Jobcentre Plus

Working in partnership is seen as key in the set-up and operation of Children's Centres, and this was a principle right from the beginning. Sure Start local programmes already had links with a range of stakeholders and were involved in multi-agency working.

In contrast with other key partners such as health services, Jobcentre Plus had rarely been involved prior to the planning and set-up stages of the Children's Centres. In a very small number of cases, Jobcentre Plus was already involved with individual Centres that had been delivering services prior to becoming Children's Centres, as a result of ad hoc local arrangements or as a result of particularly good links with individual advisers. In such cases, these earlier links were built on and

formalised through the Children's Centre core offer and partnership agenda by the relevant Childcare Partnership Managers (CPMs).

More often though, Jobcentre Plus had been seeking to join existing partnerships working with Phase 1 Children's Centres, despite the fact that CPMs had often started developing relationships with a range of childcare organisations prior to the advent of Children's Centres. This was usually done in close collaboration with LA partners, who planned and implemented the roll-out of Children's Centres. They had generally responded positively to Jobcentre Plus approaches and formally invited Jobcentre Plus along to strategic planning meetings. Latterly, with the roll-out of Phase 2 Children's Centres, Jobcentre Plus had more often been involved from the start.

However, encouraging existing partnerships on the ground to extend and include Jobcentre Plus provision was not always straightforward. CPMs had to work closely and persistently with other partners to overcome negative perceptions of Jobcentre Plus services and agendas and show that they could work together to the benefit of a local community and other organisational objectives. Negative perceptions were not tied to any particular partner, role or level of working in Children's Centres, but seemed to surface most where it was felt that Jobcentre Plus presence might put people off visiting Centres. This was usually because the full range of services on offer from Jobcentre Plus and how these could complement Children's Centre service provision were not sufficiently understood. In such cases, CPMs reported working hard to embed the message that Jobcentre Plus would work in partnership with the Children's Centre and the other partners providing services to enhance the range of services and options on offer for families. Attending steering group meetings as well as one-to-one contacts and discussions were key to developing a good working relationship. Indeed, a number of Children's Centre Managers and respondents from partner organisations commented on how Jobcentre Plus representation, and CPMs in particular, were one of the most consistent and regular in attending meetings.

In some Sure Start settings, there was acceptance of Jobcentre Plus involvement and of the importance of helping parents at least prepare for, if not enter, employment. However, in others, there was opposition. CPMs in particular had to put considerable effort into negotiating and mediating relationships.

Where Children's Centres were developed in other settings or started from scratch, partnerships and multi-agency working had to be put in place. This is not to say that all organisations had previously worked in isolation and knew nothing of each other. For example, childcare, early years, education, health and Social Services work together in a range of circumstances. In Wales and Scotland, and in some of the most deprived communities in England, there is a long history of partnership working. Furthermore, these partnerships have evolved and adapted as new organisations have emerged or been funded and others have disappeared. The various stakeholders were used to having to find out what was happening and keep in the network and to having to adapt to or work with other organisational agendas.

As we have seen, and most particularly for Phase 1 Centres, Jobcentre Plus was often the newest member of these partnerships. Through the CPM, Jobcentre Plus had been involved previously but nearly always in relation to facilitating access to childcare for those entering work and working to develop the childcare workforce. Although this continues with Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres, the involvement of wider Jobcentre Plus services in Centres was new to many. CPMs had, as with Sure Start programmes, worked to overcome prejudices and misconceptions about Jobcentre Plus services. Some family support and other outreach activities have long included employment and training issues, Jobcentre Plus services were perhaps more easily accepted by these. For others, employment and training were seen as misaligned with helping families sort out their problems. Here, more work had to be done and this continued as a Centre became up and running. Becoming familiar with Jobcentre Plus staff and services nearly always helped.

CPMs were playing a key role in these activities. It was important that they were out there and involved with a range of organisations for Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres to be developed and accepted.

Initially, they were not always involved at the real beginning of all Children's Centres. However, now many have developed ways of ensuring that as soon as the planning of a Centre starts they know and can become involved. At the time of the survey, around a fifth of CPMs were working at a strategic level with the LA as part of the roll-out of Phase 2 Children's Centres. For example, they attend strategic meetings where the roll-out of Children's Centres is planned, they have regular meetings with LA leads, and make sure that they have the plans for roll-out and are updated on these. As soon as an individual Centre starts to be planned, they make contact with that group and attend meetings. The survey found that strategic involvement also included discussing potential sites, identifying the population to be served and agreeing the range of Jobcentre Plus services to be provided. Being in at the start is seen to be crucial, in terms of developing relationships but also in terms of influencing the form of Jobcentre Plus involvement in a Centre.

In some cases, the Centre Manager is involved from the start of the process of designation. For example, where a nursery or Early Excellence Centre was being converted to a Children's Centre, the existing nursery or Centre Manager often became manager of the Children's Centre. Managers of Sure Start Local Programmes might become manager of the resulting Children's Centre. In other situations, particularly new build, a manager would be appointed. This nearly always occurred before a Centre opened so that they were involved in some of the planning and development. As soon as a manager was identified, it was important that the CPM made contact. This meant that relationships could be developed early on and managers became familiar with Jobcentre Plus services and activities. By the time of this study, these arrangements had been developed in most areas. However, as the setting up of Children's Centres gathers pace, it will be increasingly difficult for CPMs to put the same amount of effort into each

Centre as usually happens at the moment, especially for those responsible for very large geographical areas.

2.3 Partners

The list of stakeholders involved in Children's Centres is long. There are a number that are core to all or nearly all Centres, with an extensive list of others that are either locally specific or have an interest in remaining informed or involved in the longer term.

2.3.1 Core partnership members

The core partners typically include:

- LA divisions dealing with childcare and early years – variously called Early Years, Sure Start, Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs);
- schools and the education divisions of LAs;
- Children's Information Services (CIS) or their equivalent;
- PCTs and other health services;
- Jobcentre Plus;
- Family Support Services;
- Social Services;
- Neighbourhood Support Services;
- building and technical support services;
- private, voluntary sector and public learning providers;
- National Childminding Association;
- local childcare providers and organisations representing them.

These have varying histories of working together and bringing different agendas which have to be mediated and discussed.

Other interested parties included:

- the police and other crime prevention agencies;
- local residence associations;
- local community groups;
- local and regional development agencies;
- a range of local development and other projects;
- private and voluntary sector providers of employment services;

- those working with specific local groups (eg ethnic minority groups, refugees and asylum seekers, people with mental health issues, carers of elderly or disabled relatives, teenage parents);
- Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABs) and other debt and personal advice services;
- Homestart (a voluntary organisation offering support to families experiencing difficulties, eg coping with children, isolation).

Parents are another key stakeholder group with whom it is important that Children's Centres work. Many have parent forums or committees which meet regularly and input into the running of a Centre. Questionnaires and other forms of consultation are conducted to explore views on existing services, where there are gaps in provision or unpopular services.

To some extent, different organisations are involved at operational and strategic levels, or different individuals within the same organisation. This means that communication and consultation has to be conducted at a range of levels in organisations – there has to be knowledge of other organisations and buy-in to the relevance of their role at all levels.

Which organisations are involved at strategic level depends on a range of factors. Primarily those involved in core services are more likely to be on strategic management groups. However, there is also an element of which are most interested and committed. Centre management boards often include local community representation as well as professionals and this is important as part of ensuring local acceptance and buy-in.

2.3.2 A wider constituency

As Children's Centres become established, a wider range of organisations often begin to use them at an operational level. This is partly initiated by existing key stakeholders, eg the Centre Manager or various service providers, including Jobcentre Plus. For example, in one district, CPMs were taking on a wider partnership role within Jobcentre Plus. Through this, they were coming into contact with other agencies that provide outreach and support in disadvantaged communities. They might be signposted to Children's Centres, either as a possible provider of services on Centre sites or to use Centres as a source of clients. These agencies might also be a source of users for Children's Centres and could sometimes fill gaps in services.

Other agencies approach Centres to use their premises (especially where there are rooms to rent) or to offer their services. For example, one Centre was beginning to be used by a group working with people with limited sight. It had become known that premises were available in that community and that they were accessible and user-friendly to those with sight impairments.

Services for teenage parents were also being expanded. One manager reported that she had noticed a gap in services for young mothers in the local community

and had decided to set up a drop-in group. In other cases, Children's Centres had been identified as an ideal location for working with young parents by, for example, Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinators, Connexions PAs – they were locally based, childcare or crèche facilities were available and they offered a non-threatening and safe environment. These groups might not seem specifically relevant to Jobcentre Plus services. However, the provision of such services in Children's Centres could help young parents, who are often very alienated from a range of official services⁸ or perhaps have had bad experiences of Jobcentre Plus, become more familiar with the support available and feel more able to access this at a later stage.

2.3.3 Engaging with Children's Centres

CPMs have been the main contact between Children's Centres and Jobcentre Plus and in many cases this remains the case. In nearly all Jobcentre Plus districts, the CPM has played a key role in decisions about the level of Jobcentre Plus involvement with Children's Centres in the area. In a majority of districts, this role has involved generating and maintaining contacts at a more strategic level.

However, CPMs nearly always have large geographical areas to cover and many Children's Centres within these. Currently, CPMs across the country are spending around half of their working time each month on activities related to Children's Centres and in some cases, as much as 90 per cent of their time. They cannot remain involved on a day-to-day level as they have in the past, especially as more Centres open. In some areas, responsibility has been delegated to local offices.

Survey findings suggest that in over half of districts, local office managers already play an important role in making decisions about Jobcentre Plus involvement with Children's Centres, and in just under a fifth of districts the District Manager, External Relations Manager and local Adviser Services Manager were also involved. For example, an External Relations Manager or other member of Jobcentre Plus staff would typically sit on the management board. Where advisers are working in Children's Centres or linked advisers are in place (see Chapter 4), relationships at an operational level are being delegated to them. It is important that they are given the time and responsibility to develop good working relationships with local Centres. Resource issues and other restrictions are discussed later in the report.

It is important that CPMs have an overview of what is happening in Centres across their district, so that they can monitor progress, spread good practice and adapt Jobcentre Plus involvement as necessary. There are various ways they are doing this without remaining involved at a day-to-day level, and such working will become increasingly important in the longer term. For example, through attending meetings at a strategic, LA level rather than with individual Children's Centres; where Centre Managers and CPMs meet regularly as a group; and through

⁸ See for example, Dench, S., Bellis, A. and Tuohy, S. (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning: A Qualitative Study of Barriers and Attitudes*, Learning and Skills Council, IES Report 441.

generally delegating responsibilities but putting in place means of communicating regularly and gathering feedback from those they delegate to. The importance of the work that CPMs are already doing at this more strategic level was recognised as a key factor for successful partnership working.

2.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has been concerned with the process of setting up Children's Centres and the means by which Jobcentre Plus has sought to contribute to this process. It shows that there was considerable variety in the ways in which Children's Centres had been set up, and that initially, for many Phase 1 Centres, Jobcentre Plus had rarely been involved prior to the planning and set-up stages of the Children's Centres. Where this had happened, CPMs sometimes had to work closely and persistently with other partners to overcome negative perceptions of Jobcentre Plus services and agendas and to show how they could contribute. The establishment of more satisfactory relationships seemed to turn on the work of particularly active or capable CPMs, on Jobcentre Plus responding actively and positively to invitations to join partnership at an early stage and on the slowly developing understanding among other partners about Jobcentre Plus' intentions/provision. At the time of the survey, around a fifth of CPMs were working at a strategic level with the LA as part of the roll-out of Phase 2 Children's Centres. Being in at the start seems to be beneficial, in terms of developing relationships but also in terms of influencing the form of Jobcentre Plus involvement in a Centre.

Children's Centres typically have representation from many different agencies and constituencies and working in partnership is widely seen as key in their set-up and operation. Those agencies involved in the delivery of core services for children and parents are more likely to be on strategic management groups. However, there is also an element of which are most interested and committed, and Centre management boards often include local community representation as well as professionals, and this is important as part of ensuring local acceptance and buy-in. Very often, as Children's Centres become established, a wider range of organisations begin to use them at an operational level.

CPMs have typically been the main contact between Children's Centres and Jobcentre Plus and in many cases this involves both strategic and operational level engagement. The expansion in the number of Children's Centres has placed their day-to-day contact under some strain. It was widely reported that the work CPMs are already doing at the more strategic level was likely to be a key factor for successful partnership working.

3 Services provided in the Children's Centres

This chapter explores the range and nature of non-employment and training services in Children's Centres. The core offer is outlined first and then the range and variety of other services which are offered by Children's Centres are summarised. The chapter then turns to outlining the different models of provision, taking into account the evolution of particular Children's Centres and the communities that they serve.

3.1 Children's Centre core services

The Children's Centres visited as part of this research described their services in terms of their 'core offer', plus the services they provided which were additional to this. The 'core offer' is the range of core services which Children's Centres are required to provide in order to become designated centres. This core offer includes elements of childcare, education, healthcare services and links with training and employment opportunities. Jobcentre Plus services in Children's Centres do form part of the core offer, but given the focus of this study, all employment and training-focused provision in the Children's Centres, including Jobcentre Plus, is discussed in the next chapter.

3.1.1 The core offer

The full core offer which Children's Centres must provide to be designated includes the following elements:

- good quality early learning combined with full day care provision for children;
- good quality teacher input to lead the development of learning within the Children's Centre;
- child and family health services, including ante-natal services;
- parental outreach;

- family support services;
- a base for a childminder network;
- support for children and parents with special needs;
- effective links with Jobcentre Plus to support parents and carers who wish to consider training or employment.

In practice, the core offer was developed and delivered in different ways, depending on a variety of factors including models adopted across each district, the evolutions and history of the Children's Centre and the demographics and requirements of communities. In practice, the elements of the core offer are overlapping, with, for example, family support services and parental outreach having clear commonalities. Some examples of how key elements of the core offer was interpreted and delivered are outlined below.

Early learning and day care provision

Day care was seen as one of the key elements of core provision and most Children's Centres had this aspect of provision in place at an early stage. Many had been providing day care prior to their designation as a Children's Centre, although this had often been on a different site. In such cases, Children's Centres reported that they had been able to bring many of the parents with them to their new building, and this had helped them to embed the service in their core offer and to establish it in the minds of parents in the community.

In addition to day care, many of the Children's Centres also provided school holidays children's clubs, and wraparound childcare, breakfast and after school clubs, which were viewed as additional but related to the core offer.

Children's Centres reported a wide variety of early learning activities including:

- stay and play sessions;
- messy play sessions;
- heuristic play;
- family learning sessions.

Some of these activities were delivered as drop-ins, and some were aimed at particular groups of parents, for example, fathers or young mums. Again, this was viewed as part of, but also additional to, the core offer. Many of the Children's Centres had sensory rooms for children.

Child and family health services

The ways in which the child and family health services were delivered through the Children's Centres varied greatly, depending on the history and evolution of each, and where it was located with regard to other locally available services. The Children's Centres often relied on co-operative partnership working to provide

their core offer, with relevant professionals running sessions in the Centres on a part-time basis, rather than being based there full time. In other Children's Centres, where other health services were close by, Centres worked in close collaboration with them as neighbouring partners. In these situations, signposting was felt to be very important; parents could be referred by the Children's Centre to the local health services, and vice versa. As some of the parents needed additional support in accessing services, for example if they had low confidence, some Children's Centres had family support workers who could help in making appointments with the health service or going with parents on their first visit there to introduce them to the staff. In turn, there was the capacity for nearby health services to refer people to the Children's Centre. It was felt that ensuring parents could easily access services in their communities was the key priority. Some Children's Centres combined the model of neighbourhood partnership with some drop-in sessions by health professionals within the Centre in order to further strengthen their links with health services and in order to reach parents who found it less easy to reach out for the full range of services they needed.

Parental outreach

Many of the Children's Centres were working with parents in the community, through home visits, door knocking and delivering services from outreach venues. Health services were being delivered on an outreach basis through, for example, health visitors and midwives visiting parents in their homes while using the Children's Centre as a base. This was often more embedded in the Children's Centres with a history as Sure Start local programmes, where health services had been delivered out in the community for a number of years before they became designated.

One of the key challenges highlighted by the Children's Centres was making links with the more isolated and hard-to-reach families in their communities. A number of Children's Centres were providing some of their core and additional services from outreach venues in the community, in part to address this. Service delivery in outreach venues such as churches, community centres and village halls were most usually reported by longer established Children's Centres and by those serving more rural communities. One Children's Centre reported using a wide range of community outreach venues because they felt it was very important to go to where the need was. A number of Children's Centres said they would like to do more outreach work but that funding was the main issue which prevented them. However, many of the Children's Centres reported that some of the professionals based in the Children's Centre, or who divided their time between a number of bases including the Children's Centre, frequently made home visits to families in the community. For example, health visitors and midwives often worked out in communities with families in their own homes and would sometimes refer the parents they saw on this basis into the Children's Centre itself when they picked up a particular need which could be met by the Children's Centre provision. Home visits were particularly mentioned in conjunction with vulnerable and hard-to-

reach groups – for example: new communities families, children with special needs and families with alcohol and domestic violence issues.

An additional way that Children's Centres were doing outreach work with parents was to raise awareness of the Centre and its services and to find out who the local parents were and what they wanted from the Children's Centre. This type of consultation was happening in a number of Children's Centres, on a regular or an ad hoc basis, with community development workers and other centre staff going out into the community and knocking on people's doors to introduce themselves and the Children's Centre.

A base for the childminder network

All of the Children's Centres had links with their local Children's Information Service (CIS) and tried to work closely to provide up-to-date information on local childminders to the Children's Centres. In turn, the childminder networks were able to use the Children's Centres as a base for meetings. Children's Centres stressed that childminders could be seen as competition for their nursery places but in fact they found it better to work co-operatively with local childminders in order to share knowledge and expertise and to call on them to help with ad hoc childcare needs when the Children's Centre day care was full and they needed to access additional childcare places to cover one-off events and courses. There were also childminding courses running in some of the Children's Centres, with parents hoping to progress to becoming qualified childminders themselves.

Support for children and parents with special needs

The Children's Centres were offering support to children and parents with special needs to varying extents. Most had links with local Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) and some had specialist workers to provide sessions for children with delayed development or special needs and support for parents. Some of the Children's Centres had day care places held specifically for children with special needs. Most Children's Centres had 'sensory rooms' which they stressed were for all children but they found them very effective for working with children with special needs and encouraging them to explore their surroundings. One of the Children's Centres had a programme called 'Time Out', which was a parenting programme for parents who had children with special needs.

Effective links with Jobcentre Plus to support parents and carers who wish to consider training or employment

As indicated above, the whole of Chapter 4 is devoted to a description and assessment of such links with Jobcentre Plus. We do not therefore discuss them here but rather move on to show how the key players involved in the provision of the core services have come together to deliver them.

3.1.2 Development of core services

Local authority (LA) strategic leads in the development of Children's Centres were usually reported to be responsible for ensuring the core offer was delivered effectively in each Children's Centre. At the planning stage for each Children's Centre, they set up early strategic meetings between the other potential key partners who would need to be involved to deliver the core offer. However, there was often felt to be considerable flexibility in the exact way in which the core requirements could be met by individual Children's Centres.

'The core offer is the basic minimum standard and we can be creative around that. We're opening up services to less formal postcode boundaries and we'll accommodate everyone who turns up to the doorstep, but if they're outside the formal boundaries we'll record where they are from, as we'll need this information for Phase 3.'

(LA stakeholder)

There were mixed views on the extent to which embedding the core offer was assisted by a Children's Centre's history. Some felt that Children's Centres with a track record of serving their communities in partnership with a range of statutory services had found it easier to provide the core offer than Children's Centres which were newly created and had to put together new partnerships. However, there was also the view that the shift in focus required from a more established provider – for example, when a Sure Start local programme changed to a Children's Centre – could be more difficult to achieve in practice than building up a core offer from scratch for an entirely new Children's Centre. Similarly, some Children's Centres without the basis of provision found in a former Sure Start area felt it had been initially difficult to develop the core offer, but starting from scratch had allowed them the freedom to think about what was needed. A number of Children's Centres which had formerly been nurseries had understandably found it more straightforward to provide the day care aspects of the Children's Centre core offer than the health provision, which had involved them forming new partnerships with health services.

However, the Children's Centres visited as part of this research reported that all partnerships necessary to provide the core services were in place and most of the core services were being delivered. A small number of Children's Centres which had been operational for less than six months were at the point of being able to deliver all core services within the very near future. Some of the Children's Centres which had been long established in their areas, such as, for example, Sure Start local programmes or Early Excellence Centres, felt that they had in fact been delivering the core offer for a number of years before they were designated Children's Centres and that the transition had brought about few changes in practice. However, they were usually looking for ways to improve their services, to integrate them more fully with other Children's Centres in the area and to be responsive to the needs of their parents.

3.1.3 Monitoring the core offer

The core offer delivery of the Children's Centres was monitored at Centre level by their management boards, on which all of the key partners tended to be represented. Typically, this would run alongside other management matters and would involve reviewing what was being delivered as part of the core offer, ensure the core offer requirements were being met and to examine how effective the current core provision was. The core offers of the Children's Centres were also monitored at a more strategic level by the relevant LA.

3.2 Additional services

This section summarises the range and nature of additional non-employment and training services. Whilst it was clear that many of the additional services were linked to the core offer, Children's Centres viewed them as additional, as they were over and above what was required for them to be designated. As such, Children's Centres provided a vast array of services in addition to the core offer, most of which fell into five main themes:

- early years;
- health;
- family support;
- education for parents;
- engagement, consultation and evaluation.

These are discussed briefly in turn below. The exact mix of additional services provided within each of these areas depended on a number of factors, including the history of each Children's Centre – for example, whether Children's Centres were already providing a range of additional services prior to Children's Centre designation or whether they were newly developed Centres.

3.2.1 Early years

Early years activities had clear links with the core provision around early learning and day care provision and was delivered in combination with this. It included:

- children's school holiday clubs;
- library services, including children's libraries and toy libraries;
- family learning programmes;
- CIS surgeries;
- Welsh language sessions and nurseries in some of the Welsh Children's Centres.

3.2.2 Health

The health services which were additional to the core offer were varied and depended on what was already running before Children's Centre designation. There were also examples where sessions were delivered from the Children's Centre by local practitioners who hired out a room at the Centre for that purpose – for example, Pilates or Slimming World. Hence, they were not a key partner of the Children's Centre, but they enhanced their range of services and classes available. The range of health activities being provided across the Children's Centres is outlined below:

- baby massage;
- breastfeeding café and support;
- post-natal depression groups;
- ante-natal sessions with a midwife;
- speech and language therapy sessions;
- health team drop-ins;
- nutrition and healthy eating;
- stop smoking sessions;
- Pilates and other exercise classes;
- Slimming World;
- an allotment project and a food co-op providing low cost fruit and vegetables.

3.2.3 Family support

The family support services provided by Children's Centres often went beyond what was required by the core offer, with family support sessions tailored to particular groups. In addition, a number of voluntary agencies were running drop-in advice sessions within Children's Centres. Occasionally, they would also deliver these on an outreach basis in people's homes – for example, debt counselling had been found by several Children's Centres to be effectively delivered in this way. The range and focus of the family support services being delivered across the services included:

- dads' groups;
- volunteer programmes;
- parents' forum which raises money and feeds into the governance of the Centre;
- new communities drop-ins with all services represented;
- teenage pregnancy and teenage mums' groups;

- counselling;
- CAB drop-ins;
- debt advisers or money advisory projects;
- legal advisers;
- Relate sessions;
- domestic violence support services;
- Social Services input, for example, some Children's Centres had on-site social workers;
- police surgeries.

3.2.4 Education for parents

A wide variety of courses were being delivered from the Children's Centres, although those that had been delivering the core services prior to being designated were usually most advanced in this area and their delivery of courses to parents and the wider community tended to be quite wide-ranging and pre-date their Children's Centre status. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses in Children's Centres with a high black and minority ethnic (BME) population and basic skills and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) courses, were some of the most commonly mentioned. The levels of courses being delivered ranged from introductory level up to and including GCSE, although introductory courses were most common.

Examples of the education opportunities for parents at Children's Centres included:

- ESOL classes;
- parenting groups, nurturing courses, bonding and attachment classes;
- childcare courses;
- basic skills, ICT, GCSEs;
- food hygiene courses;
- first aid;
- Connexions Service surgeries.

3.2.5 Engagement

The Children's Centres had different ways of attracting people to visit the Centre and to use the services. Staff were generally very proud of their Centre and took the view that once parents had been to the Children's Centre, met some of the staff and seen what was on offer, they would want to come back. Signposting between partners and other service providers in the area was viewed as vitally

important in this but many of the Children's Centres had open days, special events and taster courses and had done leaflet drops in the area to encourage people into the Children's Centre for the first time.

3.2.6 Consultation and evaluation

A common ethos running through the governance and day-to-day management of the Children's Centres was the importance of consulting parents and enabling them to have a voice within the Centre and this involved a mixture of formal and informal consultation.

At a local level, many of the Children's Centres were trying out activities beyond their core offer and had developed formal consultation and evaluation activities to inform these developments, looking at the needs of their individual catchments and communities and what parents wanted. A number of the Children's Centres did regular parents' surveys for both mapping and evaluation purposes, which looked at parents' qualification levels and their satisfaction with provision. Some Children's Centres also encouraged parents to be part of the Centre management, although there was a recognition that not all parents had the right skills to be able to do this and they had to use appropriate methods to support parents to make meaningful decisions. In some Children's Centres, there were volunteer programmes which provided training and opportunities to get involved in Centre management meetings.

In addition to formal consultation, evaluation of provision was also being done continuously by Children's Centre staff through more informal methods. Staff working with families on a day-to-day basis felt that they got to know the parents, and once a level of rapport, understanding and trust had been built up, they were able to discuss with parents the extent to which the Children's Centre was providing what they needed and what else they would like to see offered. This often naturally occurred through the sessions which Children's Centre staff were leading with parents. One district had regular 'tea and toast mornings' which acted as parent focus groups, giving parents an opportunity to share their views with each other and with Centre staff.

3.3 Models of provision

This section explores, in more depth, the ways in which Children's Centres were providing their core and additional services to respond appropriately and innovatively to their communities. Firstly, it looks at some of the ways in which Children's Centres have developed their provision to reach particular groups and then it turns to the ways in which each Children's Centre's history and evolution has shaped its current focus and provision.

3.3.1 Provision of core and additional services

Within most of the districts visited during this research, there was considerable variation with regard to the characteristics of the local communities which were served by the Children's Centres. The Centres were usually located within relatively deprived areas or in rural areas with pockets of relative affluence and deprivation. Some communities had high minority ethnic communities, others housed families which were mainly white. Hence, deprivation within particular communities was clearly felt in different ways. For example, there were communities with issues around long-term and generational unemployment, drug abuse and domestic violence and other communities with high proportions of ethnic minority families and increasing numbers of Eastern European families, where there were multiple barriers to engagement including culture, language and isolation within the larger community. An advantage of the Children's Centre as a 'one stop shop' which provided a range of services, was cited by a number of Centres. They felt it was important that parents could access services for their children and themselves without anyone from their community knowing why they were there or making assumptions about them. This was compared to the potential stigma of accessing support directly from Social Services.

There were a number of ways in which Children's Centres were meeting the demands of their local communities through their core and additional service provision. These included tailoring their provision to match the needs of the families living in their catchment area, through providing, for example, ESOL classes or stay-and-play and drop-in sessions for women, men or particular ethnic groups. In other Children's Centres, there was a greater focus on raising confidence and aspirations through education and training programmes (these employment and training-related activities are discussed in the next chapter).

3.3.2 Evolution of services

This section looks at some of the issues around the development of the individual Children's Centres and what this has meant in practice for putting the core and additional services in place. There were a few examples of newly created Centres but more usually Children's Centres had evolved from some form of existing provision, for example a Sure Start local programme, an Early Excellence Centre or a neighbourhood nursery. Hence, there was usually a range of existing services which could be added to and adapted to fit the new Children's Centre agenda, together with an existing client base which pre-dated the Children's Centre. This section looks at some of the different starting points from which Children's Centres were developing and how this is shaping their evolution.

Mature Children's Centres

A number of the Children's Centres were at an advanced stage of evolution and could be viewed as being 'mature' Children's Centres. They had a long history of working with, and providing, a wide range of service to their communities. They had been designated as Children's Centres for two years or more and as such,

they were the first operational Children's Centres in Phase 1. These Centres were often delivering many, if not all, of the services required for the core offer prior to becoming Children's Centres. They had been working with their communities for a number of years and in many cases felt that their relatively recent status of Children's Centre had made little practical difference to their operation.

Newly created Children's Centres

Most of the Children's Centres visited for this research had been developed from some form of existing provision but a small number had been developed from scratch as part of the Children's Centre agenda. These Children's Centres had concentrated on setting up all relevant partnerships, providing their core offer and mapping existing provision in the area with a view to developing their additional services over the medium term. Once the core offer was firmly embedded, they planned to expand in various directions, depending on the interest and the drivers of Centre staff, partners providing services, local population needs and existing provision and networking in the area.

Former Sure Start local programmes

A number of the Children's Centres had been developed from Sure Start local programmes and as such, their health partnerships and services were already well developed. In addition, they were usually located in the most deprived wards and as a result of this, they had often had access to a range of funding streams for some years – for example, local, national and European regeneration money. This had enabled them to provide a wider range of services and link in with more partners than was the case for Children's Centres in slightly less deprived areas. Due to their history as Sure Start programmes and as recipients of a range of funds, these Centres tended to be offering the widest range of different health services and to have a number of different health professionals based on-site or continuing close links with local health services. However, they were keen to ensure that their full range of services remained appropriate to their aims as a Children's Centre.

An issue around funding was raised by staff in some of the Children's Centres that had undergone the transition from Sure Start to Children's Centre; they reported a loss of, or reduction in some of, their funding as a result of the change. Some had lost health professionals from their team and spoke of their core staff having been greatly reduced by the changes. They were now linking into externally delivered services in order to address this, although some Children's Centres appeared to be finding this new way of working easier to adapt to than others. Other Children's Centres had lost family development workers through a reduction in funding, and hence, had fewer staff resources to work with parents.

Former Early Excellence Centre

A number of the Children's Centres visited for this study had started as Early Excellence Centres. Some had received funding for new buildings as a result of their Children's Centre status. Like the former Sure Start local programmes, they

generally had a range of partnerships and services in place before they became Children's Centres. Some had needed to build partnerships with health services in order to deliver the core offer but others already had all the core services in place before they became Children's Centres.

Former Family Centres

Children's Centres which had emerged from former Family Centres had undergone a considerable shift in focus which was welcomed by staff. Family Centres had tended to concentrate on hard-end child protection issues, whereas the Children's Centres were felt to focus on empowering parents, on early interventions and on promoting employment as a way out of poverty. Some Children's Centres had been able to retain aspects of their former Family Centre work alongside the new Children's Centre agenda and felt this enabled them to deliver a more comprehensive service. However, some staff felt that they were still working to bring about a shift in perception from the community, some of whom still viewed the Children's Centre as a place for 'problem families'.

Former nurseries

As highlighted earlier in the chapter, former nurseries felt that they had had a head start in the day care aspect of their core provision, with many having been able to hold on to or re-attract parents who had used the nursery, to the day care provision in the Children's Centre. This included Children's Centres which had moved premises to new purpose-designed buildings. However, some of these Centres had to work hard to engage all the relevant partners to help them to deliver the full range of core services. Many of the Children's Centres of this type were relatively 'young', having achieved Children's Centre status and becoming fully operational within the 12 months prior to this research. As such, their core health provision tended to be up and running but their additional health services tended to be less extensive than was the case for the Children's Centres which had been delivering these types of services for some time.

Innovative ways of bringing in funding

A number of the Children's Centres had taken advantage of their location within the community and had provided facilities for other local groups and organisations for a fee. There were examples of Children's Centres providing training and conference facilities to a range of different groups for a fee (which was sometimes dependent upon the time of day and the type of group or organisation, with, for example, concessions for the voluntary sector). Work of this type was usually occurring where additional money for regeneration had been available to fund the Children's Centre buildings, which had allowed additional facilities to be provided. Examples of the funds used included Welsh Assembly and Lottery funds, and funding from New Deal for Communities.

3.4 Chapter summary

This chapter explores the range and nature of non-employment and training services in Children's Centres. The Centres' core offer (i.e. those services they are required to provide in order to become designated Centres) comprise good quality early learning combined with full day care provision for children, good quality teacher input to lead the development of learning within the Children's Centre and child and family health services, including ante-natal services. In addition, parental outreach, family support services and operating as a base for a childminder network are evident, as is support for children and parents with special needs.

The development of effective links with Jobcentre Plus to support parents and carers who wish to consider training or employment also forms part of the core offer but this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

In practice, the core offer was developed and delivered in different ways, depending on a range of factors, which included: the age and origins of the Centre itself, the demographics and requirements of communities and learning from delivery models adopted by other Centres in each district.

The elements of the core offer often overlap with additional services which Centres have developed in response to their local circumstances and the perceived needs of the communities they serve. These include early years services, health and family support and education for parents, plus a range of activities in the area of engagement, consultation and evaluation.

By sensitive orchestration of a mix of services, Centres were developing strong links with communities based on their core services, and building on these to offer additional services to somewhat broader (and much more locally varied) constituencies, although the extent to which they had achieved this (and the means through which they had done so) varied greatly among them.

4 Employment and training services provided in Children's Centres

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the range of employment and training services provided in Children's Centres. It begins by considering those services provided directly by Jobcentre Plus, moving from the fairly passive forms of engagement, such as leaflets and vacancy boards, through to much more active forms, such as outreach and advisers' presence in the Centres. The chapter moves on to look at other activities (i.e. not directly based on potential Jobcentre Plus customers) which help to foster good links between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres. It then goes on to consider other agencies' activities in delivering similar employment and training-related services, either independently of, or in partnership with, Jobcentre Plus.

4.2 Jobcentre Plus delivery of service in and through Children's Centres

There is a wide range of Jobcentre Plus services that could potentially take place in Children's Centres. In practice, this study found that those provided are largely focused on a relatively narrow range, which includes:

- fairly passive and generalised information dissemination, through literature/leaflets;
- more targeted labour market information, through vacancy boards;
- a range of IT-based means of providing more labour market information through job points, warm phones, internet access;

- sponsorship of, or participation in, one-off events, such as jobs fairs;
- adviser outreach delivering services in the Children's Centres.

There are, in addition, a range of other activities which are not based directly on service delivery to potential beneficiaries, but have rather more indirect or longer-term capacity-building objectives. These are discussed separately in Section 4.3.

Data from the 2006 survey is included in this chapter and it serves to illustrate both a wide divergence of the scale of these various activities from district to district and indeed, within districts, as well as a fairly pragmatic approach by Jobcentre Plus staff, balancing what works, against what it costs to deliver.

4.2.1 Leaflets and posters

The most common form of Jobcentre Plus activity in Children's Centres is the provision of Jobcentre Plus literature, with over 80 per cent of districts offering this service in at least one of their Children's Centres. In terms of what that means at the individual level, over half of all Children's Centres were stocking Jobcentre Plus leaflets or leaflet stands at the time of the survey (in late 2006). The majority of Children's Centres visited during the qualitative case study research (early in 2007) were displaying Jobcentre Plus leaflets and posters at a minimum.

Quite obviously, although the production and distribution of such material to large numbers of Children's Centres is not cost-free, it is relatively cheap and straightforward to effect. Their effectiveness in delivering appropriate information to relevant recipients may be somewhat more problematic, however.

Firstly, in some cases, Childcare Partnership Managers (CPMs) were taking responsibility for making sure that leaflets and posters were delivered to Children's Centres but in others, this had been devolved to local level, most commonly a Jobcentre Plus adviser or a member of staff in the Children's Centre. In a few areas, Centres had been given contact details of the organisation that distributes Jobcentre Plus literature so that they could order more when supplies were low. However, this only worked properly where there was a dedicated member of staff at the Children's Centre responsible for ensuring that such literature was available. One issue that was raised a few times was that it can be difficult making sure the most up-to-date leaflets are on display, especially when there is little take-up of the material. For example, around the time interviews were conducted for this study, an updated version of the Jobcentre Plus leaflet for lone parents had been issued – old versions remained on display in some Centres (and indeed, in some Jobcentre Plus offices).

Secondly, the presentation and visibility of leaflets varied from, on the one hand, their availability from a dedicated and labelled Jobcentre Plus stand, which often collected together a range of written material of relevance to a varied range of potential Jobcentre Plus customers, to being mixed in with a more varied and general group of leaflets from different organisations on a collective display. In a

few Centres, leaflets were not in proper stands but lying on tables. The location of this material also varied, depending on the space available and the design of the Centre; while in some it was placed in reception areas, in others it was elsewhere in the Centre. It is not immediately obvious which style of presentation is most effective, and there were differences among our interviewees in this respect. Thus, while having a dedicated Jobcentre Plus stand increases the profile of the agency and its services, those not currently interested in working, or thinking that they couldn't for whatever reason, might simply ignore the stand. Having Jobcentre Plus leaflets mixed with other material makes them less obvious but they might also reach a wider range of people who were generally browsing. What is important is that the material is readily accessible and on view, which it is not always.

Thirdly, in line with their frequent aspirations to be 'one-stop-shops' with access to a wide range of services, Children's Centres nearly always have a range of leaflets and posters to display relating to the varied services provided by, and on, their premises. Their immediate content may be of less importance than their role in signposting users to services available elsewhere. Although a fairly wide range of Jobcentre Plus literature was evident, the most common Jobcentre Plus leaflets were those aimed at lone parents, and people on Incapacity Benefit (IB). Senior Jobcentre Plus Managers and CPMs generally reported that they viewed Children's Centres as an important route through which to access lone parents and people on incapacity benefits. In addition, several Jobcentre Plus respondents argued that even if mothers using Children's Centres were not currently looking for work, they probably would be at some point in the future and so establishing the Jobcentre clearly in their minds as the kind of place that would help them then was an important collateral effect of the distribution of this written material. Casting this net still wider, some Children's Centres were providing services to fathers and this is one area of work which many would like to expand. While some of these will be working, others are out of work. In one Centre, a support worker was working with fathers who needed support relating to their families and on a range of other personal and skill issues. While a number of these were a long way from being able to work, providing a range of literature on different Jobcentre Plus services could be one means of showing the range of support that might be available for them.

Centre staff did not always know the extent to which users used leaflets, although it was reported that some were particularly useful, eg those on childcare and funding for learning. Being able to hand out relevant leaflets to specific users is part of the service which the Centres want to offer, however; leaflets can be an important means of reinforcing information or reminding people about what they have been told. As one Centre Manager, who summarised the views of many, put it:

'It is essential to have them...[but]...a lot of our families want to talk rather than read leaflets.'

Thus, although the most widespread and relatively straightforward form in

which Jobcentre Plus makes its presence and role evident in most Centres, the use of literature is not without its problems. Although no formal audit had been undertaken either by Jobcentre Plus or the Centre Managers involved, there was a fair consensus that the ready availability, visibility and up-to-dateness of both specific and general Jobcentre Plus literature was an important need and marked a minimum level of engagement that Jobcentre Plus ought to deliver.

4.2.2 Vacancy boards

The provision of job search opportunities such as vacancy boards was less common, with around one-third of districts providing vacancy boards in one or more of its Children's Centres. As a result, the survey showed that, of over 1,000 Children's Centres across Britain, fewer than 200 were displaying vacancy boards.

The principle of having vacancy boards was nearly always welcomed by the Centre Managers. However, as with Jobcentre Plus literature, a range of issues were raised relating to their size, location and design. For example, in one district, standalone boards had been designed and were being put into Children's Centres. These were attractive-looking and striking, but placing them in an appropriate place was not always straightforward. Being standalone they needed to be located where they would not be knocked over or infringe on other space. In several Centres, for example, they were placed in a room with other employment-related material. This meant they were not clearly on view, so that people not specifically looking for employment would not see them as a matter of course.

Vacancy boards take a range of forms; for example, in one area, each Centre had a plasma screen displaying a range of information and including ten key local job vacancies running along the bottom. These were prominently displayed in reception and waiting areas so that all entering the Centre would see them. It was felt that these were successfully raising awareness of jobs available. However, more traditional vacancy boards seem to be more common and this may reflect issues that many districts are experiencing with IT availability (discussed further in Section 4.2.3).

Although some Children's Centres were displaying job vacancies independently, the vacancy boards based on Jobcentre Plus information were nearly always clearly identified as this. They would have the Jobcentre Plus logo and maybe other information, such as the website address. As well as providing information on vacancies, these could also contribute to the general approach of increasing awareness of Jobcentre Plus and the services offered.

However, locating job vacancy information somewhere where users are likely to browse, whether specifically looking for work or not, is important. As discussed elsewhere in this report, many users in Children's Centres are not currently looking for work or may be only thinking about this vaguely. Information that raises awareness of labour market opportunities may not be immediately of use, but does help to inform people, however generally, about the types of jobs around.

Deciding which vacancies to display and keeping the information up-to-date was viewed by respondents as critical in gaining credibility both among the active jobseeker minority and the future potential jobseeker majority. Where a Jobcentre Plus adviser visited the Centre, that person was usually responsible. However, where there was no regular adviser visit or visits were very ad hoc, responsibility had to be taken by someone at the Children's Centre. This worked best where there was a member of staff who had clear responsibility for links with Jobcentre Plus and was given the time and authority to take this forward.

While updating a vacancy board might seem straightforward, this was not always the case – some thought and background knowledge is necessary. For example, in one Centre visited in the course of this study, the CPM and a Jobcentre Plus adviser were placing vacancies on a new board for an open day. This Centre was in a small, fairly remote town where the local Jobcentre Plus office had recently been closed. The adviser had previously worked in the local office and knew the area well – she knew which were 'good' employers and which were not, as well as where local residents might be able to travel to. This knowledge helped in the decision as to which vacancies to include. Both the adviser and CPM were keen not to just include vacancies that seemed to stereotype lone mothers (in particular) into certain types of job – eg low paid, low skilled work. They tried to include vacancies that demonstrated a range of jobs and opportunities.

As with all Jobcentre Plus services in Children's Centres, vacancy boards will only be widely used if it is known that they are available. Word-of-mouth is an important way of spreading such information; however, this does take time. Some initial publicity also helps. For example, it was reported that in one small rural town that had recently lost its local Jobcentre Plus office, there were queues waiting to look at the vacancy board when it first became available.

Despite their significantly more restricted presence, vacancy boards appear to represent an effective means of both demonstrating the value of Jobcentre Plus as an accessible source of potentially relevant vacancies to the typical Centre user, as well as a practical aid to the jobseeking minority. Fine tuning and up-to-dateness of content are evidently crucial in securing this and this seems to be more easily secured through the use of computer-distributed and displayed hardware than the traditional boards.

4.2.3 Job points, warm phones, internet access

Job points were the least commonly provided of all services, because they have generally only been funded as part of Jobcentre Plus' New Deal Plus pilots. Nevertheless, they were present in a few Children's Centres (survey data suggests less than ten Centres in total across Britain). In some districts, a decision had been made to have a job point in just one Centre in a local authority (LA) or wider area. A key issue around the installation of these was their cost, and which organisation should pay. They are expensive – one respondent reported that they cost £60,000 to install; others mentioned tens of thousands. Who would be responsible for the

running costs was another concern. One key role of CPMs in relation to Children's Centres was managing expectations. Some partners had often expected Jobcentre Plus to come to the partnership with plenty of funding – this was not the case, although another CPM role was to facilitate access to other sources of funding. Further analysis of the survey data suggests that those Centres which have job points tend to be located in areas with an additional funding stream, such as New Deal for Lone Parent Plus (NDLP+) pilot areas.

Job points were well used in some areas, at least once it became known that they were available in a Children's Centre. However, there were mixed views on whether they were value for money. The general opinion was that they rarely were, especially where Jobcentre Plus adviser outreach was also available at the Children's Centre. Furthermore, the information on job points is the same as that available on the Jobcentre Plus website (internet access is explored later in this section).

To justify the specific expense of a job point, they do need to be widely used by a local community. Children's Centres are relatively new and many people do not know what they are – indeed, some people do not even notice them when they pass by every day. Furthermore, the name 'Children's Centre' implies childcare to many; they do not realise that broader services are available. Given that a significant amount of activity in Centres is around childcare and early years, many do not allow open access. A member of the public cannot just walk in to use a job point or vacancy board – they have to be 'buzzed' in and this can be off-putting to those who have no other reason to visit.

Job points also require support. Users nearly always need to be shown how to use one. In a Centre with a job point where a Jobcentre Plus adviser was present, the adviser was able to show people how to use the equipment. They are also fairly old technology and not easy to keep up-to-date – when information changes, each has to be updated individually, which requires someone having the responsibility for it. This could often fall to the CPM, who did not generally see this as either a good use of their time or something at which they were particularly skilled.

Half of Jobcentre Plus districts stated that they provided Children's Centre clients with **warm phones** to access all Jobseeker Direct services, report changes in circumstances and register new or repeat claims. However, warm phones were actually present in only a few Children's Centres within each district (totalling around 150 Centres nationwide). Some more were planned. However, as above, the CPMs did not always feel that these were a good use of resource, because they were not specifically targeted at Centres with large volumes of potential jobseekers.

It was felt by some Centre staff that these would be a very good way for users to make contact with Jobcentre Plus. Despite the increasingly widespread ownership and use of mobile phones, it was reported, a number of times, that some of the more hard-to-reach and vulnerable people either do not have one or are often

very reluctant to use one. It was felt that warm phones would help remove cost as a barrier to some groups in accessing Jobcentre Plus services. On the other hand, warm phones would not be likely to be used by many without encouragement. Only those who were confident enough and perhaps actively thinking about returning to work are likely to use these unprompted. One CPM reported that they were not introducing warm phones as they were not effective in other areas. In that county, warm phones had been introduced in some libraries following the closure of some Jobcentre Plus local offices – these were hardly used.

Again, cost and who pays was an issue. For example, in one area, those interviewed in a Children's Centre reported that they were looking forward to having a warm phone. However, at the local jobcentre, it was said this was unlikely as they had no funding to run it. Warm phones are expensive – not only in terms of instalment but also paying the line rental. This was rarely felt to be justified given the likely level of use. In another area, the LA was paying and users could be put through to other services not available in the Centre at that time. There had not been much usage, although the respondent thought that this was due to it not being publicised enough.

Having some means by which Children's Centre users can access information about job vacancies at a Centre was, nevertheless, felt to be important and desirable by most Jobcentre Plus and Centre Manager respondents. Many of those working directly with users to support them into, or towards, employment reported the need to provide relevant information at the time of an enquiry. For example, if talking to someone about entering employment, it is useful to show them examples of jobs available then and there. Vacancy boards can help. However, **internet access** can play a major role.

At the moment, not all Children's Centres have broadband or easy internet access. There are a range of reasons for this, including cost and initial building design (in a few cases it seems that this simply was not thought of). A number of Centres visited only had dial-up access to the internet. In one Children's Centre, broadband was not installed when the Centre was built, as an additional telephone line was needed, which at that point the Centre had not been in a position to fund. The Centre is now hoping to install a wireless connection but there are logistical difficulties which must be overcome in order to obtain the reliable service required. This is an example of the very real problems that Children's Centre Managers are having to address in providing a wide range of services.

In one district, all Children's Centres did have broadband and a dedicated PC was being placed in each that would allow users, possibly with the support of Centre staff, to search the Jobcentre Plus site for vacancies. The LA was funding these in one area. A touch screen allowed access to a restricted number of websites – in addition to Jobcentre Plus, these included Directgov and Children's Information Services (CIS) (Childcare Link). This service had come about through the CPM working closely with the LA and through a belief in the need for such information to be available as part of the package of provision.

In another region, the installation of broadband in all Children's Centres was being looked into. It is crucial in planning further Centres that this is included as part of the package. It does provide so many options for accessing information. Furthermore, although perhaps a discrete and identifiable cost that can be cut when budgets are tight, putting a service in later is not always straightforward. For example, the Manager of one Centre reported that they did not have adequate phone lines. At that time she had no delegated budget for such things and was struggling to obtain the necessary financial authorisation from the local authority (LA) to change this.

In others, staff might access a PC to provide relevant information to users. For example, in one Centre used as a base by a local government-funded initiative to support women back to work, the programme co-ordinator would look up job vacancies for those attending the course if they were interested. She would, typically, also provide users with examples of vacancies to illustrate what types of jobs were available locally.

Thus, job points and to a lesser extent warm phones, appear to be relatively uncommon. CPM respondents often (though not exclusively) felt that they were not cost-effective, because of the relatively low volume of use they were likely to generate in smaller Children's Centre settings. Internet access is felt to work best in association with an on-site adviser using it to undertake job search on behalf of Centre users. While offering obvious operational advantages, the cost of these approaches seems to position them more to following up on an established flow of likely users, rather than in creating one.

4.2.4 Special events

The 'one-off' character of special events allows them to take advantage of the Children's Centres' proximity to potential Jobcentre Plus customer groups, while avoiding, or at least minimising, the problem of their (frequently) low daily throughput of such individuals. In effect, an attractive special event might appeal to a wider and larger constituency than the daily users. They also avoid ongoing costs, while offering a good opportunity to build awareness of Jobcentre Plus' presence in, or accessibility through, the Centre.

The main type of event being held was jobs fairs. These could take a range of forms and were usually run jointly by Children's Centres and Jobcentre Plus, possibly other partners as well. Some jobs fairs were general information sessions with a Jobcentre Plus adviser talking about the support available, usually to lone parents but sometimes to other groups, for entering employment and training. Many lone parents do not know about the range of support available to them.⁹ They

⁹ See for example, Knight, G., Speckesser, S., Smith, J., Dolton, P. and Azevedo J.P. (2006), *Lone parents Work Focused Interviews/New Deal for Lone Parents: combined evaluation and further net impacts*, DWP Research Report 368.

think that if they enter employment they will immediately lose all their benefits and financial help. This is not the case. In some areas there is more support available, for example, through NDLP+ or various local pilots and initiatives. Other organisations were often also invited to these jobs fairs, for example: Employment Zone providers; those providing debt and financial advice; CIS.

Other jobs fairs were larger, more open events. They involved local employers who were looking for employees and a range of other organisations able to offer advice and support to those on benefits and/or looking for work, training providers. Some events were themed around, for example, a particular occupation or employer. One LA looking for employees had a stand at one where people were helped with application forms or given specific advice about entering particular jobs. The police, health service and a range of other employers were reported to have found these jobs fairs a useful means of finding employees.

As with all activities, funding was an issue. Jobcentre Plus would often do a mailing, usually to lone parents in the local area – they had the information and could resource this. Childcare would typically be funded by Jobcentre Plus or the Children's Centre if necessary, and lunch was often provided. There was also some concern in a few areas about the low turnout at jobs fairs but more particularly because a low attendance offered few opportunities to engage parents. This was more often the case in general information events, rather than those where employers and a wider range of organisations were present.

Events where employers were present were nearly always well attended. For example, one was held in London on the day of the July bombing in 2005 – people still managed to attend and from quite a wide area. Whether those attending were all on benefits was not clear; however, such events were helping employers fill posts and helping people find a job or perhaps improve their employment prospects.

However, organising these events does take time and involves some cost. Also, effort needs to be put into encouraging those attending to become more engaged, without feeling that they are being forced; and into follow-up afterwards. At most events, people were asked to sign in and they would then be put on a database. Follow-up might be general or only of those who specifically ask. One Jobcentre Plus adviser was planning to use a questionnaire to identify who attends the jobs fairs she is involved with, to understand, for example, their skill levels in order to find out more about what provision is needed.

There had been some experimentation with the titling and branding of events. For example, in one district, lone parent events had been titled: 'Are you getting all you are entitled to?' Jobcentre Plus was feared in many communities where it was assumed their role was to stop benefits. In one part of the district, an event was run under the Jobcentre Plus logo and turnout was poor. In another, it was run under the CIS and Children's Centre logos – there was a much better turnout. This again raises a theme that is returned to at various points in this report – to reach many

who could benefit from entering employment or improving their skills to do so in the longer term, a subtle, 'softly, softly' approach is often most appropriate.

4.2.5 Jobcentre Plus advisers in Children's Centres

In addition to the deployment of fairly passive approaches (literature, vacancy boards), IT-mediated contact (job points, warm phones, internet access) and one-off 'events' such as jobs fairs, the physical presence of Jobcentre Plus advisers in Children's Centres represents an important form of joint work. In the survey, around two-thirds of districts stated that they were engaged in outreach and marketing activities through Children's Centres. Although outreach can mean different things to different people or agencies, for Jobcentre Plus advisers, it usually meant seeing people in a location other than the Jobcentre Plus office. Furthermore, whereas under some circumstances this can involve going to people's homes, a range of community sites, meeting in cafés, approaching people in the street and shopping centres to inform them about their services, the most prevalent form of outreach for our purposes here is having a Jobcentre Plus staff presence in Centres. Although this could take several different forms, it was widely seen as very important and desirable by a wide range of stakeholders and examples of good practice in this respect are discussed on page 51.

Scale and pattern of outreach activities

Around half of districts cited some Jobcentre Plus adviser presence in local Children's Centres, either through booked surgery sessions or on a more ad hoc basis. However, when examined at the Centre level, this disguises a more sparse and varied picture. Fewer than 200 Centres across Britain offered regular Jobcentre Plus adviser presence, with around 100 more having advisers present on an ad hoc basis. Many Centres featured in the qualitative study did not have any regular Jobcentre Plus adviser attending, although one would often visit to provide information at special events or to particular groups. The role of linked advisers was being developed in many areas and this is discussed further below.

A key feature of adviser presence in the Centres is that while it is quite widely seen as desirable, experience suggests that it can also be cost-ineffective. In a number of case study districts, Jobcentre Plus advisers had initially held interviews and surgeries in some or all Children's Centres at first. Many of them consequently had experience of running drop-in sessions to which hardly anyone came, of interviews arranged for individuals who did not subsequently turn up and so on. As a result, it was not felt by advisers and CPMs alike that simply spending time in a Children's Centre was the best use of adviser resource, especially when Jobcentre Plus resources are so limited anyway. This had frequently led to a reassessment of the best way to utilise the resources available.

Survey evidence is consistent with such a pattern of early experiment and reappraisal. A small-scale survey (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) internal paper, not published), conducted in 2005, found that advisers' regular surgeries

in Children's Centres were **more common** than ad hoc adviser attendance. As we saw previously, this pattern was reversed by 2006, which suggests that some reprioritising of adviser resources has occurred in the intervening 12 or so months.

The qualitative research showed that following such a cycle, there was no clear and consistent pattern of outreach that was likely to develop. Rather, there was considerable variety in the forms of outreach which had developed. Local approaches seemed to depend on a range of factors, as follows:

- the number and character of the Centre's local population of benefit recipients (particularly priority group customers);
- staff resources and funding within Jobcentre Plus;
- the deprivation of the local area; and
- the physical proximity of the Centre and the local Jobcentre Plus office.

Forms of outreach

Despite these underlying concerns, in those Centres where a Jobcentre Plus adviser did engage in outreach work, they had often found that regular, scheduled attendance was less successful than a more informal approach, where advisers were able to link into particular events, or drop in at the end of a course. In this way, they were able to link in with a wider range of parents than would be at the Centre at a specific time each week and were also available for casual conversations with parents which were often seen as less intimidating than a formal appointment system but were important in starting to build up rapport and trust.

These advisers sometimes conducted individual Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) in Children's Centres, for which formal appointments had been made, although the survey showed that this was happening in only around 50 Centres, and in only one-third of all districts. WFI appointments were usually made through the Jobcentre Plus call centre; however, in some Centres, advisers would conduct an interview with whoever wanted to see them. This would either be through appointments or drop-in. In a few cases, advisers would contact the Children's Centre the day before they were due to visit and cancel the visit if no appointments had been made. It was often these types of session which had been discontinued due to low numbers. However, as is illustrated below, a broader, more proactive approach can lead to greater success (although this is more resource-intensive).

More common was conducting Better Off Calculations (BOCs) with clients in Children's Centres (available in around 170 Centres) but there were practical barriers to conducting both WFIs and BOCs off the Jobcentre Plus site.

Constraints on outreach

Underlying this experimentation lies a growing realisation that with the total number of Children's Centres being planned, it would be impossible for a Jobcentre Plus adviser to visit each on a regular basis. One Jobcentre Plus office might have ten or even 20 Children's Centres on their patch. In addition, Jobcentre Plus advisers and adviser managers did vary in their views about the extent to which it was useful to have an adviser presence in Children's Centres, at least on a regular basis. Where this had worked, in terms of seeing sufficient people, they were usually more favourable. For their part, advisers generally did enjoy the part of their work that took them out of the office into local communities. A number reported having done more of this in the past under various programmes and pilots, but that current workloads and expectations meant they did need to be focusing on conducting interviews in local offices.

In addition to concern about resource use, there was some feeling that once work-ready and needing the sort of advice and support an adviser could offer, many parents would be prepared to attend an interview at the Jobcentre Plus office. In this view, the Children's Centre and other agencies had an important role in supporting the more disengaged in reaching this point and could then direct them to Jobcentre Plus.

A further operational constraint relates to technology. Some advisers had no laptops to take out with them and/or no internet connection at the Centre, meaning that they had to record everything with paper and pen and then enter it on the system on returning to their office – effectively a double effort. Without a laptop, BOCs could not be precisely calculated. The relevant information could be collected from a claimant and the result sent or phoned through later. However, this did not have the same impact as being able to tell the person face-to-face and then follow-up with further information. Where laptops were available, accessing the Jobcentre Plus Labour Market System (LMS) and the software to conduct BOCs was also sometimes problematic.

Another issue is that it takes time for people to realise that an adviser is available in a Centre and for the adviser to become trusted and valued. In some areas where the service had been withdrawn, the door had not been closed completely in relation to Jobcentre Plus advisers running sessions in Children's Centres. It was commented that once a Centre and its range of services became more established, having an adviser presence might be revisited.

Good practice in outreach

Despite the generally small scale on which it was undertaken and the constraints identified above, there were, nevertheless, a number of examples of very successful Jobcentre Plus adviser presence in Children's Centres. However, these nearly always involved more resources and most particularly, a significant commitment to provide regular Jobcentre Plus adviser outreach from the Children's Centre and other community venues. Success did not always mean getting people into work

quickly – although some examples of this were reported – but rather, that Centre users were engaging with the adviser and benefiting from using the services. Getting people into work might be a long-term aim, perhaps taking several years. However, it was felt that having a Jobcentre Plus adviser visiting the Centre who became known and valued was a good first step in '*sowing the seeds for future engagement*'.

In flat contradiction to the fairly widely reported view about the effectiveness of ad hoc scheduling of visits, the most successful examples generally involved having a dedicated adviser resource who would visit a Children's Centre regularly – at least once a week – and engage with a range of users. These were nearly always funded through additional funding streams, rather than the Jobcentre Plus main budget, for example, the NDLP+ pilot, Action Teams, the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) or New Deal for Communities. Advisers brought in using these additional funding streams were usually lone parent advisers but were prepared to provide advice and support to other users as well. Within Jobcentre Plus, a target group that has had relatively little attention so far is partners of those on benefits – Children's Centres were one potential route to reach such people.

Good practice in outreach

In one area, a Jobcentre Plus adviser funded through NLDP pilot, was working in conjunction with a community development worker in a Children's Centre. She has built good links with parents through chatting to them informally, telling those with young children what she was there for. Word-of-mouth is playing an important role in people going to see this adviser. She has helped friends in relation to employment and training and the message is passed on. She provides friendly, hands-on support, showing people how to use the job point, following up appointments with telephone calls to give information on other opportunities and services they might find useful. She is willing to see anyone, not just lone parents. If a drop-in session is quiet she places herself in reception so she can chat to people.

Continued

Another Jobcentre Plus adviser was based in a Children's Centre five days a week. Her post was funded through NRF and this was about to end. At the time of the interview she was waiting to hear whether there would be funding for another year. This was preventing her being as proactive as she would have liked – it would be no good starting various activities if they are shortly discontinued. The post was first funded through Action Teams. This approach had helped to break down negative perceptions of Jobcentre Plus and build up trust. She is able to work very flexibly. She sees people in the Children's Centre or in a range of other community locations. Some people see the Centre as another official building and don't like going there, so she will see people anywhere. The funding also enables her to meet people in cafés and buy teas, coffees. She has to work intensively with a range of different clients and will also refer them elsewhere as necessary (eg for debt and mental health issues). For example, she works with 16/17 year old lads who are still living with their parents and unemployed, amongst other things helping them to take responsibility for themselves. She has made links with Connexions who come out to give talks. She sometimes sees whole families, some with problem histories and generational unemployment. One person hadn't had contact with anyone in authority for 20 years. Much of her work revolves around verbal contacts, informing people what is available to them, 'planting the seeds', and a number do eventually progress to training and work. Word-of-mouth is an important means through which people come to see her and 15 to 25 people each week attend her surgeries.

While on one hand, the Jobcentre Plus logo and affiliation can put people off approaching an adviser, it is, nevertheless, important that Jobcentre Plus presence in Children's Centres is obvious. While initial take-up was often slow, an adviser being seen to be around and providing relevant support and advice, can help reduce prejudices and preconceptions about Jobcentre Plus services. The ability of advisers to mix with Children's Centre users, as in the example above, is an important part of reducing barriers. This adviser also made sure that she was placed in an obvious position, not tucked away in a corner – she uses a place in the Centre where people have to pass by to drop off their buggies.

Children's Centre users also need to be informed about the presence of a Jobcentre Plus adviser. One outreach adviser had run a localised mail shot to tell people she was in the Centre. She also relied on staff in Centres to signpost and refer users to her.

Using linked advisers

Whether an adviser regularly visits a Children's Centre or not, it is very important that there are clear links between the two organisations. An approach which is being developed in a number of districts is that of '**linked adviser**'. This does need to be co-ordinated and facilitated and was developing most effectively where

someone, usually the CPM, was taking the lead. Survey findings suggest that a significant part of many CPMs' day-to-day work with Children's Centres is helping to establish links 'on the ground' between Children's Centres and local Jobcentre Plus offices. The aim was to have a nominated adviser for each Children's Centre. They would not necessarily hold regular sessions but become known, especially by Centre staff, and a named point of contact with Jobcentre Plus. While their role is likely to evolve and develop, responsibilities would include making sure that the Children's Centre had up-to-date Jobcentre Plus leaflets and that staff were kept informed about Jobcentre Plus activities and services. They would also visit as necessary to, for example, give presentations to particular groups of users. Some Children's Centre users would not be prepared or perhaps confident enough to phone the Jobcentre Plus call centre to make an appointment. The Jobcentre Plus linked adviser and Centre staff would be able to facilitate this; the adviser being able to answer questions and signpost people to the appropriate adviser or support.

In one district, advisers had been asked to volunteer to play this link role. It is not the case that all advisers want to do such outreach work or have the appropriate skills. CPMs in just under a quarter of districts must spend time negotiating with Jobcentre Plus colleagues for staff resources to work Children's Centres. Buy-in is needed from adviser managers, who have to see this role as important and requiring dedicated time. However, as has already been reported, some local offices have so many Children's Centres in their area that there are not enough advisers to take on a link role. Either selection or alternative models might be needed. It is early stages yet in the development of linked advisers, and the different ways in which their roles might evolve have yet to become fully realised.

Linked advisers can also play an important role in making jobcentre-based services more accessible to Centre staff and their users. In one of our case study areas, Children's Centre staff, usually the manager, were largely being left to make contact with their local Jobcentre Plus office. This was not always working well – it could be difficult to speak to an appropriate person and find the right contact, and could take some perseverance and persistence. A more successful model which was found in a number of districts was where the CPM was involved in brokering the new relationship between Children's Centre and linked adviser. The CPM would work with adviser managers in local Jobcentre Plus offices to identify suitable linked advisers for particular Children's Centres, and would introduce the adviser to the Children's Centre staff. This ensured that there was a Jobcentre Plus representative in place to take over the linked adviser role and maintain regular contact between the Children's Centre and Jobcentre Plus, as soon as the CPM stepped back from day-to-day contact with the Children's Centre.

An issue discussed elsewhere in this report is the extent of reliance on CPMs in maintaining links between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres (currently at least a quarter of all districts). Developing the linked adviser role should help take the pressure off CPMs – releasing them, for example, from day-to-day link activities

which so many are currently involved in, for more strategic and overarching activities.

In a few Children's Centres, a particular member of staff had the main responsibility for maintaining links with Jobcentre Plus. These were in a number of roles, and could often be the Centre Manager. It does seem important for there to be a named member of staff who will take the main responsibility for communicating with a Jobcentre Plus link person. Other staff would still be able to contact the linked adviser, eg in relation to a particular user or query. However, the Centre link would be the person who ensured that Jobcentre Plus material and information was disseminated to all, updated and presented as appropriate.

Another role that Jobcentre Plus advisers were taking in Children's Centres – both where there was a regular adviser presence and in others – was giving presentations about Jobcentre Plus services to groups of Centre users. This could be a formal presentation or simply a quick self-introduction from the adviser, followed by an informal chat with the parents attending the session. These sessions included drop-in groups where information on employment and training had been requested or was thought appropriate or those who were just completing a training courses of some sort, for example, basic skills, IT or confidence-building. In some cases, eg at the end of a training course which people were aiming to progress from, this could be done openly and in a straightforward way. However, in other cases, it had to be approached carefully and sensitively. Not all parents were ready to engage formally with Jobcentre Plus and even for those who were, CPMs and Centre staff generally felt it important that Jobcentre Plus input should be introduced at the most appropriate stage possible, in order to increase the chances of new engagement. For example, having Jobcentre Plus input right at the beginning of an introductory confidence-building course would probably not be suitable or useful. The most appropriate stage to introduce Jobcentre Plus input, particularly on the more introductory courses, was often felt to be towards the end, as parents would be used to being in the Children's Centre, would hopefully feel they had taken positive steps forward and could be ready to think of what they wanted to do next. At this point, a fairly informal chat with a Jobcentre Plus adviser could help to inform them of the full range of options available.

It was seen to be very important to make sure that parents were comfortable with seeing Jobcentre Plus advisers in the Children's Centre; for example, there were some reports that users had said they would not go to an activity/session if anyone from Jobcentre Plus was there. To avoid this, some of the staff organising such sessions said that they would ask in advance if those attending would like someone from Jobcentre Plus to give a talk later in the course. However, not all parents were so reluctant to consider their back-to-work options. In one Centre, those attending a skills club aimed at increasing basic skills and confidence, knew that someone had talked to them about getting back to work. However, they were vague as to who – this could have been Jobcentre Plus or Employment Zone or another local project, as all did attend at various times.

4.3 Other Jobcentre Plus activities in, or with, Children's Centres

In addition to delivering services focused directly at people using Children's Centres, there are a number of other activities which Jobcentre Plus staff engage in to help develop good working relationships between the two organisations. In this section, we consider them in turn.

4.3.1 Exchanging information

The setting up of Children's Centres and Jobcentre Plus involvement in this was discussed in Chapter 3. Jobcentre Plus is nearly always one of the newer partners involved. Those working in other agencies were nearly always less familiar with Jobcentre Plus services and some of these partners were not sure about the appropriateness of their role in a Children's Centre. The individuals who held these more negative opinions towards Jobcentre Plus did not seem to be in particular sectors or roles but rather, they had not worked closely with Jobcentre Plus before and usually held rather outdated views on how Jobcentre Plus operated. They included staff who worked on the ground with parents in the Children's Centres; as such they were removed from strategic partnership arrangements and the clarity that these brought to arrangements for Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres. CPMs were working at a strategic and operational level to address these negative perceptions in the Children's Centres.

At a more strategic level, CPMs were regular attenders of meetings through which they met and engaged with a range of stakeholders involved with Children's Centres. CPMs in a third of Jobcentre Plus districts were commonly involved in training and advising Children's Centre staff on Jobcentre Plus products, services and clients. This often involved presentations to a Centre management board or group of Centre practitioners and meetings between groups of staff to discuss Jobcentre Plus activities and their role.

4.3.2 Training in childcare

Part of the CPM role is to develop the childcare workforce and, where appropriate, CPMs were using links with Children's Centres to facilitate this. In some areas, there is a shortage of childcare workers and where this was the case, Children's Centres could be one means by which this was addressed. For example, taster courses for those interested in childcare carers were provided, information more generally on childcare careers was made available and those with any interest encouraged to follow this up. Childcare training could be facilitated through the childcare and early years provision in Centres; or Centres were sometimes used as locations for running childcare courses.

4.3.3 Using Children's Centres to access particular groups

Children's Centres were generally seen as possible routes to access lone parents and IB recipients, also the non-working partners of men on benefits. However, in some areas, they were being used to access discrete sub-groups. For example, a NDLP+ pilot adviser was using a range of community locations to reach specific groups of ethnic minority lone mothers. Children's Centres in the area ran drop-in groups for these mothers and were one potential route.

4.3.4 Facilitating other activities

CPMs were also facilitating a number of other Jobcentre Plus-related activities through Children's Centres or in relation to Children's Centres. For example, one LA was funding childcare tasters for women wanting to return to work and these were being advertised through Children's Centres. They also contributed to the package of support that Jobcentre Plus could offer to lone mothers to encourage them to return to work.

In another area, adviser discretionary funds were being used to fund a project outside Jobcentre Plus, aimed at supporting parents returning to work. This had been put to tender and Jobcentre Plus were pleased when the Children's Centre which had put in a bid was successful. The bids had been assessed independently from the district through Jobcentre Plus procurement procedures. This funded an employment adviser in a Centre located in a very deprived housing estate to work with local people, helping them towards training and employment. There was a target of 20 people being placed in work over a year, which was felt to be stretching.

CPM were playing an important role as facilitator, bringing other organisations into partnerships and looking for alternative sources of funding that could be utilised to fund employment and training services in Children's Centres.

4.4 Chapter summary

There is a wide range of Jobcentre Plus services that could potentially take place in Children's Centres. In practice, this study found that those provided are largely focused on a relatively narrow range, as follows.

Fairly passive and generalised information dissemination, through literature/leaflets. Over half of all Children's Centres were stocking Jobcentre Plus leaflets or leaflet stands at the time of the survey (in late 2006). Although no formal audit had been undertaken either by Jobcentre Plus or the Centre Managers involved, there was a fair consensus that the ready availability, visibility and up-to-dateness of both specific and general Jobcentre Plus literature was an important need and marked a minimum level of engagement that Jobcentre Plus ought to deliver.

More targeted labour market information, through vacancy boards. The provision of job search opportunities, such as vacancy boards, was less commonly provided, with around one-third of districts providing vacancy boards in one or more of its Children's Centres. As a result, the survey showed that, of over 1,000 Children's Centres across Britain, fewer than 200 were displaying vacancy boards. Despite their significantly more restricted presence, vacancy boards appear to represent an effective means of both demonstrating the value of Jobcentre Plus as an accessible source of potentially relevant vacancies to the typical Centre user, as well as a practical aid to the jobseeking minority. Fine tuning and up-to-dateness of content are evidently crucial in securing this and this seems to be more easily secured through the use of computer-distributed and displayed hardware than the traditional boards.

A range of IT-based means of providing more labour market information through job points, warm phones, internet access. Job points, and to a lesser extent, warm phones, appear to be relatively uncommon and are widely (though not exclusively) felt not to be cost effective in view of the relatively low volume of use they are likely to generate in Children's Centre settings. Internet access is felt to work best in association with an on-site adviser using it to undertake job search on behalf of Centre users. While offering obvious operational advantages, the cost of these approaches seems to position them more to following up on an established flow of likely users, rather than creating them.

Sponsorship of, or participation in, one-off events. The main type of event being held was jobs fairs. These could take a range of forms and were usually run jointly by Children's Centres and Jobcentre Plus, possibly other partners as well. The 'one-off' character of special events allows them to take advantage of the Children's Centre's proximity to potential Jobcentre Plus customer groups, while avoiding, or at least minimising, the problem of their every day user flow not drawing in large numbers of immediately relevant individuals. They also avoid ongoing costs, while offering a good opportunity to build awareness of Jobcentre Plus' presence in, or accessibility through, the Centre.

Adviser outreach delivering services in the Children's Centres. In the survey, around two-thirds of districts stated that they were engaged in outreach and marketing activities through Children's Centres. Around half of districts cited some Jobcentre Plus adviser presence in local Children's Centres, either through booked surgery sessions or on a more ad hoc basis. However, when examined at the Centre level, this disguises a more sparse and varied picture. Fewer than 200 Centres across Britain offered regular Jobcentre Plus adviser presence, with around 100 more having advisers present on an ad hoc basis. A key feature of adviser presence in the Centres is that while it is quite widely seen as desirable, experience suggests that it can also be cost-ineffective. In addition to certain operational constraints, it is clear that with the total number of Children's Centres being planned, it would be impossible for a Jobcentre Plus adviser to visit each on a regular basis. One Jobcentre Plus office might have ten or even 20 Children's Centres on their patch.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the cases of good practice identified nearly always involved more resources and, most particularly, a significant commitment to provide regular Jobcentre Plus adviser outreach from the Children's Centre and other community venues, which were nearly always funded through additional funding streams, rather than the Jobcentre Plus main budget.

An interesting attempt to bridge this gap between expensive presence and limited funds, is the development of a 'linked adviser' role, with a nominated Jobcentre Plus staff member responsible for orchestrating all the contacts between specific Jobcentre Plus offices and Children's Centres.

There are, in addition, a range of other activities which are not based directly on service delivery to potential beneficiaries but have rather more indirect or longer-term capacity-building objectives, including information exchanges, training in childcare and access groups.

5 Partnership working

This chapter builds on earlier chapters to explore partnership working in greater detail, more specifically looking at ‘the factors that contribute to successful joint working’. It goes on to consider factors that can inhibit successful working and to identify where there appear to be some gaps.

5.1 Jobcentre Plus and Children’s Centre Partnerships

As we discussed in Chapter 2, both the formal constitution of these Centres and the operational logic of their roles lead almost invariably to some kind of partnership arrangements, covering both their strategic development and their medium-term activities and plans. However, Jobcentre Plus is unlikely to be seen by other members of these partnerships as absolutely central to the main purposes and roles of the Centres; in reality, Jobcentre Plus’ contribution to Children’s Centres is at best likely to be viewed by the other members as important and valuable, but rarely as vital or crucial. As a result, Jobcentre Plus cannot reasonably expect, naturally, to play a central or pivotal role in these partnerships. Finally, Jobcentre Plus is often the newest member of the partnerships working around Children’s Centres. As a result, Jobcentre Plus has every opportunity to contribute to the support which Children’s Centres are delivering to families, even though it may not often do it on the terms that it might prefer or in the ways that it might choose.

Consequently, it is important that the lessons for Jobcentre Plus of successful working through these particular partnerships are recognised and learnt. Conversely, mistakes and blind alleys can be identified and avoided in future. The next two sections respectively address these two questions.

5.2 Factors contributing to successful partnerships

Overall, Jobcentre Plus districts were positive about their success in developing good working relationships with Children’s Centres. Nearly all districts said that they had been successful in developing good working relationships, with over a third saying that their district had been ‘very successful’ in partnership working.

To be successful, partnerships have to function effectively at both strategic and operational level. This involves many different people with varying degrees of commitment and day-to-day involvement. This section identifies a range of factors that are relevant at both strategic and operational level. These are derived from both direct reporting by respondents and an analysis of the data.

Underlying most of these factors is the need for good communication, in terms of informing and listening to others. The personalities involved are crucial, especially those in a facilitating role – they need to be able to get on with many different people and on many different levels.

5.2.1 Visibility: CPMs as Jobcentre Plus ambassadors

A key factor in the success of many partnerships is the approach, commitment and personality of those involved. They need to be prepared to be open and communicative about their own organisation but also be able to listen to and appreciate the objectives and agendas of others.

Childcare Partnership Managers (CPMs) have played a crucial role in opening and expanding the dialogue between Jobcentre Plus and the many organisations involved, or potentially involved, in Children's Centres. The post of CPM was introduced in April 2003 and many of those interviewed reported having to develop and define their role themselves.¹⁰ Before the vast expansion of Children's Centres and the expectation of Jobcentre Plus involvement in all, they had already started to build successful working relationships with many childcare-related organisations through their role in relation to the childcare agenda more generally. For example, they often sat on Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) and other groups involved in promoting the provision and use of childcare. The evaluation of the CPM role conducted in 2004 referred to above concluded that CPMs were convincing external organisations and their users of the value of Jobcentre Plus programmes and services. They were having a wider impact beyond their specific childcare brief: *'impacting on other services directed at supporting traditionally hard-to-reach people back into work'*.

They were, therefore, well placed to take on the role of facilitating Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres, although this has significantly added to their workload. CPMs are rarely in their office. A major part of their time is spent out meeting people, whether informally or through formal meetings. For example, they often attended board meetings at Children's Centres, also open days and other activities – meeting staff and users. They operate at strategic and operational levels and engage with representatives of a range of organisations at both these levels.

¹⁰ See also Barker, J., Ireland, J., Morrow, V., Smith, F. and Hey, V. (2004), *Evaluation of the Childcare Partnership Manager Role*, DWP Research Report.

They are recognised by many of the key players (eg Centre Managers, outreach/support workers, local authority (LA) leads) in Children's Centres as the main point of contact with Jobcentre Plus. Having a named and known point of contact was valued, especially as CPMs were often able to address day-to-day issues around Jobcentre Plus involvement in a Centre as well as more strategic matters. Thinking and working 'outside the box' are also important – that is, CPMs cover large geographical areas with multiple issues and large numbers of stakeholders and partners. Creative use of their time and resources to network across their districts, together with the enthusiasm which so many of the CPMs clearly had for their work, appears to be key in making the role a success.

The need to be out and making contacts does not diminish. Relationships have to be maintained – indeed, it was often commented that Jobcentre Plus (usually the CPM) attendance at meetings was more regular than many other members.

Some CPMs were becoming involved more broadly in the partnership working aspect of their Jobcentre Plus district. For example, attending meetings that might be relevant, in the broadest sense, to involvement in Children's Centres and the childcare agenda. This was one means of bringing new organisations to the relationship. In some areas, particularly those with the higher levels of deprivation, there are many organisations working to help families and/or supporting people into employment or training. Furthermore, this changes fairly regularly as funding streams finish or grants end. One CPM commented on how having developed contacts with the major players, other, usually smaller, projects and organisations were emerging. These might be working with particularly disadvantaged groups, often sub-groups but not be widely networked.

CPMs often reported their role as being that of a facilitator – bringing agencies together and spreading information, as well as specifically providing information on Jobcentre Plus.

CPMs are not the only ones who are proactively networking so that services can be understood and drawn in. Those from other organisations were also doing this, adding to the strength of relationships. Different organisations and individuals are part of different networks and will have easier routes into some than others. It is important that these are all utilised. For example, LA leads can facilitate access to, and links with, other LA services. One Centre Manager was working hard to understand better how the LA operated and inform other staff about the Centre and encourage links. Other managers were utilising their networks to expand services available in their Centres.

5.2.2 Getting involved early

Some of the earlier Children's Centres were set up with little Jobcentre Plus involvement at the outset and in some of these it had proved more difficult to develop involvement at a later stage. Jobcentre Plus involvement is part of the core offer and it is, therefore, very important that they are represented from the outset. CPMs are one of the key partners that LA leads contact. They are

now nearly always involved from the planning stages of a Children's Centre. For example, they have set up processes so that they know what stage each Centre is at in its development, and when the main benchmarks are (eg designation and opening).

This early involvement helps address any misconceptions about, and prejudices against, Jobcentre Plus from the outset and allows the role that Jobcentre Plus can take in a Centre to be explored early. Some Children's Centres are planned and designated before a manager is appointed. Most CPMs will aim to meet a Centre Manager as soon as one is appointed, so that a working relationship can be established early.

These actions do not always mean that things progress smoothly. However, CPMs have now done much of the groundwork in building key relationships. Those leading on the opening of Children's Centres are gaining a body of knowledge and experience from those initially opened. This can be drawn on in making the relationship between partners progress more smoothly, or perhaps differently, for those Centres opened later.

As the number of Children's Centres in each area increases, there will be growing pressure on the workload of CPMs – some of whom already cover large geographical areas with the need to develop relationships with many groups of partners. It seems likely that their role will need to become more strategic and developmental – for example, being involved fully when Centres are being set up, drawing on their experience of developing Jobcentre Plus involvement in those opened earlier. It may then be necessary to delegate regular contact with a Centre to other Jobcentre Plus staff, as is beginning to happen and was discussed in the previous chapter. However, it has also been reported that there are too few advisers to work with all the Children's Centres being opened – thought needs to be given to how links between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres, particularly on an operational level, can be maintained – especially where a more hands-on approach is having a greater impact (an issue discussed in the next chapter).

5.2.3 Understanding other organisational targets and agendas

The key factor for successful partnership working, identified by one-third of Jobcentre Plus districts across Britain, was a good level of understanding between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres staff of each other's roles. CPMs have played an important role in helping the other partners and organisations involved in Children's Centres understand Jobcentre Plus objectives and services. It was reported by a number of Children's Centres staff that Jobcentre Plus is often viewed negatively and with distrust by both professionals and users. They suggested that it is still perceived by many as an agency that is largely interested in reducing the numbers of benefits claimants and individuals' own benefit entitlements, through pushing people into work. This view was reflected by a number of users interviewed who saw having to attend a Jobcentre Plus interview as a threatening experience. Some professionals felt that Jobcentre Plus objectives conflicted with their own around supporting families.

Through attending a range of meetings, but also one-to-one contact, CPMs have informed other professionals and organisations involved in and working from the Children's Centres about Jobcentre Plus, challenging negative stereotypes. To this end, CPMs across the districts had worked with the full range of partner organisations and professionals, including local authorities and early years services, health services, and family support services. This awareness-raising of Jobcentre Plus amongst other partners has been an ongoing process; it is rarely the case that a one-off session is enough – relationships have to be built and action provides more evidence than discussion. Being available to deal with queries and being very approachable have also helped.

Other factors have contributed to increasing the understanding between organisations. Starting to place Jobcentre Plus services in Children's Centres, particularly adviser contact and outreach, means that those working in or through Centres, as well as users, are gradually becoming familiar with what is available and barriers are being broken down. Good relationships with Children's Centre staff and Centre Managers in particular, were found to be a positive factor for partnership working in a fifth of Jobcentre Plus districts. This was often expressed in terms of Centre staff's recognition and support for the employment agenda. However, links with advisers who are able to address a range of queries, eg related to benefits, not just about entering employment and to provide information, have made a big difference in Centres where these are present. This is not necessarily a short-term activity. As discussed in Chapter 4, advisers have had to be visible in Centres and proactively work to build trust.

The various information sessions and visits between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres and other agencies (also discussed in Chapter 4) have played an important part in increasing understanding.

The need for an understanding of other organisational targets and agendas is a two- (perhaps multi-) way process. Jobcentre Plus staff also have to increase their knowledge of the agendas of external organisations including local authorities. A small but significant proportion of Jobcentre Plus districts reported taking advantage of networking opportunities with a range of external partners to facilitate partnership working. One-quarter of districts also mentioned developing good relationships with LA staff as having helped them to work well in partnership. The lone parent advisers interviewed in the course of this project dealt with users who were experiencing multiple difficulties. They often referred them elsewhere for support, especially on non-employment-related matters. They were also increasingly referring users to Children's Centres – as has been reported elsewhere, there was a general feeling across many of those interviewed, Centre staff and Jobcentre Plus staff alike, that there were far more referrals in this direction, rather than from Centres to Jobcentre Plus.

Embedding the childcare agenda as a key concern within Jobcentre Plus was an issue that CPMs were having to deal with. This was a slow process, at senior management level and below. Advisers working directly with lone mothers were

well aware of childcare as a barrier to returning to work. Its cost, lack of availability, particularly for school-age children, and concerns about leaving young children, were issues they faced regularly. A quarter of districts cited the commitment of Jobcentre Plus advisers as a positive factor in helping to develop successful working relationships with Children's Centres. However, persuading other staff to see this as relevant to their role could be more difficult. CPMs had to continually reinforce the importance of the childcare agenda to the other Jobcentre Plus staff they came into contact with, by highlighting it regularly as one of the key barriers to work for some of their target groups. Senior management buy-in was nearly always crucial for the agenda to become accepted at other levels. In under a tenth of districts, support from Jobcentre Plus management was reported as having helped them to work successfully with Children's Centres.

Most CPMs have a jobcentre or benefits background and have held a range of posts including working with users on special projects, business development. They are, therefore, well placed in these respects to work with Jobcentre Plus staff on these new agendas. For example, they understand the pressures staff are under, the range of programmes and how Jobcentre Plus functions as an organisation.

There are, however, some common targets and agendas across a range of organisations that are facilitating them working together. The child poverty agenda has become central to a much wider range of organisations, including health services, family support services and early years and education services. It is widely accepted that increasing the number of parents in employment will be a main means of reducing poverty. Furthermore, helping the more disengaged and disadvantaged improve their skills, confidence, while the children are young can be of benefit to their family generally. They can become more involved in their child(ren)'s learning, less isolated and their child(ren) benefit from using formal childcare and greater social interaction, as well as being better prepared for employment (in terms of skills, motivation and confidence) when the time comes. However in spite of positive progress, there may be some scope for further work in mainstreaming the child poverty message at all levels of Jobcentre Plus. At the time of the survey, just over one-tenth of districts mentioned a lack of clear understanding/low profile of the child poverty agenda within Jobcentre Plus, as a barrier to good partnership working. CPMs were working hard to change this, both within and outside Jobcentre Plus, through networking and attending strategic and partnership meetings across their districts, and giving presentations on the role of Jobcentre Plus in addressing the child poverty agenda.

The Public Service Agreement (PSA2) target of increasing the availability of childcare places and take-up amongst low income families is helping to bring a range of organisations together. Jobcentre Plus has a role here in promoting take-up of training and placing people in childcare jobs. One agency included in the study (working in an area where there are no Children's Centres) had developed a training course to increase the potential childcare workforce. The early sessions were about confidence and self-esteem, reducing isolation and increasing

motivation – participants could then go on to train as childcare workers. Many did, although the initial confidence-building input helped some to move on to other types of job.

5.2.4 Promoting reasonable expectations

Closely related, but slightly different to the previous point, is the need for each organisation to understand what others can contribute.

One of the areas where misunderstandings could occur was in relation to funding. CPMs commonly reported that other partners had assumed that Jobcentre Plus would have plenty of funding and other resources to put into their involvement with Children's Centres. This is not the case. In over two-thirds of Jobcentre Plus districts, majority funding for work with Children's Centres comes from district budgets and Chapter 4 reported a number of ways in which funding limitations were affecting Jobcentre Plus' ability to deliver in Children's Centres. To help address this, more expensive options which were not felt to be very effective (eg job points and warm phones) were not being introduced on a wide scale. There was some evidence that those in Children's Centres were anticipating that some of these would be available. This is perhaps where one gap in communication was occurring.

Despite the suspicion with which Jobcentre Plus was viewed by some, others in Children's Centres had envisaged that a dedicated adviser might be based in Centres and available to provide advice and support to users as needed. This has clearly not materialised and is not possible with Jobcentre Plus resource levels. Where there was significant outreach adviser input, this was nearly always funded through other (often short-term and/or one-off) sources.

Lack of funding was a frustration to CPMs. There were few local Jobcentre Plus budgets available to them and it was reported that a business case had to be made for marketing activities in some cases. However, to compensate for this, they were often proactively looking for alternative sources of funding. In at least half of Jobcentre Plus districts a combination of sources are providing funding for employment-related activities in Children's Centres; for example, partners that had budgets available to them, organisations providing services (eg outreach to parents) that were needed in Children's Centres. These might come to use Centre premises, or be a service that users can be referred to elsewhere. In one Jobcentre Plus district, partnership funds actually meet the majority of costs for Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres.

Funding issues were highlighted by some of the Children's Centres visited for this study. In five Jobcentre Plus districts, engagement with Children's Centres is majority-funded by Sure Start. Those set up under Sure Start reported how funding for running costs had been reduced since the early days. Others were suffering from general cutbacks – for example, one Centre previously had five family support workers but this was being reduced to one. The other support workers were being expected to work from other Children's Centres as they were

set up. Centre Managers were filling gaps – for example, coming in evenings or weekends to open up the building for meetings if the caretaker was not available. Some were also running drop-in groups themselves.

5.2.5 Working together so that services are complementary rather than in competition or repetitive

This is perhaps more about the effective operation of partnerships than their development. Nevertheless, if each agency involved in a Children's Centre is clear where they fit in, in terms of the delivery of the complete package, how and where their services relate to others, a more co-ordinated and effective service will be available to users. Good communication between partners is therefore key, so that all partners are aware of each others' remits and responsibilities.

Children's Centres are not meant to replicate existing services but rather to provide a venue for some, fill gaps and signpost users elsewhere. Partnership working and good networking is, therefore, crucial if a range of services are to be delivered in an efficient and cost-effective way. On behalf of Jobcentre Plus, CPMs and linked advisers have been working hard to promote the range of services which they can provide through Children's Centres, which in turn also enable staff to effectively signpost users to Jobcentre Plus where appropriate. Signposting was seen to be very important in ensuring an holistic and seamless service for users using Children's Centres, while making the best use of the resources available.

5.2.6 Having clear working arrangements

The role of linked advisers was discussed in Chapter 4, and this is a way forward that is emerging in several areas, especially where there is a lack of adviser resource to provide regular sessions in Children's Centres. Having a named Jobcentre Plus adviser that Children's Centre staff can contact with queries or make an initial referral to is very important and does contribute to successful partnership working. It means that there is consistency and if something doesn't happen, Centre staff know who to contact. Furthermore, the adviser gets to know a Centre, the staff and particular issues relevant to its situation and users.

What seems equally important is that there is a nominated contact amongst Children's Centre staff who has the main responsibility for Jobcentre Plus (possibly other employment and training provision) from their end. For example, in one Centre, the Community Development Officer met regularly with the Jobcentre Plus adviser (in this case, one who was involved in outreach at the Centre). They would discuss who was being accessed, numbers of referrals and outcomes. In other areas, the CPM and the LA lead regularly collect and review feedback from Children's Centres, for example, looking at referrals, numbers using a Centre and the potential demand for services.

As working relationships and the nature of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's

Centres begin to evolve, and to some extent become embedded, Service Level Agreements and other documents formalising arrangements were being put in place. There does seem to be a slight tension here, in that working arrangements do need to be flexible and able to evolve and adapt as circumstances change and different opportunities arise. Broadly speaking, Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centre staff both favoured relatively short statements summarising key activities and responsibilities, rather than long, detailed Service Level Agreements.

5.3 Factors inhibiting partnership working

Factors inhibiting partnership working are largely the converse of those which facilitate successful working relationships. Although one-tenth of all Jobcentre Plus districts reported that they had experienced no significant barriers to partnership working, in this section a number of issues are discussed that have either hampered the development of relationships or where more needs to be done.

5.3.1 Understanding the role of Jobcentre Plus in Children's Centres

The extent to which other partner organisations understand and accept that the Jobcentre Plus agenda has a role to play in Children's Centres has been raised a number of times. Around a third of districts responding to the survey noted some resistance from Centres to Jobcentre Plus activity, with some finding that worklessness targets were not being given the same priority as other targets. Some examples were provided where there had been difficulties, for example, in a Sure Start Centre originally focusing on health issues. Other respondents, usually CPMs, reported that it had taken time to persuade some Centres that Jobcentre Plus services were relevant. This means that partnership working has sometimes been slow to develop.

We found no clear evidence that certain circumstances or organisational arrangements were systematically associated with reluctance to accept Jobcentre Plus involvement, although it was often the case that good relationships developed over time as the role and potential contribution of Jobcentre Plus became better understood. Broadly speaking, antipathy seemed more to do with the specific, and often quite parochial, attitudes and experiences of individuals or particular organisations.

5.3.2 Engaging with those living in less deprived communities

In areas where disadvantage and the proportion of people on benefits are smaller and less obvious, it can be more difficult to include Jobcentre Plus services. These groups were often less likely to access a Centre for other activities and hence, be seen as a priority. For example, unless there are outreach workers or a referral of some sort, they might not think to enter a Children's Centre. Furthermore, in these Centres there are often fewer services that directly relate to the needs of disadvantaged people – for example, in terms of courses to address poor basic

skills or lack of confidence. In many respects, those on benefits and low income living in such areas can be more difficult to reach than those living in areas of high deprivation. Yet their needs are just as great.

This is not to say that managers of these Centres were necessarily less accepting of the need to address an employment agenda but rather that they struggled more in providing the necessary provision. Less funding was generally flowing into these areas and there are fewer outreach activities that can be drawn on. A range of respondents working in more deprived areas commented on the extent to which an array of initiatives were available through different funding streams. One commented on how they would not like to be a lone parent locally as there were so many agencies after them.

5.3.3 The role of the CPM in establishing linked local Jobcentre Plus contacts

It is important that CPMs are all able to facilitate links between local Jobcentre Plus offices and Children's Centres. Centre staff need a named contact that they can approach, and pressure needs to be maintained on some local offices so that they relate to and become involved in Children's Centres. For someone external to Jobcentre Plus, especially if unfamiliar with its set-up and activities, to find the right contact is very difficult. They do not always know what job title or type of role to ask for. In addition, if dealing with an office that is either unfamiliar with Children's Centres or do not see them as a priority, requests for support and information are unlikely to be very successful.

5.3.4 Limited resources and narrow objectives

The simple pressures on time and responsibilities which staff in a range of organisations experience can also mitigate against partnership working on a more day-to-day basis and it is at this level that relationships can become more fully established. Limited funding has been referred to a number of times. However, staff are also under pressure to meet their own organisation's objectives and targets which might not accord with those of others – at least not on an immediate day-to-day basis. Jobcentre Plus lone parent advisers are now being asked to conduct eight interviews a day, and conduct Better Off Calculations (BOCs) with all users. The Adviser Achievement Tool meant that some felt constrained for becoming involved in broader outreach work and activities outside the office. Around a fifth of all Jobcentre Plus districts cited this disparity between formal Jobcentre Plus targets and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) central goals as a barrier to better partnership working. Many districts spoke of a type of 'cost-benefit analysis' that local offices were forced to perform between sparing valuable adviser resource to undertake outreach work in Children's Centres and achieving their own very stretching targets. Various actions were being taken to try and address this and to raise the profile of working with Children's Centres. For example, one CPM reported that she would always send an email to an adviser who helped with events in Children's Centres thanking them for their contribution. This would also

be copied to a relevant senior manager so that their input would be noted. Some Adviser Services Managers seemed more prepared than others to block off adviser time so that they could visit Children's Centres more regularly. Greater or clearer central guidance might also contribute, in response to the '*need for a stronger lead*' that was identified by a tenth of districts surveyed.

Technology, or rather the lack of it, was also acting as a barrier. Insufficient IT resources were cited as a barrier to partnership working by over a third of all Jobcentre Plus districts. This was discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

By far the greatest barrier identified by the survey was insufficient adviser resource. However, limited funding and resources could act as both a facilitator of, and barrier to, partnership working. On the one hand it stopped some activities taking place, and there does seem to be scope for more outreach work if the aim of greatly increasing the number of lone parents and Incapacity Benefit (IB) recipients in work is to be met. However, on the other hand, it was contributing towards the inclusion of a wider range of partners in the relationship; perhaps also ensuring that activities that were provided by other organisations in other locations were not being repeated.

5.3.5 Importance of effective communication

The key importance of communication was emphasised earlier in this chapter and to be effective this needs to be taking place at a number of levels. We did find some evidence that communication at a local level was not always happening effectively. For example, there were a few cases of Children's Centre staff saying that a certain service was going to be provided, while during a visit to the local Jobcentre Plus office we were told that there was no way in which these could be funded. This draws attention to the need for there to be clearer links and lines of communication at a local level. The CPM cannot, especially as more Children's Centres are opened, continue to be involved at all levels. A number were already delegating responsibilities – however, there needs to be a will within local offices to take these on.

5.3.6 Competing or conflicting targets

The need for organisations working in partnership to understand each other's agendas and targets was discussed above. However, one barrier to partnership working was that some have competing or conflicting targets. The engagement between Employment Zone providers and Children's Centres did, in some areas, appear to be quite weak, in that arrangements were fairly loose, informal and far less embedded than much of the Jobcentre Plus activity in the Centres. There are a number of possible explanations for this. Employment Zone providers do have their own premises on which they are geared up to provide services to the users they work with. They also have established their own links and ways of working with, and in, various community locations.

The situation was changing in some areas. For example, in one, a meeting was

being arranged between Employment Zone providers, Jobcentre Plus and others to discuss ways in which they could work together. However, thought does need to be given to the way targets are set and measured, especially when private companies that need to make a profit are involved. In an area where there were multiple Employment Zone providers, issues were raised about their competing with each other – which had both a negative and positive side.

5.3.7 The scale of the CPM role and remit

CPMs have been doing an important job in helping to bring a range of often very disparate organisations around to accepting the need to work with Jobcentre Plus. However, the sheer scale of their job could become unmanageable as more Children's Centres are opened. Many are beginning to delegate activities to other Jobcentre Plus staff, although concerns were expressed as to whether these would be maintained, or maintained at the same level, once passed on. They were looking at ways of minimising the number of meetings required – for example, in some areas, Children's Centre Managers have monthly or bi-monthly meetings; CPMs and often LA staff were attending these, reducing the need to visit each Centre separately on a regular basis. Our CPM respondents felt quite strongly that resource issues and the scale and nature of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres, need to be given more consideration nationally. On the one hand, they felt that it was important that targets and rules were not introduced which would place strict boundaries on these activities and perhaps limit the scope for experimentation and evolution. On the other hand, they also reported that they needed more support from a national level in getting local Jobcentre Plus offices to engage with Children's Centres – if it is decided that this is to be an important part of the back-to-work agenda. None of them had a specific list of the kinds and amount of support required but it generally fell into two areas: Firstly, that there should be sufficient CPMs to cope with the rapid expansion in Children's Centre numbers; the scope for 'handing over' Centres in which they had built up a presence and a relationship was felt to be growing far less quickly than the number of new Centres with which they wanted to do so. Secondly, they wanted a larger, and more assured, supply of advisers who would be able to deliver outreach services in both the established and new Centres. They had not calibrated their requirements, and on the basis of their responses, neither can we, but the general direction and thrust of their argument is quite clear.

5.4 Chapter summary

This chapter recognises the necessity for Jobcentre Plus to work effectively through Children's Centre partnerships in order to pursue its particular contribution to the child poverty agenda through supporting parents in gaining employment.

It identified a number of factors that have contributed to success in this respect. These are:

- using CPMs as Jobcentre Plus ambassadors;

- getting involved early;
- understanding other organisational targets and agendas;
- promoting reasonable expectations;
- working together so that services are complementary rather than in competition or repetitive;
- having clear working arrangements.

Factors inhibiting partnership working are largely the converse of those which facilitate successful working relationships but such constraints identified are:

- a lack of understanding among other partners about Jobcentre Plus' role and intentions;
- difficulties in engaging with those living in less deprived communities;
- a lack of clarity about the respective inputs of the CPMs and local Jobcentre Plus offices;
- limited resources and narrow objectives;
- ineffective communication strategies;
- competing or conflicting targets;
- lack of realism about the CPM role and remit.

6 The views and experiences of users

In this chapter, we focus on the kinds of service which Jobcentre Plus is seeking to deliver through the Children's Centres, but in contrast to Chapter 4, which drew largely on Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centre staff perspectives, this chapter assesses them from the perspective of the supposed beneficiaries – the users of the Children's Centres themselves. We begin by looking at the reasons that brought the people to the Centre in the first place, move on to consider their experiences of, and views about, the services which Jobcentre Plus seeks to offer them while they are there and then discuss some of the constraints they have identified which constrain their take-up of such services.

6.1 Why people were visiting a Children's Centre

It is immediately obvious from a review of the core and supporting services which the Children's Centres are delivering, that they overwhelmingly focus first on the health, well-being and general development of young children, then on the health and well-being of their parents, then on the provision of, or support in organising, care for children. The core objectives of Jobcentre Plus are very different. For the most part, they come into play only indirectly and latterly – that is to say, help and support in organising entry to employment are unlikely to be at the top of most Centre users' priorities for benefiting their child, and for many, if they are on the list at all, they are not yet an urgent pre-occupation. If they were, then there are far more obvious routes through which such individuals are likely to interact with Jobcentres. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that almost all the users interviewed had visited a Children's Centre primarily (many exclusively) to access services for their children.

Users' engagement ranged from coming to the Centre simply to drop their children off at nursery, through to parents who came to one or two stay-and-play sessions or used the health services occasionally, to those who took some courses – for example parenting, craft courses, or literacy/numeracy/IT. Some were fully

involved in the Centre, attending several times a week and possibly volunteering or serving on the parents' forum.

The majority had first come to the Children's Centre after being directed there by their health visitor or had received a leaflet in the post inviting them to visit. A few had heard about the Centre through friends or had walked in off the street. However, as the Centres were generally very new, few users had known that they existed or what they were for, before receiving information from health professionals/centre staff.

The location of the Centre within the local community, the concentration there of lots of other parents in similar circumstances, and increasingly, of various portals through which other services could be accessed, certainly serves in the medium term to broaden the likely range of rationales for visiting it. At the same time, as we have discussed above in earlier chapters, only a minority of the resulting users are likely to have some interest in possible job entry and perhaps even fewer to be interested in accessing employment and training services immediately. Nevertheless, the location of such Centres in areas with high levels of non-working and benefit-dependent populations and the widespread wish among mothers to take up some form of paid employment as children get older, suggests that these particular users, for whom Jobcentre Plus services are likely to be most relevant will always be there, albeit in small numbers at any one time.

There were some users who came to the Children's Centre for the sole purpose of meeting with a Jobcentre Plus adviser. This was usually where the adviser was funded through a programme aimed at helping a wide range of users, such as Neighbourhood Renewal Funds, and was either based at, or regularly visited, the Centre. The vast majority of men interviewed in this study fell into this group, i.e. they were not visiting the Centre in the capacity of parent and generally had no other connection with the Centre in which they were interviewed.

Of those parents with children who used the Centre and who were interviewed for this study, only one had come specifically to access employment and training services. She was a single mother who wanted to access IT training with the aim of finding a part-time job once her son started nursery. She had been in touch with various providers but could not get funding to take a course, which was free at the Children's Centre:

'I rang up LearnDirect but they said they couldn't help me with the costs. I don't think it's right because they want you to come off Income Support and get a job but they don't help you much. I came here and it's free and I don't think I would have done it otherwise because I wouldn't be able to afford it.'

6.2 Views on the provision of Jobcentre Plus services in Children's Centres

It is important to recognise the extent to which services provided by Children's Centres independently of Jobcentre Plus linked in with and complemented the Jobcentre Plus-run activities. Examples of such provision ranged from employment and training services provided by non-Jobcentre Plus agencies, to generic basic and life skills courses run at the Children's Centre. Users were able to progress from general courses or basic skills training to job search activities, whether these were provided by Jobcentre Plus or another partner. The range of services and courses available at the Children's Centres also helped users in their own right, for example, two users who had used only Children's Centre services reported how the courses they had taken had helped their skills and confidence:

'I think it all helps you get a job. The courses that I've done have helped me realise that I'm not on the scrap heap ... they've helped me, how can I say it, build me back up again and made me feel I could do it; which is ridiculous really because I worked all the time until I had my daughter. Jobcentre Plus just moved me into work.'

'I did City and Guilds 1 and 2 Maths and English. It looks good on your CV and it also means you've done something recently. It's having the confidence to go for jobs and knowing that I do know how to add up and I do know how to write things down and read. It's really good. So that's definitely something I put at the top of the list when I apply for jobs. I also did the parenting course which sounds daft but for the job I went into it helped because I work with children.'

Having Jobcentre Plus advisers in a Centre on a regular basis was by far the most popular type of Jobcentre Plus involvement among those users who had experienced it. Not only did this serve to raise awareness about the opportunity, but it also reduced worries about jumping into the unknown. Furthermore it was convenient; users appreciated one-to-one help and advice, Centres are usually closer to users' homes than Jobcentre Plus offices, there are crèche facilities available for their children if needed, and they can pop in/make an appointment when they are in the Centre anyway.

'I prefer using the Jobpoint here as it's closer...it's easier to bring my children here.'

'I'd rather come here because it's nearby. On a Tuesday morning when it's the toddlers' group, because it's next door sort of thing. I just come and ask for some more advice.'

Secondly, users generally did not like going to a Jobcentre Plus office and, in this sense, being able to meet an adviser anywhere else out in the community was preferred. Parents, in particular mothers, found jobcentres intimidating, and they were perceived to be unfriendly and even threatening environments due to some

of the people who use them. Many parents did not want to take their children there.

'When you go to the Jobcentre there are all sorts of men signing on and some of those look as though they're drug addicts and things like that, and some people are drunk – and you've got to take your child there and it's not a good environment.'

'I go to the Jobcentre purely because you have to sign on to get your money. If I didn't have to go I wouldn't.'

Children's Centres were seen as friendly, secure and familiar places where users felt comfortable. In particular, they welcomed the fact that they could speak to an adviser without the presumption that they wanted work now; they could, in effect, test out the water without an assumption that they wanted to dive in immediately and without an underlying concern that they might be pushed in. Users also reported that they were able to speak privately with an adviser and take their time, whereas at the Jobcentre they often felt rushed.

'At the Jobcentre I just want to get in and get out. Here, you're comfortable – you're asked if you want a coffee, you're not rushed, you can speak in confidence.'

'There [i.e. Jobcentre Plus], I'm sitting at a desk and sitting next to me is another adviser with another client and you can hear their conversations going on. You can hear theirs and they can hear yours.'

There is also less stigma attached to visiting a Children's Centre.

'People might feel better about coming here than going to the Jobcentre, because when you go to the Jobcentre, people look at you as a dole bag.'

However, a positive view of Jobcentre Plus advisers in Children's Centres was dependent on the adviser being available regularly and always getting back to users with information/answers – which did not always happen.

'She said she couldn't help me at that time and that she'd ring me back but she didn't ring me back. From seeing the adviser, I really didn't know what to do about going back to work because I found myself in a rut where I couldn't get any information and that demotivated me a little bit about getting a job.'

'It's just another person standing in the corridor handing out leaflets. So unless someone says specifically: "that's X from the Jobcentre over there, go and ask her", people don't.'

Some users were concerned that once they had visited the adviser they would be 'in the system' and would be hounded by advisers but this was not a widespread view.

Some people preferred to access information about jobs through the internet rather than going to the Jobcentre or Children's Centre.

'Because I've got the internet at home, it's easier for me to look for vacancies there rather than coming down here to look.'

All but two of the users interviewed thought that having Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres was both appropriate and useful. This was true for both Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and non-DWP users, and those that had not used services as well as those who had:

'There are going to be those mothers who have taken time off and are thinking they want to get back into a career or want to do something different in their lives and therefore they've got the opportunity, whereas to go down to the jobcentre is a bit of a task but if they're here with the children they might pick up a leaflet and say: "oh, yeah, I wouldn't mind looking at that, that's useful".'

'I think it's ideal. You can just bring your children and there's all the information around you.'

Jobs fairs were also popular, although they usually included a fairly limited range of employers; typically these were local employers who generally needed large numbers of low skilled workers, for example, a number of new superstores or large retail chain stores had been involved with Children's Centres as part of their recruitment drives, and this had been mutually beneficial for all involved. Users also appreciated up-to-date vacancy boards or plasma screens with job advertisements and job points. Again, this was because it was usually easier to get to the Children's Centre than visit a Jobcentre.

Generally, the users did not have many views on additional Jobcentre Plus or employment-related activities that could be provided through Children's Centres. There was some feeling that courses were mostly aimed at/used by those with few qualifications and/or on benefits. There was some demand for more vocational/recognised/higher level courses.

'I would like to see more broader courses and higher level courses because a lot of people would feel too intimidated about going up to college and think "it's not for me". It's good here but if you want to go into something where you earn a bit more money or you need typing skills, or things that are actually going to stand you in good stead to get a job, rather than "oh, you can read and write, therefore you can stack shelves", rather than "you can work in an office".'

It was also commented that Jobcentre Plus services needed to be more visible – for example, often noticeboards were tucked away or leaflets were not on view.

6.3 Chapter summary

Those who had used, or thought that they might use, Jobcentre Plus services in Children's Centres, found them physically convenient, unthreatening, culturally undemanding and non-stigmatising. They appreciated being able to approach the issues of work and benefits at their own pace and on their own terms and terrain. They also appreciated working face-to-face with a known adviser who would be responsive without forcing the pace.

The more serious about work they became, the more useful some particular kinds of service (job broking, jobs fairs) became but also the more likely were their needs to exceed those available within the Centre.

However, there are also clearly many Children's Centre users who are indifferent to the existence of Jobcentre Plus activities in their Centre. They were not there to use such services, and were not always even aware of them but did not generally object to them being there, provided they did not significantly impact on the character or core operations of the Centre.

7 Perceived effects of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres

The research on which this report draws is almost entirely qualitative and as a result, this chapter draws on different respondents' perceptions of the effects of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres, rather than on any independent and objective measurement of them. The discussion focuses on three different levels at which any such effects might be registered:

First, we consider the effect on individual Children's Centre users. Then we move on to discuss the effect on the operations of the Centres themselves and on the perspectives of the staff running, and working in, them. Finally, we look at effects on Jobcentre Plus and its staff.

7.1 Users

The extent to which there had been an effect on users themselves varied greatly, both from one Centre to the next, according to the extent of Jobcentre Plus activity in those Centres, and from one user to the next, depending on their interest, or potential interest, in work.

7.1.1 Explaining variation in effects on individuals

The greatest effect was felt by those who had been to see Jobcentre Plus advisers in their Children's Centres, while little effect appeared to have been felt by parents who attended Children's Centres where Jobcentre Plus involvement was at an early stage of development, or where it was restricted to leaflets and noticeboard displays only. In general, the most effect was reported where there had been the most Jobcentre Plus outreach activity. Indeed, amongst the users interviewed for

this research, there was an almost universal preference to access Jobcentre Plus services in a Children's Centre, rather than at a Jobcentre Plus office. Generally, Jobcentre Plus services which gave users extra support and individual attention were most appreciated and appeared to have been most effective. This included face-to-face interviews, help with job searches, and help in finding childcare. In general, it seemed that, as might be expected, the more intensive the help given, the more successful the service was in terms of moving people into work or moving people closer to the labour market.

However, even where outreach activity was available, it was recognised by Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centre staff alike that some of the parents they saw at Children's Centres would not be ready to think about work options for some time. Indeed, if they were lone parents with young children, they were under no obligation to do so. In these instances, advisers spoke of the longer-term benefits of being seen to be working with parents in the community and raising people's awareness of the range of information, advice and support which Jobcentre Plus offered, so that when parents were ready to take the first steps towards becoming work-ready, they would know where to go. It was felt that parents who started engaging through short courses would eventually move on to formal training and then to employment in the longer term.

7.1.2 What kinds of effect were observed?

There were a number of ways which Jobcentre Plus involvement was felt to be impacting on parents:

- in their attitudes towards Jobcentre Plus;
- increasing their engagement with Jobcentre Plus;
- in producing hard and soft labour market outcomes;
- in terms of potential effect in the future.

These are discussed in turn below.

Attitudes to Jobcentre Plus

Parents' negative attitudes towards Jobcentre Plus were reported by Children's Centre staff and it was felt that perceptions which had taken years to build up would also take a long time to break down.

'There is definitely a view amongst parents that Jobcentre Plus will force you back to work. We've worked hard to promote the idea that it's about choice.'

(Children's Centre Manager)

Attitudes towards Jobcentre Plus were reported to be changing but mainly on an individual basis, and following on from instances where a user at a Children's Centre had some good advice or help from a Jobcentre Plus adviser. Childcare

Partnership Managers (CPMs), Jobcentre Plus advisers and staff in the Children's Centres believed that this would spread and build up over time and indirectly through word-of-mouth and that in due course, Jobcentre Plus would be seen as more approachable by parents, particularly if based in the 'safe', convenient and familiar environment of the Centre. The importance of having people with the right attitude and skills doing Jobcentre Plus adviser outreach was often mentioned by Jobcentre Plus and by Children's Centre staff alike. They felt that not all Jobcentre Plus staff were necessarily suited to this type of work; it was important for outreach advisers to have a friendly, proactive and non-threatening attitude, which would put people at ease and help to build up trust and a rapport with parents. The 'personal touch' was seen to be important; for example, Children's Centre staff usually thought that parents preferred being able to talk to someone from Jobcentre Plus at a Children's Centre, rather than reading leaflets. Where staff were less well informed, were unable to access information for users on the spot, or did not return phone calls or get back to users with information, user attitudes towards Jobcentre Plus services in Children's Centres were more negative. There were a small number of users who were not claiming benefits and had been unable to access Jobcentre Plus services as a result and were frustrated because of this.

Increasing engagement with Jobcentre Plus

It was widely reported that many users would find it less intimidating to meet with a Jobcentre Plus adviser in a Children's Centre rather than at a Jobcentre Plus office. This was especially the case as many of the people using Children's Centres were not yet job-ready, and possibly would not be for some time. Having a Jobcentre Plus presence in Children's Centres was seen to be making Jobcentre Plus more accessible to communities and hard-to-reach groups who would be reluctant to visit Jobcentre Plus offices, or who would find it logistically difficult to do so. Jobcentre Plus activities which focused on capacity building with parents, developing their skills and confidence, were reported to have been successful – for example, Jobcentre Plus had funded a number of confidence- and aspirations-raising programmes for lone parents, from which there had been very positive outcomes, both job-entry outcomes and others, which indicated some progress towards employment, albeit falling short of immediate job entry. Some Jobcentre Plus staff reported that users could initially respond better to a non-Jobcentre Plus logo or badge from other Jobcentre Plus-funded initiatives, for example: 'At Work' or 'Talent' that had been used by some of their New Deal partners and contracts. They observed that parents seemed to find these less threatening than Jobcentre Plus itself.

The relationship between Jobcentre Plus adviser and parents was key and it can take some time to build up trust and change the culture of the way Jobcentre Plus is viewed, particularly by users who are further away from the labour market and by harder-to-reach groups. A Children's Centre Family Services Co-ordinator commented on the success of having had a strong and regular Jobcentre Plus adviser presence at the Centre:

'It's been really successful and made a difference to a significant number of families. She works at a personal level, building rapport, people know her. They might be wary of going into Jobcentre Plus; they don't know the way or what will happen there, especially if they're a young mum. Having [the adviser] here, young men come in for advice; you don't need to have a child to come into the Centre. The nearest Jobcentre Plus office is one to two miles away, but it's quite a long walk, and people like to stay on the estate.'

Increasing engagement in rural communities was seen to be an area where effect of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres could be significant in the future. In rural and isolated communities with few public transport links, families can be very isolated from many services including Jobcentre Plus and it can be too difficult for users with children to travel to a Jobcentre Plus office in another town. In contrast, it could be relatively easy for them to meet with a Jobcentre Plus adviser in a local Children's Centre. This work was felt to be at an early stage in many of the Children's Centres in more rural locations visited for this research, and so the effect was generally seen in terms of future potential.

'I feel working from the Children's Centre benefits the clients a lot. They don't need to travel, which is important especially if they've got young children. I feel I'm more approachable as I'm not in the Jobcentre Plus office. It's an unthreatening environment and people come and ask me things they might not ask at a Jobcentre Plus office. I would hope there's quite a bit of impact. I'm supposed to get people into work, but some people are a long way from the labour market so I try to get them involved in some way, onto a course, or doing some volunteering.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser working in a Children's Centre in a rural location)

There had been some success in engaging users through one-off events and jobs fairs, as the example below illustrates.

Example of a user who has benefited from integration of Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centre services

A user was not working at the time of the interview for this research, having spent several years at home looking after her three children. She had begun looking for a part-time job that fitted in with school hours a few months previously and had been to a jobs fair at the Children's Centre jointly organised with Jobcentre Plus:

'I came just to get a bit of advice on where to look for jobs in schools. I just didn't know where to start apart from ringing them all up or looking in the paper. The adviser gave me the website and that was really easy.'

Continued

The user had intended to apply for a job advertised on the website, and wrote to her previous employer for a reference; as a result of this, her old boss offered her a job with flexible hours which she was due to start the following week. She felt that the jobs fair at the Children's Centre had given her the push she needed to take some action, and she was reassured that her youngest child could stay for extra sessions at the Children's Centre Nursery while she was at work.

'It's a really good setting [for the jobs fair] because if you go somewhere else to look for work, you've then got to go somewhere else to find childcare. If [daughter] wasn't in this nursery, I wouldn't be working because I wouldn't take her anywhere else...I feel comfortable leaving her here.'

The extent to which engagement might be made easier for any Centre user may be somewhat more restrictive, however. Interviews with Jobcentre Plus customers in Children's Centres, found that Jobcentre Plus advisers often worked with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) customers in Children's Centres, but that working with non-DWP customers was seemingly less frequent. For example, a number of the advisers in Children's Centres were lone parent advisers and so their focus was on this group of parents. It seemed that fewer non-DWP customers were accessing Jobcentre Plus adviser services or engaging in sustained contact with Jobcentre Plus. This appeared to be due to a combination of these parents being less interested in Jobcentre Plus or feeling that they were not relevant but also due to a perception that although they would have liked advice on training and employment issues, Jobcentre Plus services were not available to them.

'It wasn't that it's not helpful, but I'm not claiming benefits and I don't really need help getting back into work... . What they were after was people on benefits and lone mums, getting those people back into work. I'm on a career break and I'm married so no-one is really bothered about me. I wouldn't mind talking to them about childcare or courses, but I know I wouldn't go into the local jobcentre and ask them. If somebody was here I'd definitely ask them, but not the jobcentre – I find it quite intimidating actually.'

'We just come to the play sessions, and that's what it is for us because I know what I'm going back to, and also my husband is working full-time so most of the services wouldn't be open to me anyway.'

Hence, whilst many of the advisers said that they did try to see people outside their priority groups, there were potential customers outside these priority groups who had felt excluded from Jobcentre Plus services in Children's Centres.

Labour market outcome for parents

The research found a mixture of job outcomes and other beneficial outcomes which fell short of job entry (soft outcomes) reported as a result of Jobcentre Plus activity in Children's Centres. Thus, in the first instance, there were examples of users moving into training and employment but additionally, there was more evidence of movement towards the labour market or greater interest in it, which was seen in terms of increased engagement with Jobcentre Plus and other services, increased confidence and aspirations.

Job outcomes

Where there had been Jobcentre Plus adviser input for some time, there was usually a clear effect in terms of the numbers of people being seen, the trust of a community that the Jobcentre Plus adviser had gradually built up, and in people entering training and employment, as the following example shows.

Moving towards job entry outcomes

A Children's Centre on a large estate has had a full-time Jobcentre Plus adviser there for two years, funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF). The effect of this had been felt by the community as the reputation of the adviser had spread by word-of-mouth to people including lone parents, young people and others in the community who would be reluctant to visit a Jobcentre Plus office.

The adviser tended to see 15 to 25 people each week in her surgeries at the Children's Centre, including a wide range of people of all ages, some of whom accessed other services at the Children's Centre and others who did not use the Children's Centre but had heard about her service. She summarised the effect she had had as a result of having worked in the Children's Centre:

'I've helped 160 people into work, from this estate and other areas too. I've seen whole families, some with problem histories. One person hadn't seen anyone in authority for 20 years. It's about making verbal contacts, letting people know what's available, and planting seeds. You see people progress over time onto courses and then into work.'

Working closely with Children's Centre staff and other agencies was important in maximising the effect of Jobcentre Plus work within a Children's Centre, both in terms of giving users the advice they needed to confidently make decisions from an informed base and in helping some parents progress into employment, as the following examples illustrate.

Moving into employment

A Children's Centre with half a day of Jobcentre Plus outreach each week, had come to value this as an important part of their core offer. The family and Community Service Leader worked closely with the Jobcentre Plus adviser and felt that advice on benefits was greatly needed and appreciated by the Children's Centre users. They had also seen some parents move into employment.

The Jobcentre Plus adviser helped a woman to get a job, and it changed her whole family's outlook so much, that her husband came to a training and review day at the Children's Centre to feed this back. He told of what a difference it had made to the whole family's confidence and motivation.

The adviser found work in a large, newly opened retail store for another woman who had been out of work for a long time, and whose English was not fluent. She also helped the woman to access the childcare at the nursery for her son. Working with the adviser raised the woman's confidence and self-esteem to the point where she was able to enter employment.

A Jobcentre Plus adviser who had strong links with a local Children's Centre, including outreach sessions every two weeks, had referred a number of people onto training courses and a smaller number into work. She had extended her skills base and her knowledge of other agencies to enable her to refer people who were not her priority group (lone parents) on to other agencies and sources of information and support. She worked closely with Children's Centre staff and they were able to contact her for advice or to refer a parent, at any time.

'For the amount of work I've done and the amount of time I've been there, I feel it's been an effective use of my time. The key thing is making links with the staff.'

A number of Children's Centre staff felt that it was too early to comment on the effect of Jobcentre Plus involvement, particularly as some Children's Centres had only recently established links with Jobcentre Plus or had recently been allocated a linked adviser. However, even some of these had experience of one-off events and courses which they felt had been beneficial. Some were already able to report hard and soft outcomes of early Jobcentre Plus activity, particularly through courses and publicity events, as the following examples show.

Early successes

A Children's Centre which had only recently been linked with a local Jobcentre Plus adviser had run a mentoring course for parents in partnership with Jobcentre Plus, including input from the CPM. The results from this had been very good, with many parents progressing onto courses and then employment. As a result of this, the Children's Centre was hoping to hold another course in the future and also to encourage the Jobcentre Plus linked adviser to drop into some of their groups, including stay-and-play sessions.

In a Children's Centre which had been running for four months, it was felt to be too early to assess the effect of Jobcentre Plus involvement; however, positive steps had already been taken. The linked adviser, funded through the New Deal for Lone Parents Plus (NDLP+), had spoken to a group of lone parents who were reviewing their children's progress at the Children's Centre, and two went on to training courses as a result. The adviser had also arranged leaflet drops for an event when a large furnishing store was opening in the area, and 14 people attended the event, some of whom went on to employment.

Some of the users interviewed had made up their minds that they wanted to go back to work or do some training some time ago, and it was precisely for those reasons that they had accessed Jobcentre Plus services at the Children's Centre. Hard outcomes, such as the number of users who have moved into jobs, was easiest to determine where users had had direct contact with a Jobcentre Plus adviser. It was more difficult to ascertain the effect of less formal interaction with Jobcentre Plus. However, users interviewed also reported using vacancy boards updated from Jobcentre Plus, visiting jobs fairs at Children's Centres and other 'use' of services which were less tangible, and very difficult to record and/or evaluate. There were a number of examples of people who have moved into jobs with assistance from Jobcentre Plus services provided in Children's Centres:

Moving from benefits into work

A single parent, who has six children, had recently stopped claiming Income Support (IS) having started a job as a cleaner working 16 hours a week during school term-time and the summer holiday. She had been coming to the Children's Centre for many years as it had been a nursery school previously. She had taken a number of courses run by the Centre, including flower arranging and card making, before moving on to literacy and numeracy courses. Having decided that she wanted to move back into work once her youngest child started primary school, she was unsure as to whether she would be better off working, so she approached the Jobcentre Plus adviser, whom she had been introduced to at a parents' forum. The adviser had met with her regularly at the Children's Centre, helping her update her CV, undertaking job searches and undertaking a Better Off Calculation (BOC):

'She explained everything, that you can claim because when you're going for a job you haven't got a clue what you're entitled to. She did a print-off of whether I would be better off or not and it did change my views because I thought, "you've got rent, you've got council tax" but she worked it all out and I am better off and that's only part time...She was finding jobs that were suitable for me with the hours, and when I got the job she actually came down here, and we filled in all the forms to get my Child Tax Credits and Working Tax Credits.'

Moving into education

A single parent is currently claiming IS and is studying English and Maths to City and Guilds level 2. She has applied to take a university access course at a local college in September, with the aim of training to become a primary school teacher in due course. She had only been coming to the Children's Centre to drop her son off at nursery but had heard about the help available to single parents, whilst chatting to one of the other parents at the Centre café who had been to see the Lone Parents adviser who visits the Centre. Since the area she lives in is part of the New Deal for Lone Parents Plus (NDLP+) pilot, the adviser was able to help her access funding and free childcare whilst she studies:

'I just went to her and said "I want to study" and she told me I had to study over a certain number of hours to get the childcare and she put me in touch with someone else and showed me information on teaching, where you could do it, what hours it was. When I rang the college and they didn't get back in touch she sorted out [training provider] which is where I'm at now. If she hadn't been there I wouldn't have been able to do it.'

Continued

Although her contact with the Jobcentre Plus adviser has not resulted in her moving straight into work, it has made her more determined to become a teacher and given her the support she needs to study:

'It has made me more motivated. I can actually apply myself to just studying and because this opportunity might not come up again I've got to take it. I want to study to do it, and my aim is to become a teacher and I think I'll do it as long as these services are available. If they did away with it I'd have no choice but to stay at home.'

Using the full range of Children's Centre and Jobcentre Plus services to get back to work

A single parent with two children was claiming IS but was about to begin working for 20 hours a week. She had used a wide range of services provided at the Children's Centre, including parent drop-in sessions and childcare provision. She had also used all the employment services available including jobs fairs, the job point and seeing a Jobcentre Plus adviser. She had also been referred to an Employment Zone provider through the Children's Centre.

'I went and saw the lady [Jobcentre Plus adviser] who sent me to [Employment Zone provider]...She said what I was entitled to, and she gave me a brochure which said what I needed to know for interviews and helped with benefits.'

This user had also participated in the volunteer programme at the Children's Centre and through this had worked on the reception desk. As a result of this, the Centre was able to provide her with a recent reference which helped her get her job.

Soft outcomes

In addition to measurable entries into employment, there was more evidence of people moving closer to the labour market, whom we would expect to return to work more easily when the time was right. Initially, users saw Jobcentre Plus advisers in Children's Centres as someone from the Jobcentre and, as has been highlighted earlier, this often raised issues of trust, as people were initially scared of making contact with Jobcentre Plus. However, they eventually became more comfortable with seeing the same adviser in the Children's Centre and would chat to them casually or ask them for advice. Over time, the reputation of particular advisers as being trustworthy and helpful has spread within communities by word-of-mouth.

A key benefit of having an outreach presence at Jobcentre Plus was seen to be for the additional support which could be given to people who lacked self-esteem and confidence and would find it difficult to access that level of support through Jobcentre Plus offices. Having a Jobcentre Plus adviser who could talk through the options available was seen as a valuable resource, which in turn helped people to feel more confident about taking their next steps.

'Its amazing what a difference it makes and what parents will do for themselves once they have realised the support is there.'

(Children's Centre Manager)

The user interviews revealed many examples of people moving closer to the labour market and even more of changing attitudes and increasing motivation and confidence. This often appeared to be linked to a range of the services offered at the Children's Centres. Even services which did not ostensibly appear to be aimed at improving employability – for example craft or parenting courses – often had a positive effect on parents' self-esteem. For many parents this was the first step in meeting new people and gaining confidence to go on and do more vocational courses. One of the key benefits of having Jobcentre Plus in Children's Centres was that it was one of a range of different services that could, in combination, gradually move parents closer to the labour market. The softer effects, such as improvements in confidence and motivation through, for example, having gone on a short course, were highly valued by parents themselves. There were many examples of parents who reported that they felt more confident and motivated to find a job as a result of using employment and training services at the Children's Centre, often a combination of Jobcentre Plus and other services and activities:

'I didn't think I was capable of doing a course because I never qualified at school. I just plodded along, left a year early and went to work and never really thought about the future. And now I've done that course I think, "I can do that so I can do other things".'

(DWP customer who had undertaken parenting and crèche worker courses at Children's Centre)

'I'm a different person. I've met new people. I feel valued, because sometimes when you're unemployed, you don't. I'm working with people who are higher up the scale, you know, with responsibilities. It's brilliant. I have a lot more self-esteem and feel a lot more confident...I'm looking forward to getting a job, I really am.'

(DWP customer who had seen a Jobcentre Plus adviser in the Children's Centre and been on the Centre's volunteering programme)

'If I hadn't come here I would have been really, really anxious about going back to work whereas now I'm: "bring it on, I can't wait to get back". I know I haven't lost it. I can still manage it. Volunteering in particular was helpful because it's a trial run and no-one has really got any expectations because you're not getting paid.'

(Non-DWP user)

A number of users felt that BOCs were very helpful and were also useful in increasing their motivation to find work. Having all the information about tax credits and bonuses which would be available to them, made users feel more confident that finding work was the right thing for them to do. Having available and trusted childcare on-site was also important in building up parents' confidence to leave their children once they had found suitable work or a course they wanted to do.

Some users felt that the lack of part-time work which paid enough to be worthwhile was a barrier for them. There were examples of women who had taken jobs but had to give them up, as they were no better off financially:

'To be honest, it wasn't worth my time to leave my kids for 20 hours a week for an extra ten pounds. Obviously it would be different if it would make a big impact on their life, and a difference to what we could do, or what we could have but it didn't.'

(DWP customer)

Potential future effect

There was felt to be considerable potential effect of Jobcentre Plus in all of the above areas, as Jobcentre Plus becomes more fully established within Children's Centres, providing that sufficient resources are available for Jobcentre Plus to have a meaningful presence in Children's Centres, particularly a proactive linked adviser. However, in addition to this, stakeholders of all types felt there was a substantial potential effect of Jobcentre Plus working in Children's Centres in addressing cultures of unemployment. It was recognised that generational employment would take many years to change but the work that Jobcentre Plus did now could help to reduce and minimise the effect of unemployment culture on the next generation.

'I want people to feel they have a choice, but not for them to feel they must go back to work. It's about giving parents informed choices, taking into account the evidence, that shows children under 12 months thrive better if they have just one main carer.'

(Children's Centre Manager)

Taking a similarly long-term view, some Children's Centre Managers felt that Jobcentre Plus working with families could help to give children in deprived areas a more equal start with children in more affluent areas, and would help parents to feel more valued by society.

Stakeholders pointed out that some of the parents who Jobcentre Plus made contact with through Children's Centres would not be job-ready, and may be a number of years away from the labour market. This, too, was viewed in terms of potential effect; that having Jobcentre Plus adviser links with Children's Centres would mean that when parents were ready to take steps towards training or employment, they would already know the right person to ask for help.

'There has to be a recognition that Jobcentre Plus activities in Children's Centres won't always bring about instant results, but will be planting seeds for the future.'

(CPM)

'Now there's a recognition from Jobcentre Plus that there aren't always quick wins, those people are already in work. It's people with multiple barriers we need to work with, and Children's Centres give us that opportunity. Families can get so many services in Children's Centres and sort out so many issues under one roof.'

(CPM)

7.2 Effect on the Children's Centres

Although some of the Phase 1 Children's Centres had been operational for two or more years, many of the Centres visited for this research had been running for a much shorter time. Some had links with Jobcentre Plus from their planning stages, or had Jobcentre Plus adviser input prior to becoming Children's Centres, while others had more recently formed partnerships and working agreements and some reported that links were just starting to be made. As a result of this, whilst some stakeholders were able to talk about the effect of Children's Centres on parents, others felt that it was too early to be able to assess the effect of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres at ground level. However, many spoke of the potential effect that they hoped Jobcentre Plus involvement would have in the medium and long term and others referred to the impact that had been made in terms of forming new partnerships and the shift in attitude of organisations and individuals towards Jobcentre Plus and an increased awareness of the range of its services.

7.2.1 Partnership working at Children's Centre level

At the level of individual Children's Centres, some positive effect in terms of partnership working had also been felt. Many Children's Centres appreciated having Jobcentre Plus representation on their management boards, as it helped them to work towards 'threaded' service delivery – where all partners and activities worked together to support each other. This way of working was seen to be particularly important by Children's Centre Managers in terms of their vision for the future of their Centres, which would increasingly involve working in partnership and being creative with the available resources. One Children's Centre Manager commented

that Jobcentre Plus working in partnership with Children's Centres had brought 'a uniformity and a clarity of processes to a range of stakeholders and providers', who were better able to understand each other's aims, and how best to work together to achieve their common goals.

7.2.2 Children's Centre staff

In general, the effect on Children's Centre staff was greatest where there was a well established link with a Jobcentre Plus adviser, who parents could be referred to, and who could meet with parents in the Children's Centre. In Children's Centres without a strong and regular Jobcentre Plus adviser presence, the effect of Jobcentre Plus involvement on Children's Centre staff was felt to be far less. Where there was not yet a linked adviser at a Children's Centre, if this arrangement was fairly new or where advisers had, to date, only been in contact by telephone or email, the effect reported by Children's Centre staff was minimal or they felt that it was too early to ascertain. However, in some of these Centres, various information activities had been arranged between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres – where these had occurred, a greater understanding was developing of the role and agenda of each and what each had to offer.

Nevertheless, there had clearly been some effect on the Children's Centre staff who had had the opportunity to work closely and/or regularly with Jobcentre Plus. This was particularly the case where there was a linked adviser from a local office who was able to spend time in the Children's Centre, either at a regular drop-in or for ad hoc events. This effect was manifested in:

- the way in which Children's Centre staff viewed Jobcentre Plus as a whole;
- staff understanding of the range of services provided by Jobcentre Plus;
- staff seeing Jobcentre Plus as a key part of their delivery team;
- bringing new people into Children's Centres as a result of Jobcentre Plus activity.

Increased staff awareness of Jobcentre Plus and its services

In the Children's Centres where Jobcentre Plus activity had been longest established, and greater in volume, particularly through adviser outreach work, this in turn had increased Children's Centre staff's knowledge of benefits and Jobcentre Plus services. It had also changed some staff perceptions of Jobcentre Plus as an organisation: that it was able to help people to move forward in their lives rather than aiming to stop people's benefits or force them into unsuitable work.

Several of the districts had held events for Children's Centre staff at Jobcentre Plus district offices, where Children's Centre staff had a tour of the building and a presentation of the range of services available. These were felt to have been very well received and successful in dispelling misconceptions held about Jobcentre Plus and in informing staff and giving them the information they needed to work more effectively with Jobcentre Plus advisers in the future.

Children's Centre staff who had been able to access training of this sort on the range of services offered by Jobcentre Plus, said it had equipped them to work with families more effectively. Although they often worked with families who were some distance away from the labour market, they felt that Jobcentre Plus was a valuable partner for them to be working with, as parents overcame barriers and wanted to take the next steps in their own development, such as training or looking for work.

'You wouldn't be able to see the impact on parents yet. But on staff there's been a huge awareness raising, knowing that there is someone to talk to or contact. It's very worthwhile for staff development and the development of the Centre.'

(Children's Centre Manager)

While many Children's Centre staff were not able to ascertain any direct effect on the parents using the Centres at the time of this research, they felt that Children's Centres as a whole benefited from having Jobcentre Plus adviser outreach sessions, where parents were able to meet with someone who they were familiar with and who could provide an additional service from a community venue. Children's Centre staff said that where this had worked particularly well, the advisers they had dealt with had been approachable and had worked with parents in a non-threatening way. Staff in Children's Centres with strong relationships with a linked adviser had started to proactively contact Jobcentre Plus to refer people, or for information and advice.

Jobcentre Plus advisers as key members of the Children's Centre team

Where good links with Jobcentre Plus adviser and Children's Centres existed, Centre staff were keen to point out that Jobcentre Plus were seen as another member of the team. Jobcentre Plus advisers who worked regularly in an outreach capacity from Children's Centres expressed a similar view, that once staff saw the way that their presence could benefit parents using the Centre, they were keen to work closely with them.

'It's good, as we know [the adviser] will be here every fortnight so we can set up appointments for parents. Some families we work with have benefits problems so it can help to see [the adviser]. She is on the partnership board so liaises with me and knows all of the staff really well.'

(Children's Centre Manager)

'Children's Centre staff see we are there to support them.'

(Jobcentre Plus adviser linked to a Children's Centre)

Children's Centre staff were generally very appreciative of Jobcentre Plus staff who worked in the Centres on an outreach basis with parents directly and of linked advisers who they felt able to ring up for information or to refer parents to. As a result of these arrangements, staff felt they knew more about the full range of

services that could be provided by Jobcentre Plus and it gave them more scope to advise and refer on the parents they worked with:

'There have been huge benefits to having [the adviser] here, It's very relaxed and there is no pressure for parents to see her. Now we have knowledge ourselves to be able to refer people to her and we can be confident about what we're saying. So many parents don't know the options and wouldn't think to go to a Jobcentre Plus office for Better-off Calculations or the routes they could take into work. Sometimes what she does might be quite basic, like making a phone call for someone, or helping them with their CV. She has empowered parents to want to work, she doesn't push, she encourages.'

(Early Years Worker at a Children's Centre)

Making new links with the community

Some Children's Centres reported that having a Jobcentre Plus presence at the Centre had helped to bring new people in to the Children's Centre, through referrals and, in some cases, through mail shots for special events and jobs fairs. Centre Managers and family support workers also felt that it was beneficial to make links with professionals working from the Children's Centre who routinely did home visits – for example, health visitors and social workers. These professionals working in the community have the capacity to access potential customers that Jobcentre Plus would find it very hard to reach. Whilst working in this way tended to be fairly new and small scale, it was felt that there was scope in the future for referring people in the community to a Jobcentre Plus adviser in their local Children's Centre.

The importance of building up trust

A number of staff felt that it might be easier for parents to access Jobcentre Plus at a local Children's Centre rather than have to travel to a Jobcentre Plus office. However, others were wary of pushing Jobcentre Plus services at their parents, especially initially, in case they were put off using the Children's Centre. However, as partnerships progressed on the ground and trust was built up, staff increasingly felt that a Jobcentre Plus presence in the Centre was about giving parents choice by offering services in a low key way – for example, offering parents an appointment with a Jobcentre Plus adviser if they were ready for this. They observed that barriers were beginning to be broken down but also tended to find that some of their parents would not turn up for appointments with Jobcentre Plus if one was made for them.

7.3 Effects within Jobcentre Plus

An important influence on outcomes observed by Jobcentre Plus staff was the extent to which Jobcentre Plus services were embedded within the Children's Centres in the district and the districts visited for this research felt that good progress had been made on this. Linked advisers had been allocated, or were in

the process of being allocated, to many of the Children's Centres, and in some cases there had already been considerable Jobcentre Plus outreach work. Having a named person for Children's Centres to contact regarding Jobcentre Plus-relevant enquiries was felt to be important in building the foundations for Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centre working partnerships.

7.3.1 Capacity building

In some districts (or areas within districts), the tangible effects of Jobcentre Plus involvement were felt to be small or difficult to determine, as work was at a relatively early stage. The effect was felt to be mainly in terms of capacity-building, with particular emphasis placed on the good working relationships that were being built up between Jobcentre Plus, the Children's Centres themselves and the other key partners, including local authorities. In addition, there was felt to be a growing awareness of how Jobcentre Plus can support other agencies to meet their own organisational agendas.

There was a recognition, particularly at Jobcentre Plus district level, from CPMs and External Relations Managers, that Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centre partnerships were about taking a long-term view of what interventions at this stage could mean in the future for individuals and the way that Jobcentre Plus is perceived more widely:

'Today (Jobcentre Plus interventions are) around the parents of children, but thinking about ten years time, the children will have seen generational Jobcentre Plus support, so perhaps it will help to break down barriers.'

(Jobcentre Plus External Relations Manager)

7.3.2 Employment effects

Direct effect in terms of numbers entering work was felt to be relatively low. However, there was felt to be a growing awareness of the different things that Jobcentre Plus can offer and an appreciation of the wide range of positive benefits that Jobcentre Plus offers and correspondingly, a reduction of more negative worries about engagement with the organisation and its staff. Some of the districts had some historical data on the numbers of parents accessing work but felt that it needed to be recognised that outcomes were due to the efforts of Jobcentre Plus together with Children's Centre partners, including for example, community development workers.

'Impact is hard to measure at present, and we have to be realistic about resources and the number and range of activities we can support. There is a wide variation in terms of Jobcentre Plus activity in the district, with the most activity being targeted at the most deprived wards. Every Centre has a supply of leaflets, but Jobcentre Plus staff are more proactive in some wards than others.'

(Jobcentre Plus External Relations Manager)

Many Jobcentre Plus representatives stressed that Jobcentre Plus activities needed to maintain a business focus, and that outreach work in Children's Centres needed to help Jobcentre Plus to meet its targets, particularly around engaging with priority groups such as lone parents. As such, it was too early to gather data on hard outcomes, but eventually they would be looking for hard outcomes in terms of numbers into work and training.

Although the overall picture which emerged in terms of effect on the ground was that it was too early to assess this effectively, there were many examples from Children's Centre staff and Jobcentre Plus advisers, and from parents themselves, of the effect which Jobcentre Plus was starting to have on individuals and families.

7.3.3 The CPMs' work

Several CPMs reported that they were working at an increasingly strategic level; after having initiated the partnerships at a district and then at Children's Centre level they had handed over the links with Children's Centres to advisers in local offices. As well as overseeing the Phase 2 Children's Centre roll-out, CPMs were also networking, giving presentations and raising awareness of the range of services available from Jobcentre Plus amongst a variety of partners and other potential stakeholders.

'It's a gentle infiltration of other services and about making the links. I do quite a lot of presentations on five outcomes for economic well-being, and it's bringing about a realisation of why everyone needs to work with Jobcentre Plus, to meet the children and young people's agenda. Children's Centres are an integral part of that. We're now in another phase where we'll be working closely with Children's Centres and we'll get more data about impact on the ground.'

(CPM)

The work done by CPMs had certainly led to closer relationships between Jobcentre Plus and local authority (LA) partners and this in turn was leading to opportunities to network more broadly with others in the community. Many stakeholders felt that the success of Jobcentre Plus engagement with partners and Children's Centres across districts had been down to the commitment of CPMs, who worked hard to cover large geographical areas and wide agendas. CPMs themselves felt that their role had opened people's eyes to the part that Jobcentre Plus can play in the community and similarly, Children's Centre staff and other partners reported that where the resources had been available from Jobcentre Plus, they had been impressed with Jobcentre Plus advisers' commitment to going out and working in communities.

'We've achieved success in raising our status and have made other professions aware of what we're about; we've banished some preconceptions.'

(CPM)

7.3.4 Factors limiting success

There were a number of factors which were felt to be limiting the success of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres; these were usually highlighted by Jobcentre Plus advisers and CPMs.

Resources

A lack of resources and time was raised many times by Jobcentre Plus staff as the key limiting factor in making Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres the success that they felt it could be. Increasing Jobcentre Plus headcount issues were reported at local and district level in all areas visited by this research. Hence, there may be less scope for outreach work in Children's Centres in the future, as the number of Jobcentre Plus staff reduces.

Jobcentre Plus external relations managers spoke of needing to be creative with the resources that they had. It was notable from our research that the most Jobcentre Plus activity was taking place in Children's Centres which were in areas with additional funding sources, which could be used to fund advisers or pay for their secondment – for example, NDLP+ pilot funds, for Communities, Action Teams or the NRF. In the absence of such additional funds, with Jobcentre Plus resource deployment being target-driven, it may become more difficult for Adviser Managers to justify sending advisers out to do outreach work, given that it is relatively intensive and time consuming, and that some of it may have medium- and long-term benefits rather than short-term outcomes.

At a more strategic level, many of the CPMs covered very large geographical areas, with multiple and differing issues across their districts. Some said that the area they were responsible for had increased as the number of CPMs across the country was reduced. In general, CPMs felt they were covering a very wide remit, with minimal resources and minimal support. CPMs in some areas said that they would like to be more strategic and hand over local links with Children's Centres by providing each Children's Centre with a named Jobcentre Plus adviser, but that this has not always been possible due to a lack of available resources within local Jobcentre Plus offices. Children's Centres had some understanding that Jobcentre Plus were under-resourced, and that there was a need to be creative with the staff they were able to have time from.

IT issues

Jobcentre Plus advisers reported that there were difficulties in using their laptop computers in Children's Centres. They reported that access to the Jobcentre Plus network and servers was difficult; for example, advisers have been linking using a mobile phone, which is unreliable. Some advisers said that they had given up trying to link with the Jobcentre Plus network and took the requests for information that they could not deal with in the absence of a computer connection, back into the Jobcentre Plus offices to address. They then phoned up customers to pass on the information.

Jobcentre Plus materials for Children's Centres

Some Jobcentre Plus advisers felt that the Jobcentre Plus marketing materials available for them to hand out to parents at Children's Centre events were limited and less attractive than those from other partners and that this could mean they were missing valuable opportunities to engage with new customers. They contrasted their materials with those available from Employment Zone partners.

Some CPMs felt that it would have been useful to have had a national information pack to send out to Children's Centres. CPMs had generally designed and put together their own packs which was possibly a duplication of effort.

Bureaucracy

Some stakeholders felt that internal bureaucracy could limit the extent to which Jobcentre Plus advisers were able to become active, creative and innovative in Children's Centres. It was felt that Jobcentre Plus had less flexibility than some of the other employment and training agencies, including Employment Zone partners. As a result, it was felt that, on occasion, other employment and training partners could provide more tailor-made services than was possible within Jobcentre Plus.

The future of the CPM role

It was felt by senior Jobcentre Plus staff in some districts that CPMs needed to have a steer on their priorities for the future, once the links have been set up between Children's Centres and local Jobcentre Plus advisers, allowing CPMs to step back and work strategically. CPMs have developed a range of skills in their role and these will need to be used effectively in the future.

7.4 Chapter summary

This chapter draws together different respondents' perceptions of the effect of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres.

Looking first at their perceptions of Jobcentre Plus' effect on individual Children's Centre users, the research found that this varied considerably, both from one Centre to the next, according to the extent of Jobcentre Plus activity in those Centres, and from one user to the next, depending on their interest, or potential interest, in work.

Despite this variation, important perceived effects were identified in terms of:

- attitudes of Centre users towards Jobcentre Plus: These were reported to be improving slowly. Both Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centre staff believed that this would spread and build up over time, and indirectly through word-of-mouth and that, in due course, Jobcentre Plus would to be seen as more approachable by parents, particularly if based in the 'safe', convenient and familiar environment of the Centre;

- increasing their engagement with Jobcentre Plus: Having a Jobcentre Plus presence in Children's Centres was seen to be making Jobcentre Plus more accessible to communities and hard-to-reach groups who would be reluctant to visit Jobcentre Plus offices or who would find it logistically difficult to do so;
- producing hard and soft labour market outcomes: The research found a mixture of hard and soft outcomes reported as a result of Jobcentre Plus activity in Children's Centres. There were examples of users moving into training and employment but additionally, there was more evidence of movement towards the labour market or greater interest in it, which was seen in terms of increased engagement with Jobcentre Plus and other services, increased confidence and aspirations;
- potential effect in the future: There was felt to be considerable potential effect of Jobcentre Plus in all of the above areas, as Jobcentre Plus becomes more fully established within Children's Centres. Staff respondents from both Jobcentre Plus and the Children's Centres often recognised that generational employment would take many years to change but the work that Jobcentre Plus did now could help to reduce and minimise the effect of unemployment culture on the next generation.

There were parallel effects also evident on the operations of the Centres themselves and on the perspectives of the staff running them and working in them. Firstly, at the level of individual Children's Centres, some positive effect in terms of partnership working had been felt. More obvious were the effects on staff, who had had the opportunity to work closely and/or regularly with Jobcentre Plus. This was particularly the case where there was a linked adviser from a local office who was able to spend time in the Children's Centre, either at a regular drop-in or for ad hoc events. This effect was manifested in:

- the way in which Children's Centre staff viewed Jobcentre Plus as a whole;
- staff understanding of the range of services provided by Jobcentre Plus;
- staff seeing Jobcentre Plus as a key part of their delivery team;
- bringing new people into Children's Centres as a result of Jobcentre Plus activity.

Finally, effects on Jobcentre Plus and its staff were also reviewed. Here, the effect was felt to be mainly in terms of capacity-building, with particular emphasis placed on the good working relationships that were being built up between Jobcentre Plus, the Children's Centres themselves and the other key partners, including local authorities. Although direct effects in terms of numbers entering work was felt to be relatively low, outreach work in Children's Centres was seen as helping Jobcentre Plus to meet its targets, particularly around engaging with priority groups such as lone parents. The work done by CPMs had certainly led to closer relationships between Jobcentre Plus and LA partners and this in turn was leading to opportunities to network more broadly with others in the community. Many

stakeholders felt that the success of Jobcentre Plus engagement with partners and Children's Centres across districts had been down to the commitment of CPMs, who worked hard to cover large geographical areas and wide agendas. CPMs themselves felt that their role had opened people's eyes to the part that Jobcentre Plus can play in the community. A number of factors which were felt to be limiting the success of Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres were highlighted, including a lack of resources and time, a range of IT issues and some uncertainty about the developing role of the CPMs.

8 Conclusion and policy implications

To this point, this report has focused on presenting the results of the research in as objective a manner as possible. In this chapter, however, we look back over several previous chapters to draw out factors which we believe to be important in influencing the ways in which Jobcentre Plus could deal with the challenges of working with, and through, the expanding Children's Centre network. We accept that others may draw out different findings, may interpret them in different ways and might draw wholly different conclusions. In this case, our conclusions in this chapter can stand as our contribution to debate about the future trajectory of Jobcentre Plus' strategy.

8.1 Working with the Children's Centre partnerships

Jobcentre Plus involvement in Children's Centres has been evolving since the introduction of Centres in 2003. We showed in Chapter 2 that there had been considerable variety in the ways in which Children's Centres had been set up and that initially, for many Phase 1 Centres, Jobcentre Plus had rarely been involved prior to the planning and set-up stages of the Children's Centres. Although this had improved more recently, survey evidence suggested that only around a fifth of Childcare Partnership Managers (CPMs) were working at a strategic level with the local authority (LA) as part of the roll-out of Phase 2 Children's Centres. Being in at the start seems to be beneficial, in terms of developing relationships but also in terms of influencing the form of Jobcentre Plus involvement in a Centre. Conversely, catching up later can be difficult for Jobcentre Plus, particularly if it is perceived as being of fairly marginal relevance by the key players.

The establishment of more satisfactory relationships seemed to turn on the work of particularly active or capable CPMs, on Jobcentre Plus responding actively and positively to invitations to join partnership at an early stage and on the slowly developing understanding among other partners about Jobcentre Plus' intentions/provision.

CPMs have a crucial role to play in developing the relationship between Children's Centres and Jobcentre Plus and in many cases this involves both strategic and operational level engagement. The expansion in the number of Children's Centres has made it increasingly difficult for them to be involved in the day-to-day operations of more established Children's Centres while also orchestrating newer developments at a strategic level.

The challenge for Jobcentre Plus is, therefore, to:

- prioritise positive and early involvement in the partnerships through the CPMs;
- devise a package of relevant services that can be offered and reliably delivered, to the Centres, which does not draw unduly on scarce CPM resources;
- customise the components of the package to meet the particular characteristics of each Centre, particularly in terms of the likely volume of Centre users who could benefit from Jobcentre Plus help.

8.2 Developing the Jobcentre Plus 'offer'

Our review in Chapter 4 of the range of Jobcentre Plus services that are offered, albeit not consistently, in Children's Centres, indicates what such a package might beneficially look like.

8.2.1 The minimum offer

The research showed that the ready availability, visibility and up-to-dateness of both **specific and general Jobcentre Plus literature** was an important need and marked a minimum level of engagement that Jobcentre Plus ought to deliver. In addition, **Jobcentre Plus vacancy boards** both demonstrated the value of Jobcentre Plus as an accessible source of potentially relevant vacancies to the typical Centre user, as well as providing genuinely useful help to the jobseeking minority. The survey suggested that only just over half of all Children's Centres were stocking Jobcentre Plus leaflets or leaflet stands and less than a fifth were displaying vacancy boards.

In our view, this combination should provide the basic offer which Jobcentre Plus should make to all Children's Centres. While certainly not cost free, this basic offer seems to us to combine a maximum exposure of Jobcentre Plus' existence, availability and ambition to help Centre users, with a relatively modest delivery cost.

8.2.2 The enhanced offer

The research has suggested a number of criteria which Jobcentre Plus could use to identify Centres where it would be worthwhile concentrating more resources. These include the size and footfall of the Centre, the demographic make-up of the local population likely to provide a strong representation of potential Jobcentre Plus customers, locations which are not well served by existing Jobcentres.

In selected locations, where the existence of a sizeable volume of likely users had been demonstrated or was expected, the minimum offer could usefully be supplemented by somewhat more costly IT-based provision, which might involve providing more labour market information through **job points, warm phones, internet access**.

8.2.3 The importance of the linked adviser

In addition, the research showed that a practical and useful means of bridging the gap between the (expensive) on-site presence of a Jobcentre Plus adviser and limited funds is the development of a **'linked adviser'** role, i.e. providing a nominated Jobcentre Plus staff member responsible for orchestrating all the contacts between specific Jobcentre Plus offices and Children's Centres, whether this be in the form of the minimum or the enhanced offer. Once CPMs stepped away from their involvement with individual Children's Centres, linked advisers had been key to maintaining and developing this. Given sufficient resources, they had been fairly successful in improving working links between Jobcentre and Children's Centres, both at the level of the individual jobseeker and more generally between the two organisations.

8.2.4 Building on success

In order to introduce some flexibility into this two-tier system, there are two further services, which the research has demonstrated to be of considerable success in Children's Centre settings, which could be beneficially delivered in the light of (1) the levels of response to the minimum or enhanced offers, and (2) the availability of Jobcentre Plus resources. These basic levels of support could be supplemented by:

- **sponsorship of, or participation in, one-off events**, such as a jobs fair or a course to build confidence and skills. These could take a range of forms and the 'one-off' character of special events would allow them to take advantage of the Children's Centre's closeness to potential Jobcentre Plus customer groups, while avoiding, or at least minimising, the problem of their everyday user flow not drawing in large numbers of immediately relevant individuals. They also avoid ongoing costs, while offering a good opportunity to build awareness of Jobcentre Plus' presence in, or accessibility through, the Centre;
- **adviser outreach delivering services in the Children's Centres**. A key feature of adviser presence in the Centres is that while it is quite widely seen as desirable, experience suggests that it can also be very costly. In addition, we have shown that whereas potential users value regularity and a familiar face, there are also economic and operational advantages to a more ad hoc pattern of attendance. It ought, therefore, to be fairly straightforward to target the larger and more productive Centres with the former and the more marginal ones with occasional visits at potentially propitious times.

There are, in addition, a range of other activities which are not based directly on service delivery to potential beneficiaries, but have rather more indirect or longer-term capacity-building objectives, including information exchanges, training in childcare and access groups.

8.3 Inter-district consistency

The research observed considerable intra-district variation in the depth and content of relationships between Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres, reflecting the facts that some Centres within a district had been in existence for much longer than others, that some were more interested in working with Jobcentre Plus than others and that some provided much more obvious potential for Jobcentre Plus to reach interested Centre users than others. Indeed, the tiered offer which we propose in Section 8.2 would continue to promote these differences. However, the survey showed that there are also considerable inter-district variations in the scale and spread of Jobcentre Plus activities, reflecting the degree to which different Jobcentre Plus districts have prioritised work with Children's Centres and the consequent volume of resources which they have committed in this direction.

This kind of variation seems less to reflect real-world differences in the potential openings for Jobcentre Plus in working through Children's Centres and more the different subjective assessments of District Managers about the usefulness of doing so. It may, of course, also reflect a greater level of tentativeness and uncertainty about how to undertake this kind of intervention among those districts who are less forcefully engaged but of course it is only the experience of making these interventions that has allowed some districts to gain more experience of, and familiarity with, making them.

While the significant geographical, demographic and labour market differences between districts make it sensible for District Managers to have considerable autonomy in how they allocate resources and budgets, this seems less acceptable if it results in relatively new ambitions and their associated activities being too frequently relegated to the margins. For this reason, it seems desirable for Jobcentre Plus to prescribe, more forcefully, the levels of resource commitment which it expects districts to commit to work with Children's Centres. In line with this, it would obviously also be beneficial to find ways in which good practice developed in one area could be transferred to others and this research is intended to provide some assistance to such developments. In this way, we would expect to see greater overall consistency between different parts of the country, notwithstanding ongoing variation from one Centre to the next.

8.4 Resources

In the provision of any services, the question of resources always has to be raised. Nearly all the stakeholders interviewed in the course of this study reported financial cutbacks and reduced staffing. Decisions as to the most appropriate future pattern of provision will always have to be placed against this background. Furthermore, over time, the balance of resources across stakeholders is likely to change, and activities will need to be adjusted and allocated in accordance with this.

In some cases, relatively modest improvements in capital expenditure could open up significant possibilities for the scope of work within Children's Centres. Where Children's Centres have been set up with no or very limited internet access, this does need to be addressed (and this is being done in some areas). In the future, it should be ensured that new Centres have appropriate access – this should not be something that is cut to fit with the capital budget available. Internet availability enables not just access to information on employment and training information but a whole host of other types of information. Being able to print out and hand such information to users is important. Furthermore, internet use can help some users become familiar with the technology.

Some equally mundane, but operationally significant, IT issues were also evidently constraining Jobcentre Plus staff in their efforts to work with, and in, Children's Centres; for example, a lack of laptops, laptops that did not easily link into the Jobcentre Plus system, unreliable mobile phones. These all need to be addressed if effective services are to be provided in Children's Centres. Being able to access Jobcentre Plus information outside Jobcentre Plus offices was another issue. Indeed, several respondents commented that health workers and others were able to access sensitive information about clients from Children's Centres via an internet or other link and it was not understood why this was not possible for Jobcentre Plus.

The importance of outreach to access the harder-to-reach groups has been emphasised at a number of points. Working through Children's Centres represents not only a means of outreach directly to the Centres' clients but can also exploit the Centres' physical location at the heart of many disadvantaged communities, to reach out beyond them. It is important that funding is available so that Jobcentre Plus advisers can work out of the office and become known in Children's Centres – familiarity is an important way of reducing negative perceptions. Certainly, some adviser managers whom we interviewed did see Children's Centres as a potentially important means of accessing a greater range of customers and locations in which to conduct formal interviews – but not always as an immediate priority.

There are many good examples of Jobcentre Plus working well with Children's Centres, although in some areas services are newly in place and the success of a particular way of working is not yet clear. If more Jobcentre Plus services are to operate through Children's Centres, issues of resources and priorities will need to be looked at more strategically by Jobcentre Plus and decisions made accordingly.

8.5 Winning hearts and minds

The research has shown that while Jobcentre Plus had benefited some of the parents using Children's Centres, many Children's Centre users were indifferent to the existence of Jobcentre Plus activities in their Centre. They were not there to use such services, were not always even aware of them but did not generally object to them being there, provided they did not significantly affect the character or core operations of the Centre. Nevertheless, the research suggested that attitudes of Centre users towards Jobcentre Plus were reported to be improving slowly. Staff believed that this would spread and build up over time and indirectly through word-of-mouth and that in due course, Jobcentre Plus would be seen as more approachable by parents, particularly if based in the 'safe', convenient and familiar environment of the Centre. Thus, having a Jobcentre Plus presence in Children's Centres was seen to be making Jobcentre Plus more accessible to communities and hard-to-reach groups who would be reluctant to visit Jobcentre Plus offices or who would find it logistically difficult to do so.

The research found that the 'labour market effect' on users themselves varied greatly, both from one Centre to the next, according to the extent of Jobcentre Plus activity in those Centres, and from one user to the next, depending on their interest, or potential interest, in work. The minority who had used, or thought that they might use, Jobcentre Plus services, found the ability to access them at the Children's Centre physically convenient, unthreatening, culturally undemanding and non-stigmatising. They appreciated being able to approach the issues of work and benefits at their own pace and on their own terms and terrain. They appreciated working face-to-face with a known adviser who would be responsive without forcing the pace.

The crucial 'success factors' here seem to be:

- being prepared for the long haul with perhaps only modest overt returns in the early years;
- the projection of a helpful and supportive image, as an offset to different, widely held and less engaging perceptions of Jobcentre Plus;
- the delivery of practical, useful and relevant help and support to individual Centre users, through whom others may be drawn in;
- the use of experienced, empathetic and knowledgeable staff, with time to work on long-term cases.

None of this can be achieved without winning the related support of Centre staff. The research showed that their 'buy-in' to Jobcentre Plus' activities could not be assumed but had to be earned. To date, this had been most readily achieved in cases where there was a linked adviser from a local office who was able to spend time in the Children's Centre, either at a regular drop-in or for ad hoc events.