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An exploratory comparison of the interactions between advisers and younger and older clients during Work Focused Interviews

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Summary

This report presents findings from an exploratory comparison of interactions between personal advisers and older and younger clients during Work Focused Interviews (WFIs). The study was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and conducted by researchers at the Social Policy Research Unit and Department of Sociology at the University of York. The WFI recordings were selected from a dataset that had been collected for a larger study (Drew *et al.*, 2010, forthcoming). The main findings include:

- evidence of overall variation by client age came predominantly in the New Jobseeker Interviews (NJIs). With older clients, advisers:
 - were more likely to agree fewer job goals;
 - conducted fewer assisted job searches and job submissions;
 - tend to give ‘softer’ explanations of the requirement to evidence job search activity.
- In NJIs and initial Incapacity Benefit (IB) WFIs there was some evidence to suggest that individual advisers modified their approaches when meeting older or younger clients. Differences observed included:
 - weekly job search activity requirements more minimal for Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) older clients;
 - a stronger balance of emphasis on return to work when giving initial explanations of WFIs to younger IB clients.
 - return to work treated as a less definite possibility for older IB clients;

- where age-related differences were apparent, these tended to emerge at age 25+, or with clients 40+ rather than a clear distinction above/below age 50.
- the report identified a number of policy implications:
 - consider whether there are aspects of the WFI process which might be appropriately and effectively tailored to different clients and aspects which should remain consistent;
 - equip advisers with accessible information about age-discrimination legislation and referral channels to more specialist sources of advice and guidance;
 - consider the concept of the ‘older client’ and ways in which this can be meaningfully defined and applied.

Background

In light of previous evaluation evidence to date and from internal analysis of management information, that older clients did not appear to benefit so much from certain back-to-work programmes than their younger counterparts, the study aimed to identify whether there were differences in the content and structure of WFI interactions with older and younger client cohorts. There was also a more general interest in expanding the evidence base on adviser interactions with older clients, with consideration of what makes for effective interactions with this age group. For the purposes of this analysis, the older client cohort was defined as people aged 50 and above.

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Method

The study used the method of Conversation Analysis (CA) to explore a set of video/audio recordings of WFIs taking place in Jobcentre Plus offices. These recordings were selected from a body of data that had been collected for a larger scale study (Drew *et al.*, 2010, forthcoming). The subset of data used in the present study included 28 recordings with people aged 50 and above, covering a wide range of WFI types, and a comparison sample of 28 recordings with people under the age of 50. The comparison sample comprised three WFI types selected to match those which featured most commonly among the 50+ sample: initial IB WFIs under the Pathways to Work programme, New Jobseeker Interviews and subsequent New Deal WFIs for JSA claimants.

The study was small scale, exploratory and opportunistic and the sample of recordings was not representative of the wider claimant population. In many respects, the scope for comparative analysis was limited and given the one-off 'snapshot' nature of the WFI recordings, little can be inferred about longer term outcomes for the individuals involved. It is important to understand these limitations of the data and to bear them in mind when considering the findings reported here.

Interactional difference by age cohort

The approach to comparative analysis was two-fold: firstly looking across the different age cohorts as a whole to explore whether there were any aspects of adviser practice that seemed to differentiate the age groups **overall**; and secondly (where the data allowed) considering the practices of **individual advisers** when meeting with clients of different ages.

Aspects of the WFI process which seemed to show some evidence of overall variation by client age came predominantly from NJIs. These differences included:

- fewer job goals being agreed with older clients (this difference began to emerge at the 25+ boundary);
- where clients had existing Jobseeker's Agreements (JSAg) from previous claims, job goals being revisited in less detail than with younger repeat claimants;
- assisted job searches being carried out less frequently with older clients (difference again emerging at 25+);
- fewer job submissions for older clients when an assisted job search was carried out;
- 'softer' explanations of the requirements to evidence job search activity given to older clients;
- no mention of the possibility of benefit sanctions in WFIs with older clients.

In NJIs and initial IB WFIs, there was some evidence to suggest that individual advisers modified their approaches when meeting older or younger clients. These included:

- weekly job search activity requirements more minimal for older JSA clients (difference emerging at 40+);
- tailoring explanations of the use of national minimum wage in Better Off Calculations (BOC), to acknowledge older clients' higher previous and potential future earnings level (difference emerging at 40+);
- stronger explicit expressions of adviser optimism for older JSA clients;
- a stronger balance of emphasis on return to work when giving initial explanations of the WFI purpose to younger IB clients;
- return to work treated as a less definite possibility for older IB clients;
- suggestions for work related activity tending towards voluntary or therapeutic activity for older IB clients.

The diversity in programme stage, and hence WFI content, for people in the New Deal recordings meant that it was particularly difficult to draw out any comparative findings from this section of the data. Advisers' individual interactional style did not alter significantly when meeting with clients of different ages. Additionally, in the NJIs, some advisers demonstrated a striking degree of consistency in the 'linguistic routines' which they used in approaching various tasks within the WFI.

Considering the set of recordings with 50+ clients as a whole, there was a lack of evidence of any common patterns that characterised the way in which advisers interacted with older clients overall or indeed the way that older people interacted with advisers. In part, this is likely to be a reflection of the different aims and structures of the various WFI types included in the 50+ data set. However, we suggest that the heterogeneity of the 50+ cohort is also important in explaining the apparent absence of consistent features that typify interactions with older clients.

Age-related barriers to work

There was evidence to suggest that perceptions of employer age discrimination develop as people spend longer periods in unemployment, rather than being of concern at the point of making a new benefit claim. Advisers in the recordings used a variety of approaches in responding to clients' comments about age being a barrier to securing employment. These included concurring that age discrimination was a 'real issue' and presenting a range of alternative perspectives which, to varying degrees, challenged or countered the notion that age was a barrier to work. However, while adviser responses were generally supportive of the claimant, there was often little in the way of practical or personalised advice on how age-related barriers to work might be tackled. As such, this report makes the following recommendations for improving

the effectiveness of advisory support for older clients:

- Acknowledging clients' concerns about age discrimination and inviting them to elaborate on how they have arrived at this view.
- Offering examples of employers who take a positive approach to older workers (identifying local employers where possible).
- Working collaboratively with the client to identify the particular skills they **personally** can offer employers.
- Providing specific advice on how to convey such information in applications.
- Providing accessible information on age discrimination legislation to equip and empower the client.

Some of these suggested strategies may be beyond the scope of the Jobcentre Plus adviser remit as currently designed and thus, require the input of specialist external organisations. As such, it would be important for advisers to have comprehensive knowledge of a wider range of support sources and have the means to make referrals as appropriate.

Policy implications

The more wide-reaching question of what makes for effective strategies when interacting with older clients is not one which can be answered in any comprehensive or unequivocal way from the present study. This is partly due to the acknowledged limitations of the available data but also relates to the question of whether the older client cohort is one which can be meaningfully defined or described. The present study's data both illustrated the diversity in circumstances of people aged 50 and above and found no evidence that circumscribing a 50+ cohort is necessarily a meaningful distinction. We conclude that the central importance of taking an individualised and flexible approach to advisory support applies across clients of all ages and that differentiated practice does not necessarily

mean discriminatory practice. Some of the areas of difference that have been tentatively revealed by this study could be argued to be nothing more than the appropriate application of Jobcentre Plus policy as currently designed, or may be strategies that advisers use to engender rapport with older (or more experienced) clients. On the other hand, some areas of differential practice may result in missed opportunities to support older clients in their back-to-work journey. As such, we suggest that the next step for policy is to consider what implications the various types of difference might have for client outcomes, should they be found to reflect more widespread tendencies.

In summary, from the insights provided by this study, we suggest that it would be valuable for policymakers to:

- think through the aspects of the WFI process which might be appropriately and effectively tailored to different clients and those which should remain consistent;
- equip advisers with accessible information about age discrimination legislation and referral channels to more specialist sources of advice and guidance;
- consider the concept of the 'older client' and ways in which this can be meaningfully defined and applied.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 711 2. Research Report 634. June 2010).

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