



# Voices of Unemployment

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Result of an ACOSS survey of jobactive service users

October 2018



The [Australian Council of Social Service \(ACOSS\)](#) is a national advocate for action to reduce poverty and inequality and the peak body for the community services sector in Australia. Our vision is for a fair, inclusive and sustainable Australia where all individuals and communities can participate in and benefit from social and economic life.

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# 1. Executive Summary

We report here the findings of an online survey of users of the jobactive service, the main employment service for people who are unemployed, conducted by ACOSS between 7 and 22 July 2018.

The survey was conducted in order to inform our response to the Government's '[Future of Employment Services](#)' discussion paper. ACOSS welcomed the decision to conduct a thorough review of employment services well in advance of the end of jobactive contracts in July 2020, and to consult with an expert panel and users of employment services (unemployed people and employers) to inform this work. Our [proposals for reform were recently released](#).

It is absolutely vital that governments and employment services, and peak bodies and advocates such as ACOSS, listen to the voices of people who are unemployed when redesigning employment services. These services can make a crucial difference to people's prospects of securing paid work, especially for people facing disadvantages such as long-term unemployment. The way in which employment services, Centrelink, governments and the media treat people - especially in monitoring compliance with activity requirements - also makes a huge difference to people's experience of unemployment.

Responses came in quickly. Despite the short time-frame (two weeks) and limited sources available to us to attract responses (Facebook, Twitter, and our networks of community service providers and organisations representing unemployed people), we received 311 responses. ACOSS would like to thank all who responded for sharing their experiences in an open and generous way.

## Profile of respondents

The survey sample comprised individuals who were unemployed and using, or had used, jobactive services within the last three years. There was a broad (demographic) diversity of respondents, including women, older people, single parents. People unemployed long-term - that is, for over one year - and people living in Victoria and South Australia were over-represented.

## General experience of jobactive:

Respondents were overwhelmingly (73%) dissatisfied with their jobactive service, while just 8% were satisfied. Those who were dissatisfied stated that they had not received useful help, and/the experience of attending interviews with providers was stressful. The provider role in the benefit compliance system (and risk of loss of payments) was a major source of anxiety.

Consequently, 79% indicated they would prefer to rely on their own efforts to find employment, compared with 6% who preferred to use jobactive. It does not necessarily follow that (as a general rule), most people would prefer not to use employment services. These responses may be different if people held a more favourable view of the services.

## Interactions with providers and consultants

Reflecting their relatively long duration of unemployment, 48% had used more than one jobactive service. This was due as much to provider turnover (there was a major tender for employment services in 2015) as decisions by service users to change providers. Many were not given an opportunity to choose a new provider when their existing one lost its contract.

Users overwhelmingly (71%, compared with 6% who disagreed) felt that it was important to see the same consultant consistently. This occurred in just over half of all cases (55%), while 14% saw the same consultant 'half of the time' and 26% either 'rarely' or 'never' did so.

Only 11% considered their (latest) consultant to be well-skilled for the job, while 65% did not. When asked what qualities consultants should have, three main qualities were identified: empathy (or personal experience of unemployment); relevant professional qualifications; and knowledge of and connections with the local labour market.

Only 33% found their consultant 'supportive and respectful'. Disturbingly, 35% did not. This was a source of the anxiety reported by many people. Many people felt overly pressured by their consultant. Respondents often acknowledged the constraints that consultants worked under, especially high caseloads (averaging 150) and an over-emphasis on benefit compliance within the jobactive system.

## Services and supports

Regular interviews with providers were widely perceived to be quick 'tick a box' exercises to meet bureaucratic requirements and check whether they were actively searching for jobs.

Surprisingly (since most were unemployed for a year or more), most (57%) did not know which jobactive 'stream' they belonged to, even though this had a major impact on the level of service they received.

When asked what services they received from their provider, 19% reported a referral to a job, 23% reported referral for training, 14% (not mutually exclusive) received help with the costs of training or job search, 11% reported receiving a job placement with a wage subsidy, and 11% were referred to health or community services. Given that a majority of respondents were unemployed long-term and 46% of those who knew their service stream were in streams B or C, this suggests the services received by those who were more disadvantaged in the labour market were seriously 'under-powered', with less than one quarter receiving each of these more intensive services.

Respondents with caring roles were asked whether providers took adequate account of this. Most (59%) responded in the negative and only 9% responded positively. Examples of failure to account for caring roles included appointments held at inappropriate times (e.g. school holidays), jobs that were too far away or involved night shifts, and a lack of acknowledgement of the extra pressures associated with care for children or adults with special needs. This led to problems with compliance with benefit requirements such as applying for 20 jobs a month (discussed below).

## Choice and control

People overwhelmingly gave high priority to being able to change their provider (94%) and having a say over their employment plan (90%). Many thought that allowing people to make informed choices would improve service quality. However, only 33% chose their last provider while 67% had them assigned by Centrelink. One reason for this conflict between ideal and reality was that only a minority of those who chose a provider (45%) had enough time and information to make an informed choice. Further, many reported that their consultant prepared their employment plan and asked them to sign it with little or no input from them. Their experience of employment services was that of 'compliant bystanders' rather than active participants, while they pursued their 'real' job search independently of the provider.

## Benefit compliance

The main employment plan requirements included applying for 20 jobs a month (72%), Work for the Dole (32%), voluntary work (28%), part-time employment (25%), training (19%) and a subsidised job placement (6%). Many reported that the 20 jobs a month requirement was rigidly enforced, including in regions where there were few jobs available, or they were caring for a family member with serious illness. People areas of low job vacancies applied repeatedly to the same employers, which they said inconvenienced employers.



People were poorly informed about temporary exemptions (for example, for family emergencies).

A majority (51%) considered that the requirements in their employment plan were not suited to their circumstances, while 11% reported that they were suitable. The 20 jobs a month requirement and Work for the Dole were widely criticised on these grounds. Work for the Dole was widely regarded as wasted effort since the 'work' had little or no connection with paid employment or employment-related skills.

Although the survey did not include specific questions on activity test breaches or benefit sanctions, the fear of losing benefits was a recurring theme. Many people mentioned that they had been breached (they were the subject of participation reports by providers to Centrelink) and believed they had not been fairly treated.

### What should stay the same?

The main services appreciated by respondents were practical supports such as computers, convenient locations, private interview rooms (if available), and help with incidental expenses (e.g. transport and short training courses). People appreciated referrals to suitable training courses and wage subsidies (though these were not widely available).

### What should change?

The main things respondents wanted changed included a less punitive approach to benefit compliance, better recognition of special needs (including illness and disability or caring roles), more personalised service and interviews, and more help with training and job referrals. A common concern was that providers were motivated by profits rather than improving people's lives. Many older respondents advocated that the (former) Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) be restored.

## 2. Background and Methodology

### Purpose of the survey

The responses received informed our proposals for reform of employment services in response to the Department of Jobs and Small Business consultation on the future of employment services. With current jobactive contracts ending in mid-2020, the government has an opportunity to reform employment services. Our submission is available [on our website](#).

### Methodology

The survey was conducted online (using Survey Monkey) from 7 July to 22 July 2018 and is based on the responses of 311 people who have used jobactive services within the last three years. The survey was advertised via social media, as well as directly to individual supporters of ACOSS who have used jobactive services. Member organisations assisted by promoting the survey through their networks.

A range of closed and open-ended questions were used. Where possible, an open-ended option was included with closed questions, to enrich the data collected and allow people who use jobactive to describe their experiences in their own words. This improves the validity of the survey compared with standard 'customer satisfaction' surveys.

The survey dealt with the following topics:

- Demographic background of respondents;
- General experience of jobactive;
- Interactions with providers and consultants;
- Services and supports;
- Choice and control;
- Benefit compliance.
- What should stay the same?
- What should change?

Sampling was limited by the short timeframe for collecting responses. In particular, the online distribution of the survey excluded people with little to no internet access. This is a key group to reach out to in future, as they will be the most impacted by any shift of jobactive services to digital platforms. While there was a reasonable diversity of demographic characteristics, we are not able to assess the impact of the sampling method on responses received.

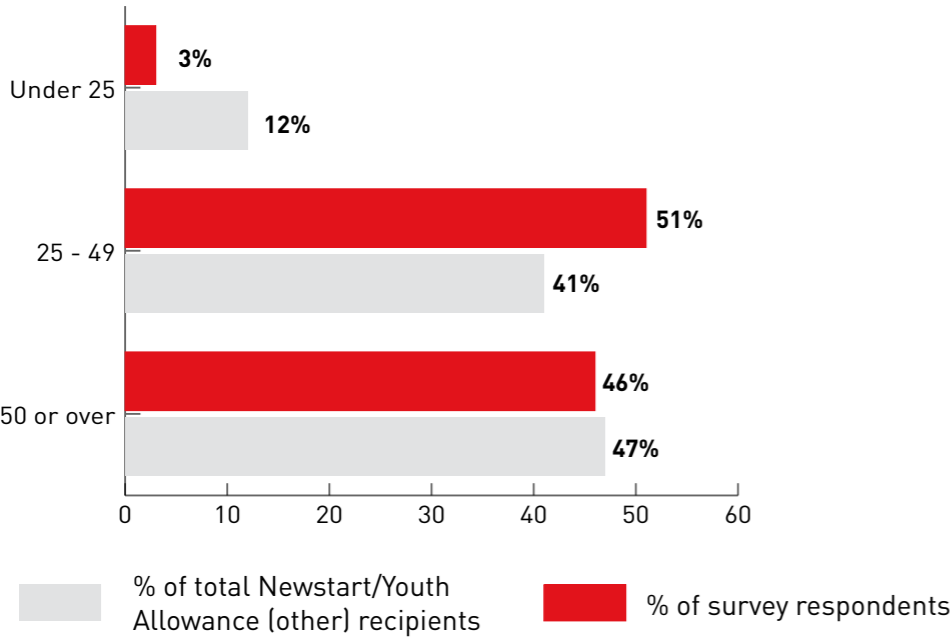
The results of the survey are set out below. Six case studies based on follow-up phone calls with respondents who agreed to be contacted further are reported in Appendix 1. The survey questions are set out in Appendix 2.

### 3. Profile of respondents

The survey sample comprised individuals who were unemployed and using, or had used, jobactive services within the last three years. There was a reasonable demographic balance of respondents, although women, older people, single parents, and people unemployed long-term (for over one year) and people in non-metropolitan regions, were over-represented in the sample.

#### Age (n=243, survey question #36)

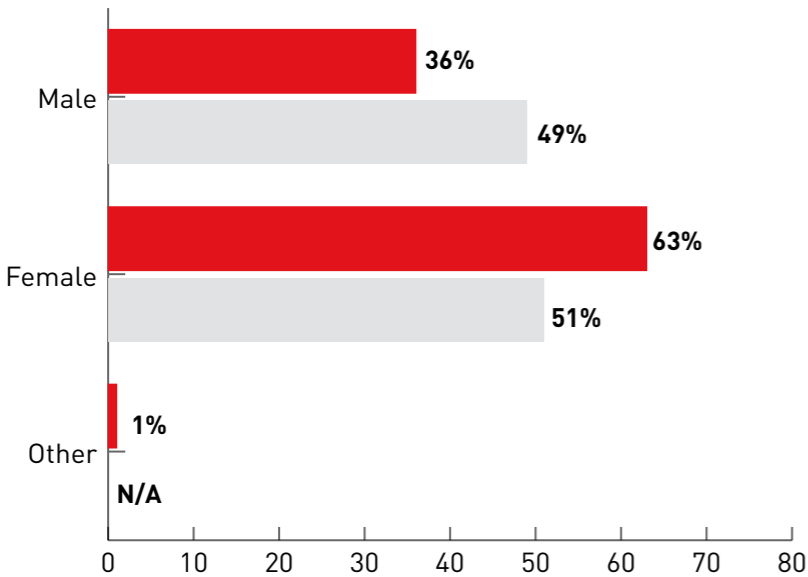
Young people under 25 years were under-represented among respondents (3% compared with 12% of NSA/YA recipients generally).



Note: The data on NSA/YA recipients relate to 25-44 year olds and people aged over 45.

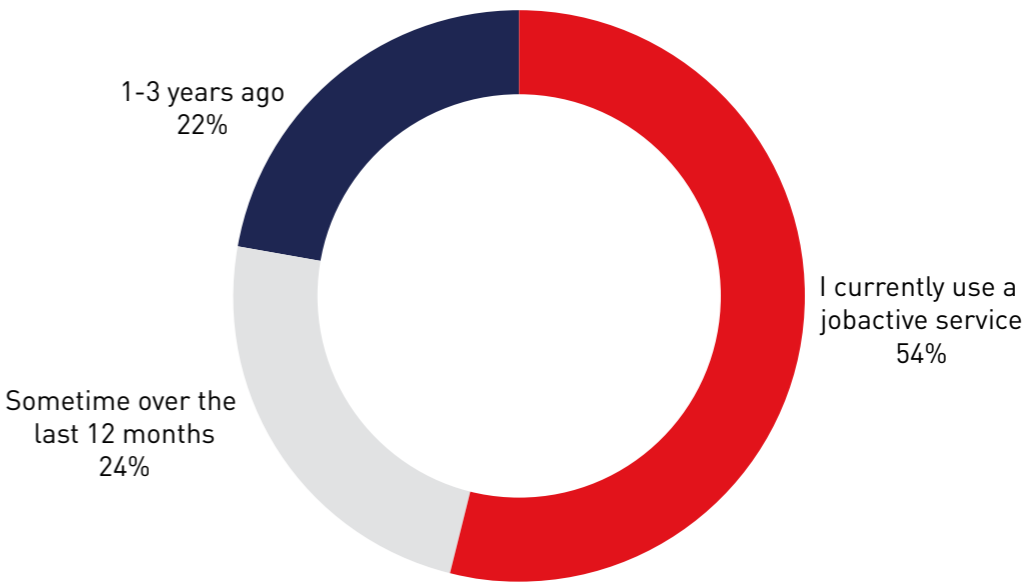
#### Gender (n= 241, Question 37)

Women were over-represented (63% of respondents compared with 51%).



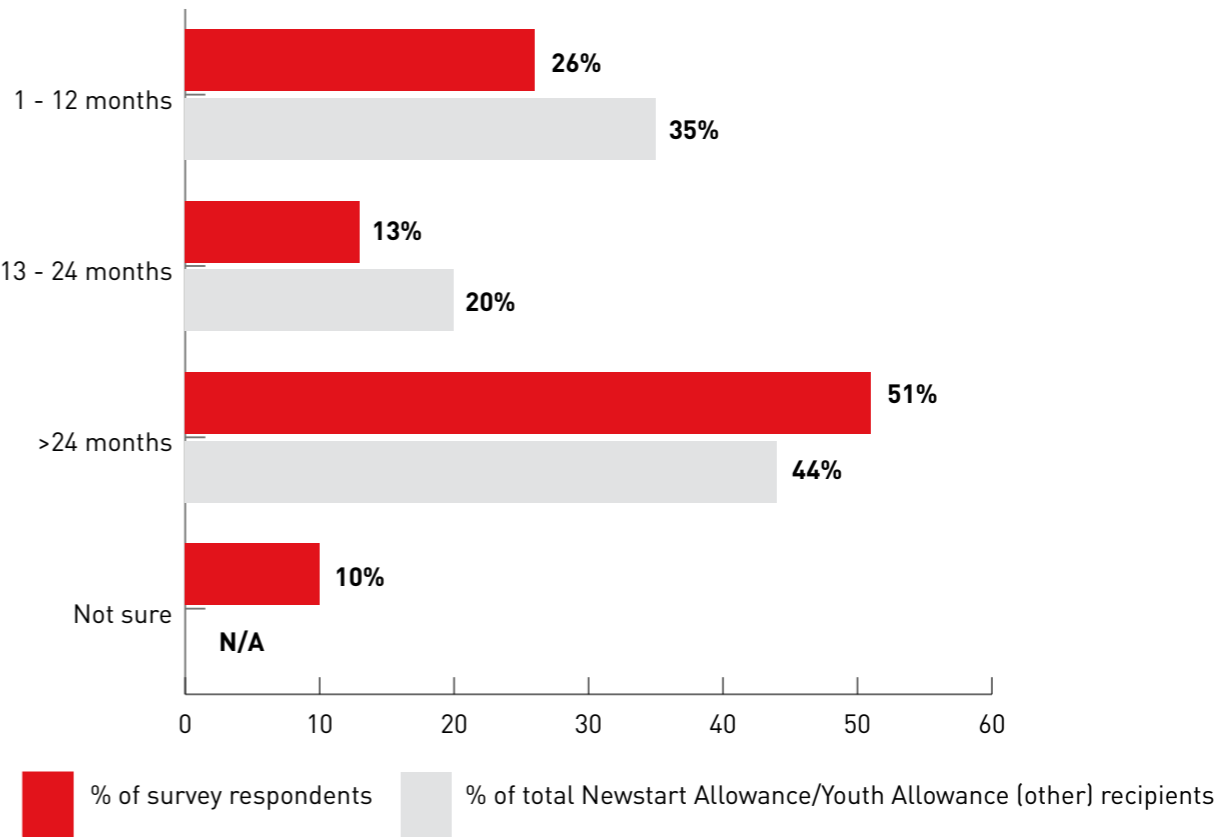
#### Most recent use of jobactive services (n=287, survey question #2)

A slight majority (54%) were currently using jobactive. The remainder were not, but had used a jobactive service within the last three years.



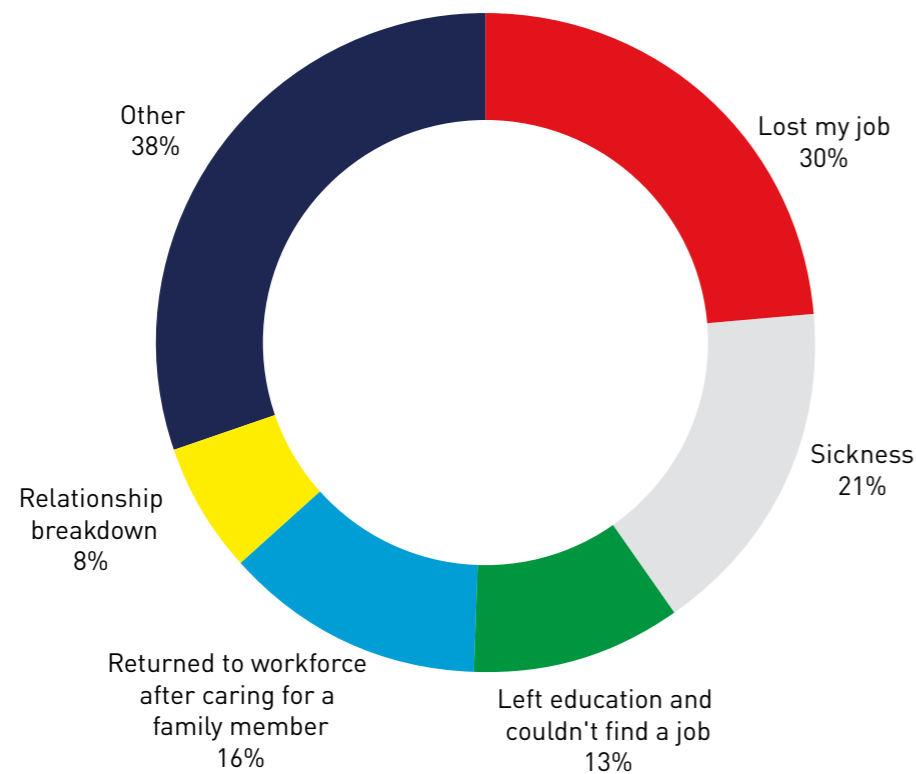
#### Duration of unemployment period (n=287, Question 3)

People unemployed longer-term (over 24 months) were significantly over-represented (51% compared with 44%).



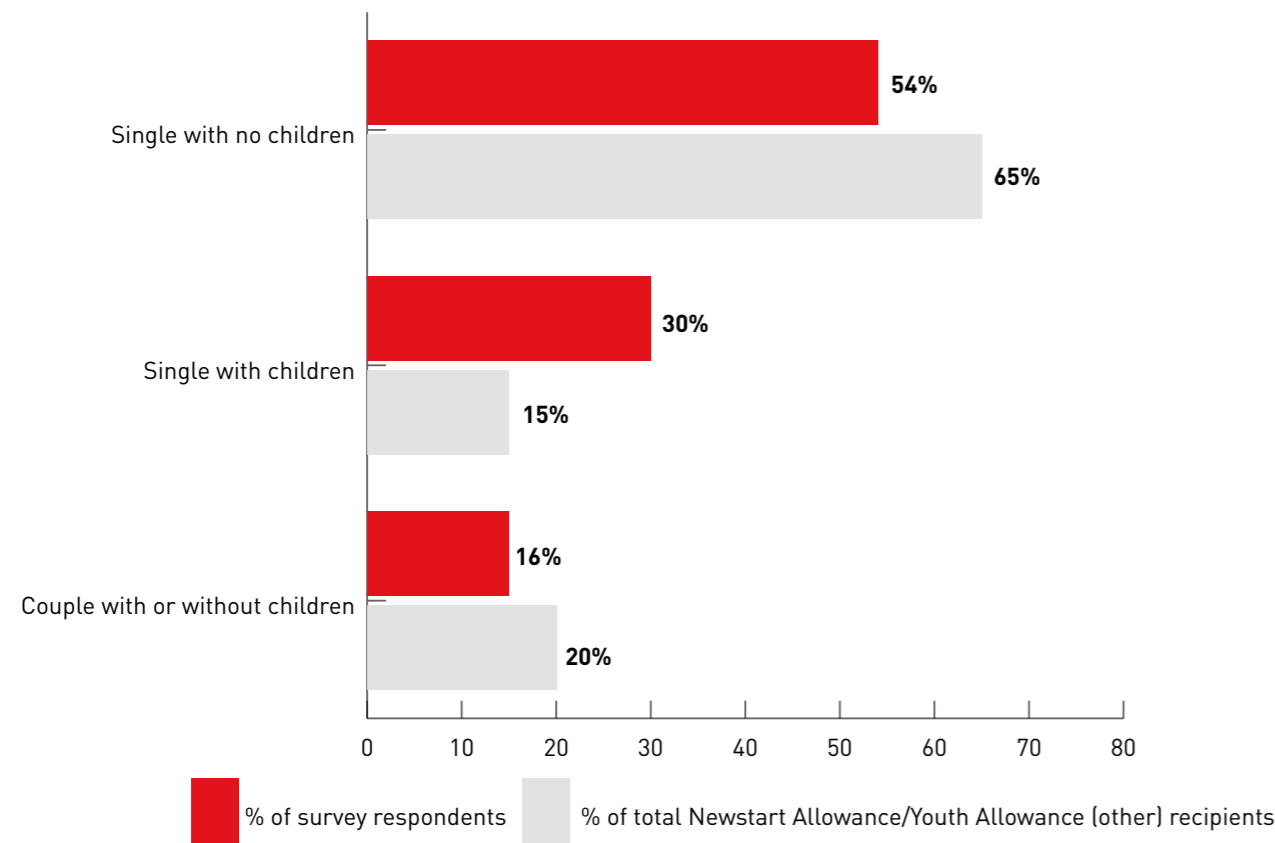
Cause/s of unemployment (n=287, survey question #5)

Consistent with the age of most respondents, the reason for unemployment reported by the largest group (30%) was 'lost my job'.



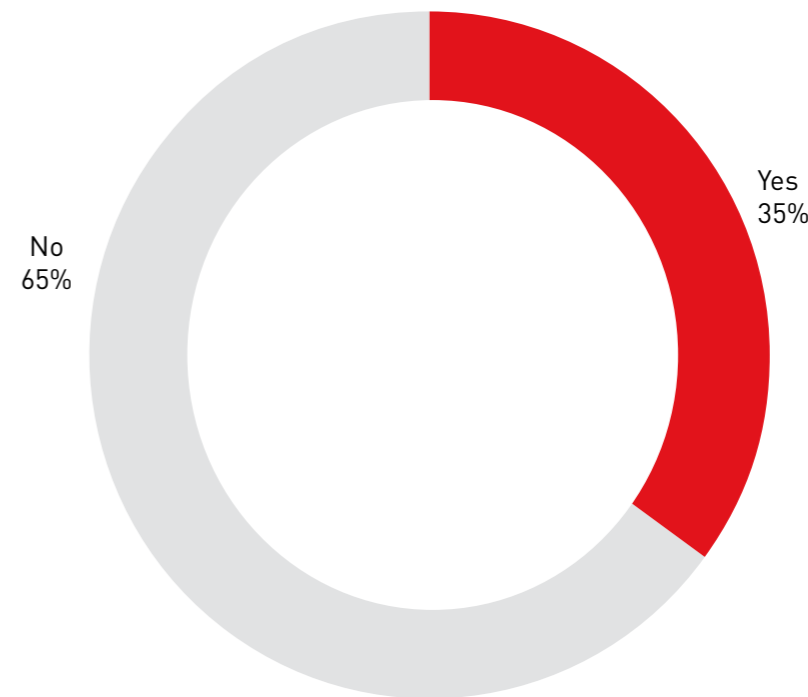
Family situation (n=239, survey question #38)

Sole parents were over-represented (30% compared with 15%) among respondents.



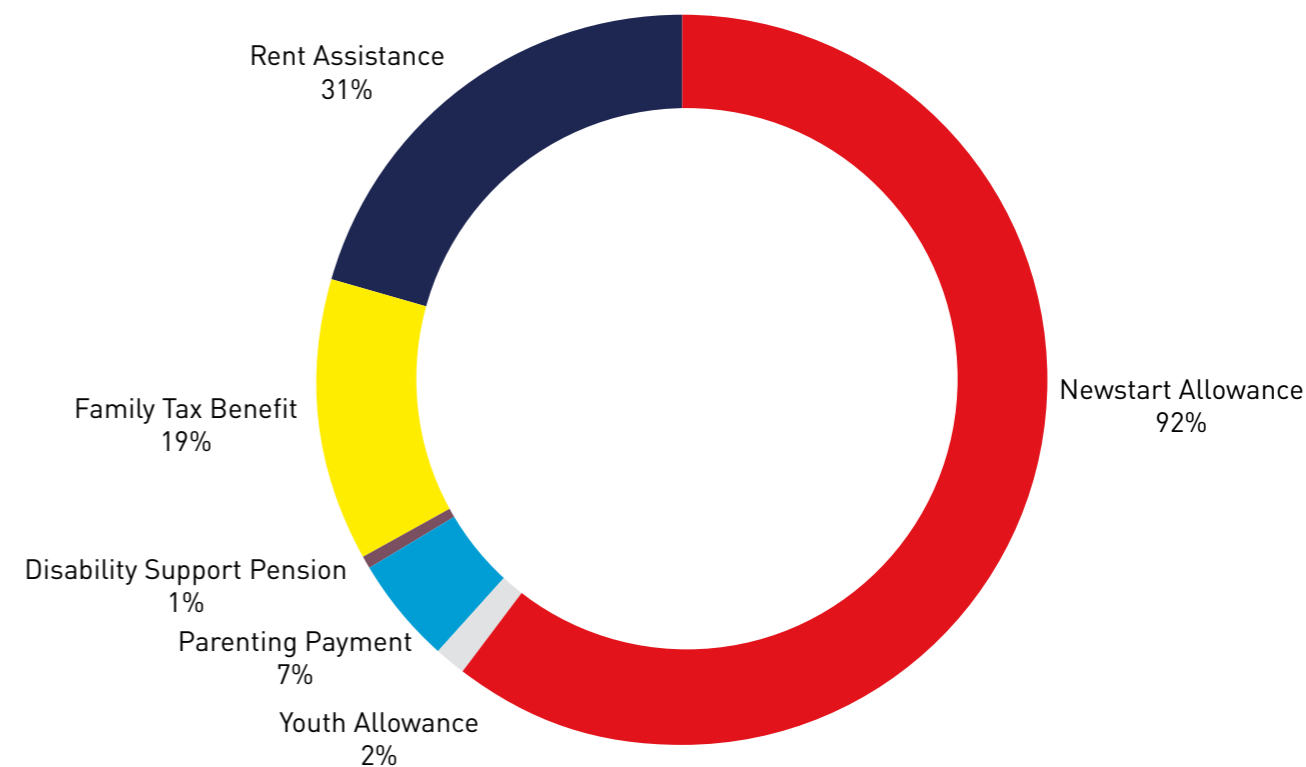
Care for children under the age of 16 or other family members (n=269, survey question #19)

Consistent with the above, 35% of respondents had dependent children.



Social security payments (n=240, survey question #39)

The payment received by the vast majority of respondents (92%) was Newstart Allowance, while (consistent with the age profile of respondents) only 2% received Youth Allowance.



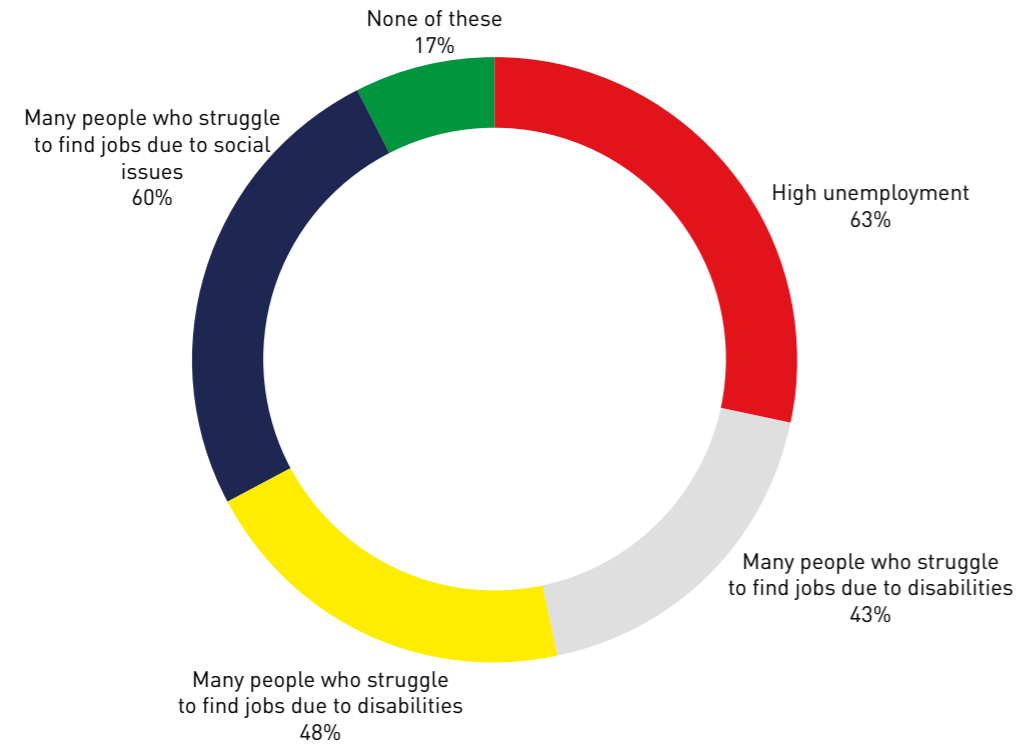
Location (n=205, survey question #35)

People living in Victoria (33% compared with 23%) and South Australia (16% compared with 9%) were over-represented, and a sizeable share of respondents (42%) lived in non-metropolitan areas.

Location	All in survey [%]	All YA(o)/NSA [%]	Metropolitan in survey [%]	Non-metropolitan in survey [%]
ACT	1	1	1	0
NSW	22	27	9	14
NT	0	2	0	0
QLD	15	23	6	9
SA	16	9	12	4
TAS	3	3	2	1
VIC	33	23	20	13
WA	9	12	8	1
Australia	100	100	58	42

Labour market disadvantage in local area (n=260, survey question #27)

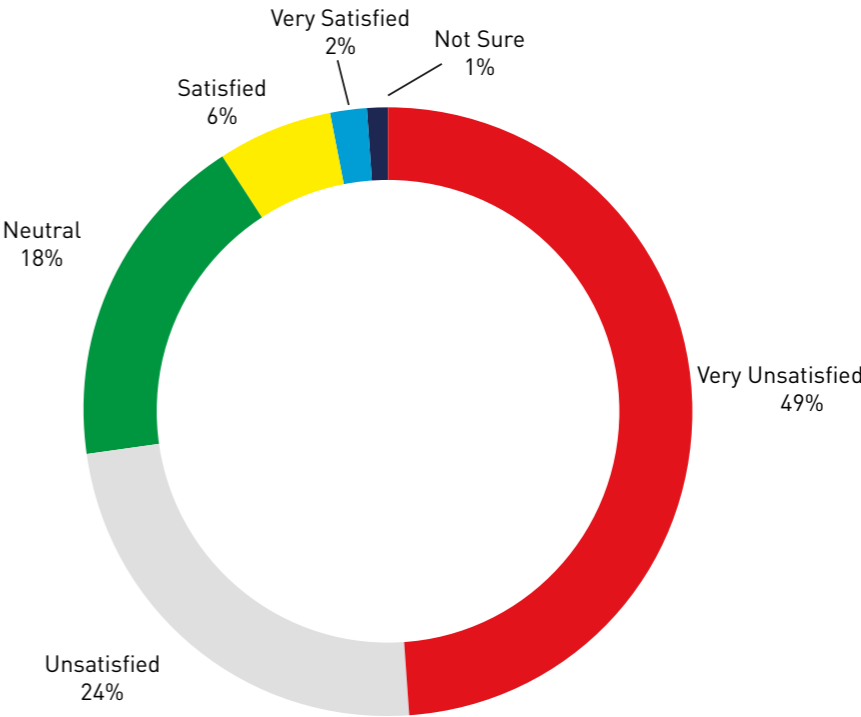
A majority of respondents reported that they lived in an area with high unemployment (67%) or one where ‘people struggled to find jobs due to social issues’ (60%). While these responses are only indicative, they suggest that people living in more disadvantaged regions were over-represented.



4. General experience of jobactive

Respondents were overwhelmingly (73%) dissatisfied with their jobactive service, while just 8% were satisfied. This contrasts with the 57% of respondents to the government’s regular survey of satisfaction with employment services who expressed satisfaction with jobactive.<sup>1</sup> Those who were dissatisfied said they did not receive useful help and/or that the experience of attending interviews with providers was stressful. Their responses to other questions suggested that the provider role in benefit compliance was a major source of anxiety.

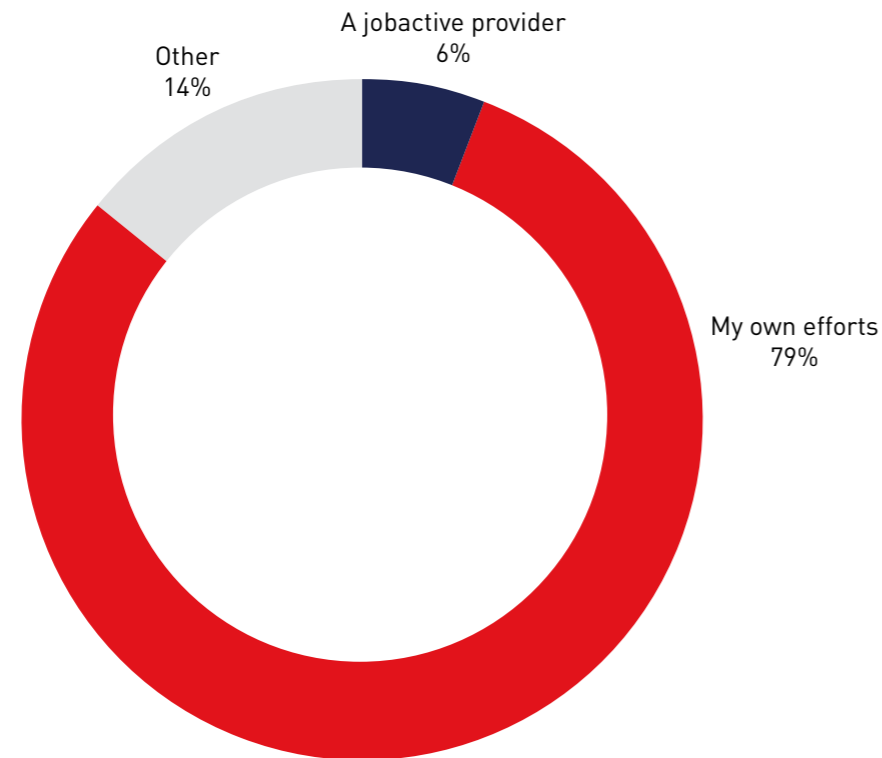
How satisfied are you with the assistance you received from your jobactive provider? (n=281, survey question #12)



Consequently, 79% indicated they would prefer to rely on their own efforts to find employment, compared with 6% who preferred to use jobactive. It does not necessarily follow that, as a general rule, most people would prefer not to use employment services. These responses may change if people held a more favourable view of jobactive.



**If you had a choice, would you prefer to use a jobactive provider or rely on your own efforts to find a job? (n=265, survey question #21)**



### What has it been like using jobactive services? (Survey question #30)



## User experiences

### What it has been like using jobactive services? (Question 30)

- 'Frustrating, humiliating and depressing'  
*Female, 50+, Queensland*
- 'Absolute waste of time'  
*Male, 50+, single with no children, Victoria*
- 'Painful, annoying, waste of time, soul destroying'  
*Female, 25-49, single with children, New South Wales*
- 'It has actually affected my health with stress and anxiety'  
*Female, 50+, couple no children, South Australia*
- 'The first one was very helpful. I'm better off doing most things for myself.'  
*Female, 50+, couple with no children, Victoria*
- 'The balance between holistic genuine interactions and what 'Centrelink Requires' is just not there.'  
*Male, 25-49, single with no children, Queensland*
- 'Sometimes it has made me feel suicidal. I feel depersonalised, and a failure in general. That I don't have the same rights as an employed person.'  
*Female, 50 and over, single with no children, South Australia*
- 'They are pointless, will never help me find work. I'm just slave labour that the government owns, that they lend out to people.'  
*Male, 25-49, single with no children, South Australia*

# 5. Interactions with providers and consultants

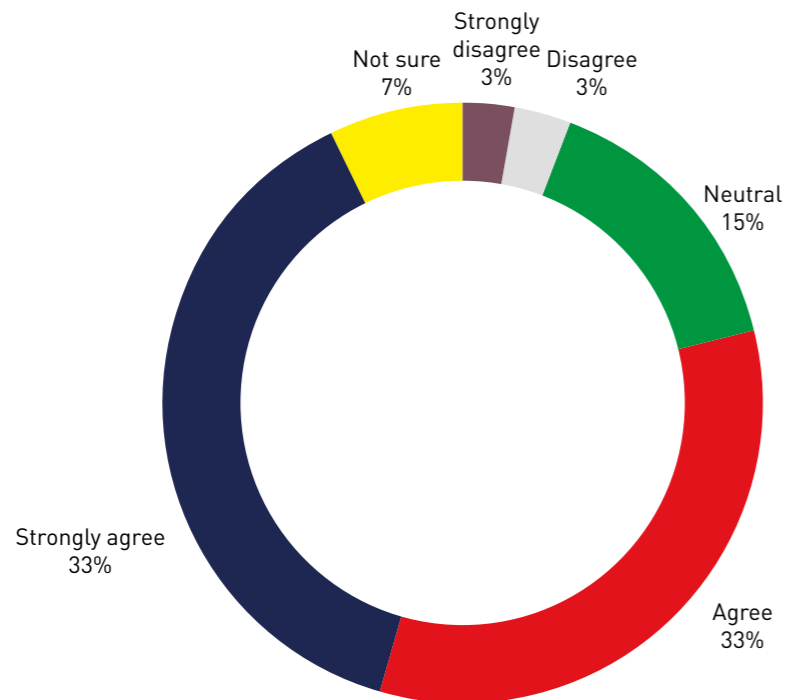
Reflecting their relatively long duration of unemployment, 48% had used more than one jobactive service. This was due to provider turnover (especially after a major tender in 2015) as much as decisions by service users to change providers. Many reported they were not given an opportunity to choose a new provider where their existing one lost its contract.

Have you used more than one jobactive provider in the last three years?  
(n=289, survey question #1)

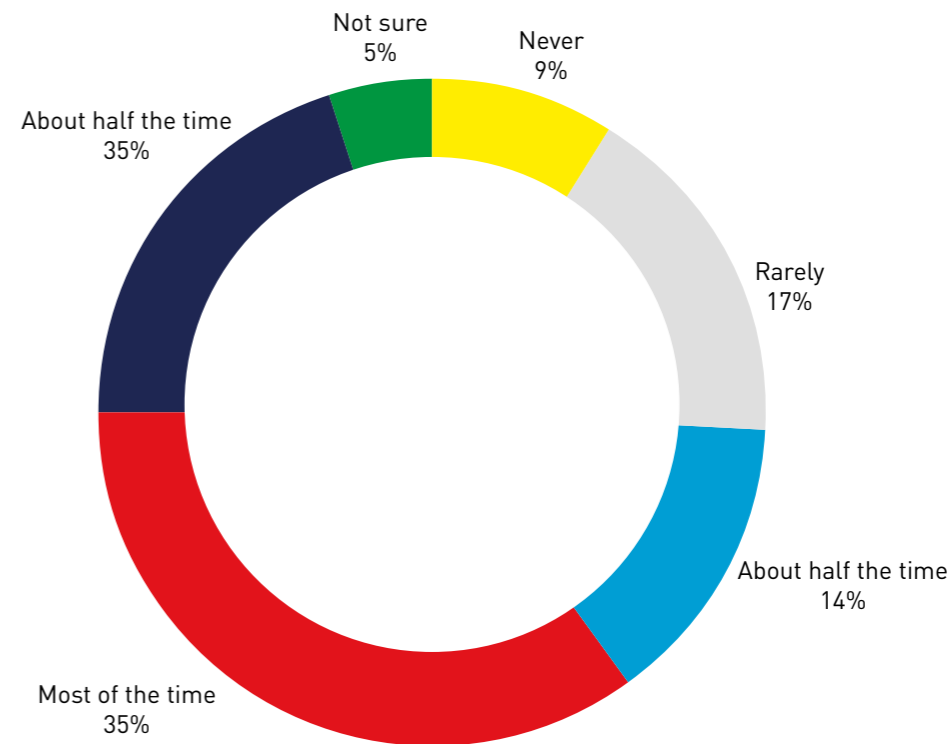


Users overwhelmingly felt (71% compared with 6% who disagreed) that it was important they see the same consultant consistently. This occurred in just over half of all cases (55%), while 14% saw the same consultant 'half of the time' and 26% either 'rarely' or 'never' did so.

It is important for people to see the same jobactive consultant regularly  
(n=266, survey question #23)

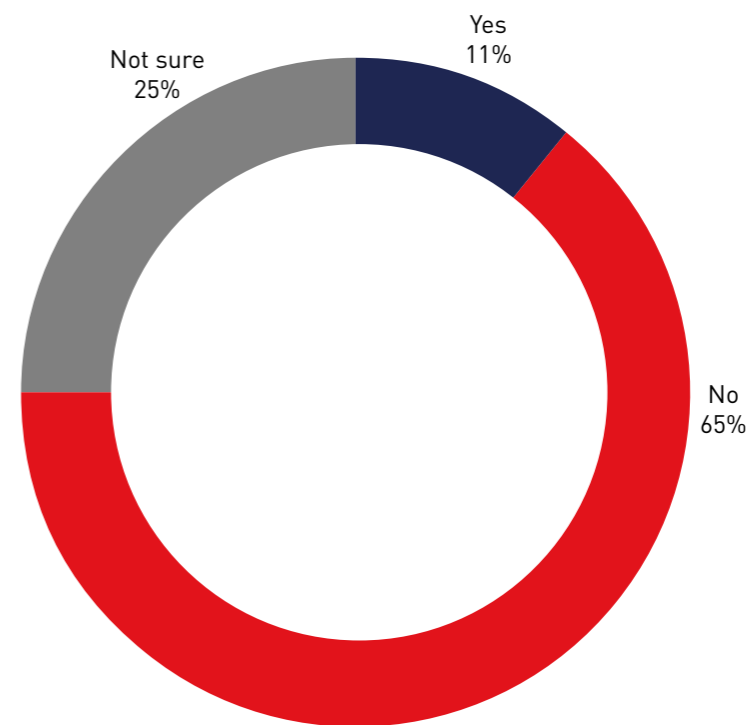


Do you usually see the same jobactive consultant (n=263, survey question #22)

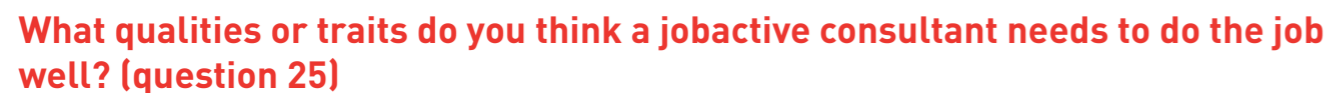


Only 11% considered their (latest) consultant to be well-skilled for the job, while 65% did not. When asked what qualities consultants should have there were three broad responses: empathy (or personal experience of unemployment), relevant professional qualifications, and/or knowledge and connections in the labour market.

Do you think jobactive consultant/s you've dealt with have been well-skilled and suited for the job? (n=260, survey question #26)



**Is/are your jobactive consultant/s supportive and respectful?**  
(n=266, survey question #24)

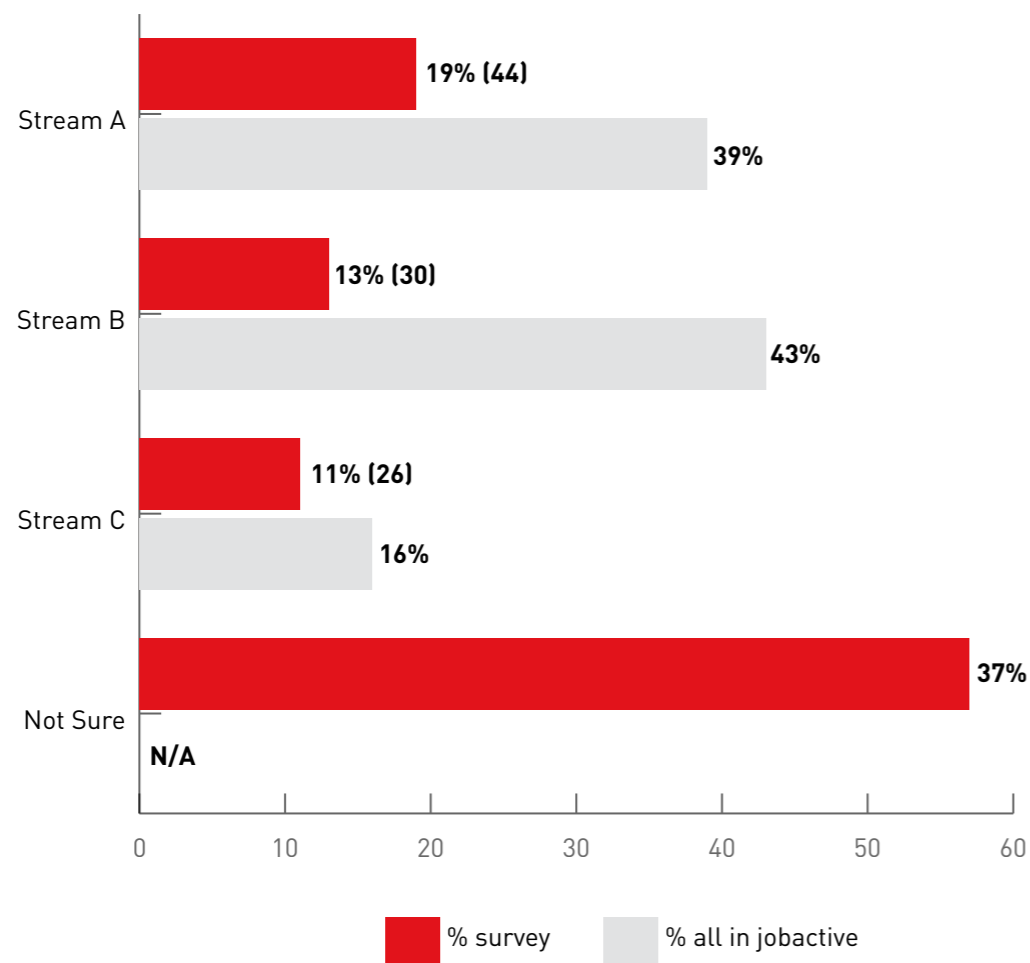


- 'I often felt emotional and frustrated by the service. Changing staff members, lack of knowledge to assist me personally and having to complain to the manager multiple times.' *Female, 25-49, single with children, Victoria*
- 'Nightmare is the best way to describe it. They have been abusive rude and yelling in my face. I have also had to sit and watch them abuse very sick people.' *Female 50+, single with no children, Queensland*
- 'Fairly painless compared to what I've heard from other people. They don't seem to do much but they're always polite and respectful.' *Male, <25, single with no children, Queensland*
- 'While my consultant is always so friendly and casual, he rarely remembers who I am and I find myself having to rehash issues and conversations numerous times. I understand there's a large number of clientele but I think I would benefit from a more personal approach.' *Female, 25-49, single with no children, Queensland*
- 'Disrespectful in that he has never asked me what my profession was, what are my skills and qualifications all he said to me was once you are over 40 you will never get a job. He patronises me e.g. told me I should volunteer to work in a hospital so I can learn about hospitals. I have spent most of my working life in hospitals. How would this be relevant to me? They talk down to you and treat you as though you are stupid and have never worked a day in your life.' *Female, 50+, single with no children, Queensland*
- 'I am spoken to with distrust and distain, I have my payments threatened every time I interact with my job provider. They make it very clear they are not here to help me, but to catch me out on behalf of the government and stop my payments.' *Male, 25-49, single with no children, South Australia*
- 'All the people I have dealt with have been very reasonable.' *Single male 25-49 years, Queensland*
- 'I was asked 'Do you really want a job?' or words to that effect several times, how is that respectful? I meet my mutual obligations by turning up to appointments on time, on several occasions consultants and trainers have not shown up. I have my payment cut off if I miss an appointment, for the consultant or trainer there are no sanctions whatsoever.' *Male, 50+, single with no children, Victoria*
- 'With the crippling anxiety I was experiencing appointments with the provider sent it into overdrive.' *Single female, 26-45, New South Wales.*
- I am pretty sure they aren't given training in mental health awareness or drug and alcohol awareness, *Single female, 25-49 years, Victoria*
- 'They seem to be stretched so thin, I'm sure that individually they're fine at their jobs but due to the sheer volume of people they need to deal with, you'd never know.' *Female, <25, single with no children, Victoria*

# 6. Services and supports

Surprisingly (since most were unemployed for a year or more), a majority of respondents (57%) did not know which jobactive 'stream' they belonged to, even though this has a critical impact on the level of service they received.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that many people were not getting the information they need to navigate the system and exercise choice over the services they received. Of those who identified their service stream, both the least and most disadvantaged streams (Streams A and C) were over-represented.

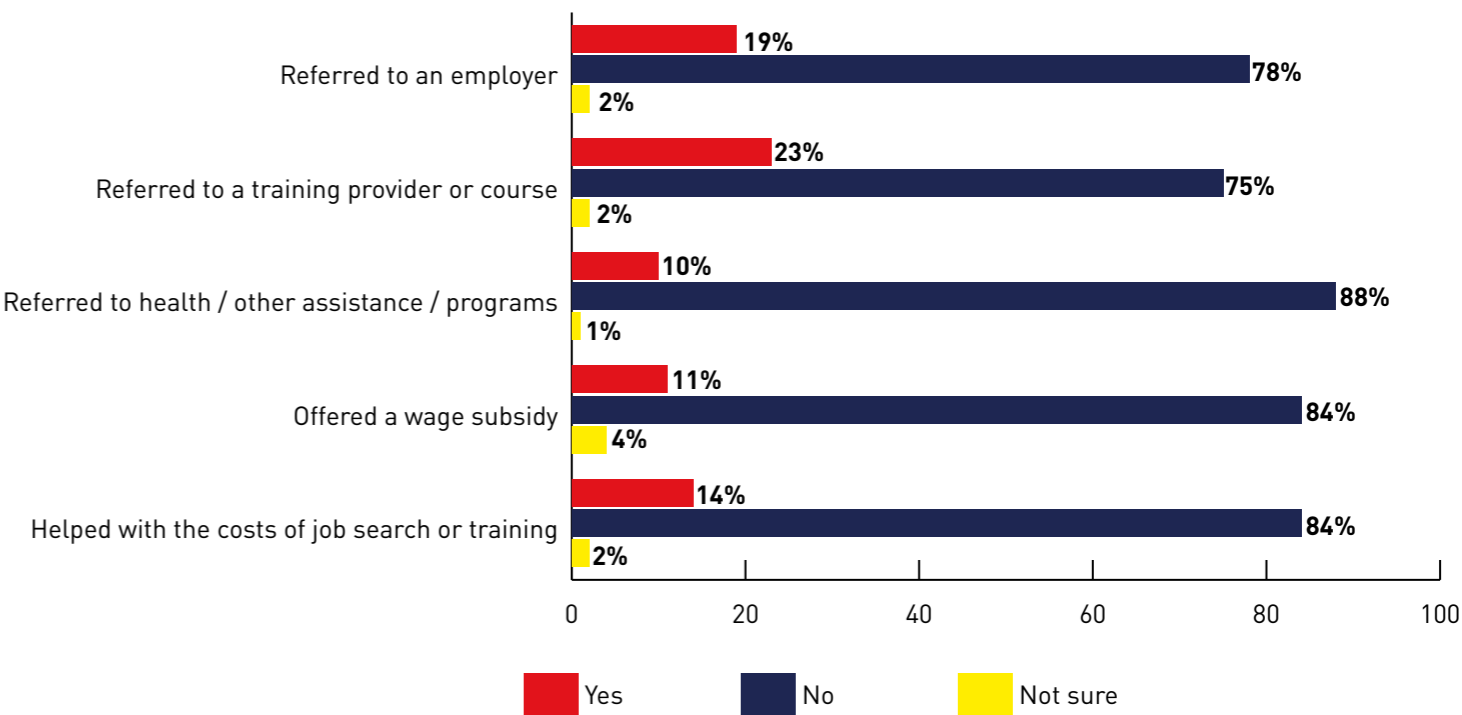
## Do you know what jobactive stream you were placed in? (n=285, survey question #4)



Note: Figures in brackets are percentages of those who were able to identify their stream.

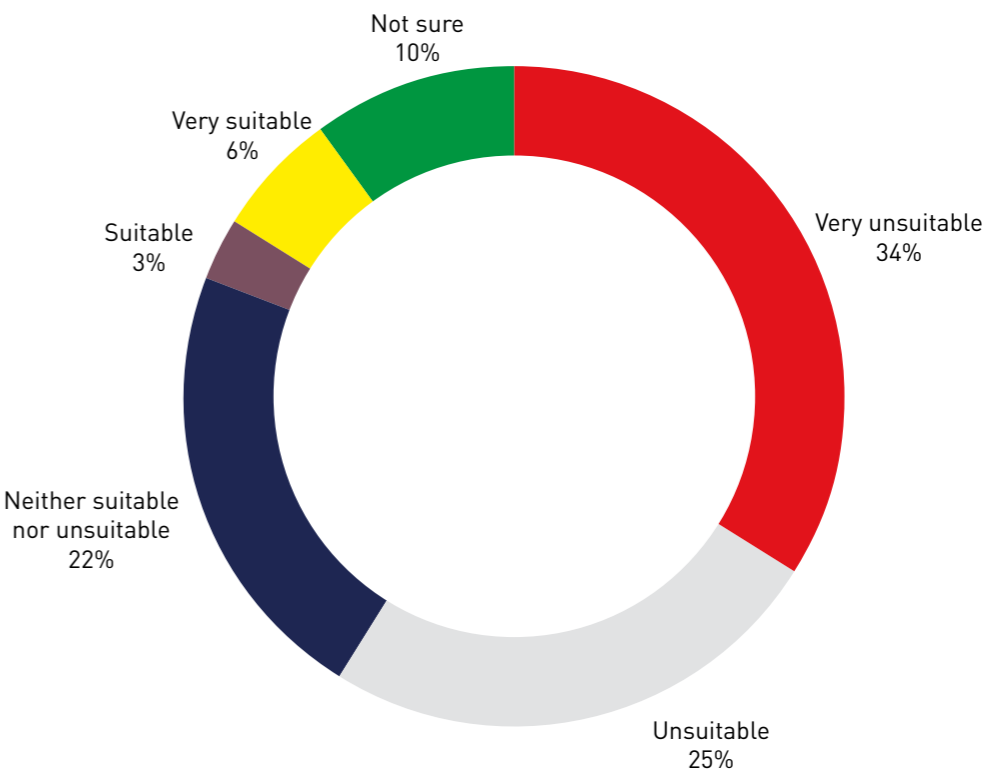
When asked what services people received from their provider, 19% reported a referral to a job, 23% reported referral for training, 14% (not mutually exclusive) received help with the costs of training or job search, 11% reported receiving a job placement with a wage subsidy, and 11% were referred to health or community services. Given that a majority of respondents were unemployed long-term and 56% of those who knew their service stream were in streams B or C, this suggests the services received by people more disadvantaged in the labour market were seriously 'under-powered', with less than one quarter receiving each of these more intensive services.

## Supports offered by jobactive provider (n= 274, survey question #14)



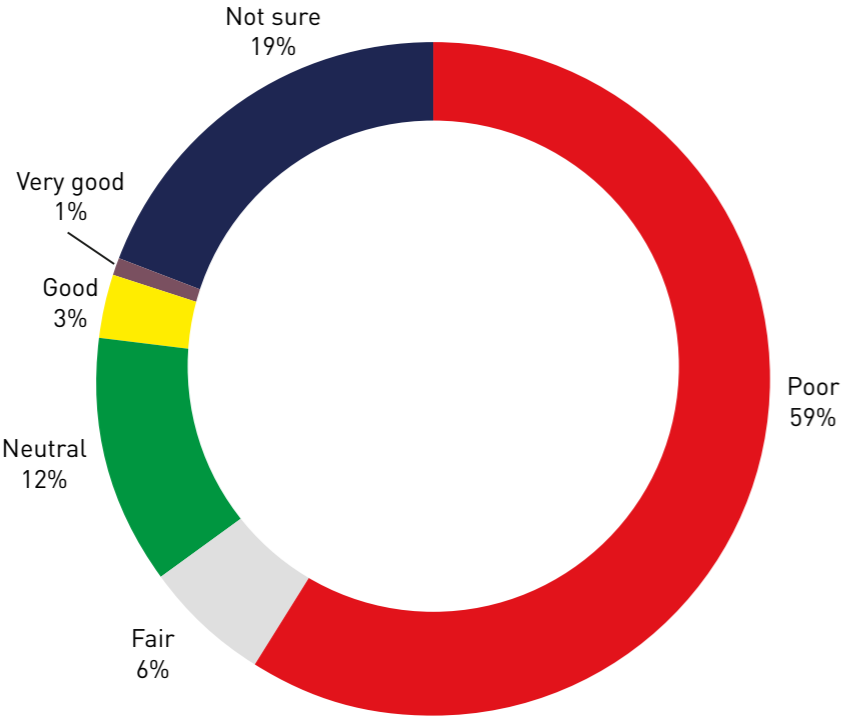
When users with caring roles were asked whether the services they received took adequate account of this, 59% responded in the negative and only 9% responded positively. Examples of failure to account for caring roles included appointments held at inappropriate times (e.g. school holidays), jobs that were too far away or involved night shifts, and a lack of acknowledgement of the extra pressures associated with care for children or adults with special needs. This led to problems with compliance with benefit requirements such as applying for 20 jobs a month (discussed below).

## Parents and carers on whether they were offered assistance suited to their needs (n= 93, survey question #20)



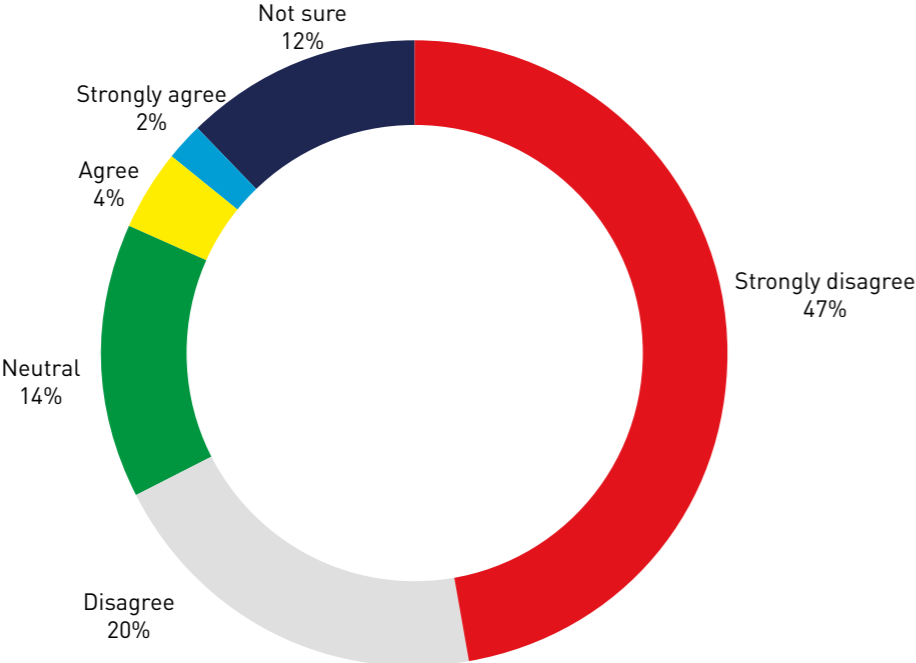
Those who reported that they lived in a region with a high level of unemployment or social disadvantage overwhelmingly believed that the service was not well-tailored to those conditions, with 59% rating the service as poor from this standpoint. In some cases, this may have reflected their own experience of disadvantage and of the service received.

**Effectiveness of provider in assisting people in areas of high disadvantage (n= 215, survey question #28)**



More concretely, respondents overwhelmingly (67%) considered that local jobactive providers did not work with other community or health services to assist people with significant social or other disadvantage obtain employment. Again, this may or may not reflect personal experience so it is possible that providers worked more closely with local community services than indicated by respondents.

**Do jobactive providers in your area work with local community, health or other services to help people with high needs prepare for employment (n= 215, survey question #29)**



**User experiences**

- ‘Sometimes humiliating especially the world of work workshops. They don’t tell you if you are entitled to receive help with travel costs or courses, you have to push to get help.’ *Female, 25-49, single with no children, NSW*
- ‘The job service provider just puts you on the computer to look for work.’ *Male, 25-49, single with no children, NSW*
- ‘It’s a revolving door industry’, *Single male 25-49, NSW.*
- Appointment was lucky if it went for 10 mins. Ticked attendance box, made next appointment. *Single female 50 years +, VIC*
- ‘The government and jobactive providers should not assume that all jobseekers have internet access, latest models of mobile phones for apps etc, plenty of mobile phone credit. I am a single parent, struggling to have credit on my simple/cheapest mobile phone, no internet access or apps on my mobile phone, currently homeless with a teenager, staying in a temporary accommodation.’ *Female, 25-49, single with children, NSW*
- ‘Offered nothing more than what I could do myself through Seek or similar job sites. Staff had no idea of my profession. Would not provide training needed. The training provided was useless.’ *Male, 50+, couple with children, VIC*
- ‘Appointments made early in the morning or close to school finish even though they knew I had a 40min travel time to attend them.’ *Female sole parent, 25-49 years*
- ‘The only work offered was a 4am start 15kms from my home, I had a 11yr old son, and do not drive.’ *Female sole parent, 50+, SA*
- ‘They were totally unequipped to deal with disabled clients, blamed disabled people for not being able to do activities, deliberately avoided notifying clients of appointments, and were generally unprofessional, uncaring and punitive.’ *Male, 25-29, single with no children, SA*
- ‘They need to know and understand all the issues facing job seekers, like getting to transport, phone, and travel times. I live in a Telstra Shadow area. I live 3 kilometres from the nearest Bus Stop and half of that is on an unmade road with only two buses leaving AM. The last at 7.12AM which means I would have to walk in the dark using a torch on a muddy gravel road unless my husband can drive me. There is no bus service that connects to my volunteer position so my husband must take and pick me up each day.’ *Female, 50+, couple with no children, WA*
- ‘I have a tertiary education. I do not need assistance with resume writing or interview techniques which is all that is available.’ *Male, 50+, single with no children, NSW*
- ‘I just get told what to do and threatened with cancelling of payments if I don’t do it! My responsibilities as a sole parent of an 8 year old child do not seem to matter one jot to them! They have actually told me- to my face- that my responsibility to my child comes

second unless I want my payment cut.' *Female, 25-49, single with children, VIC*

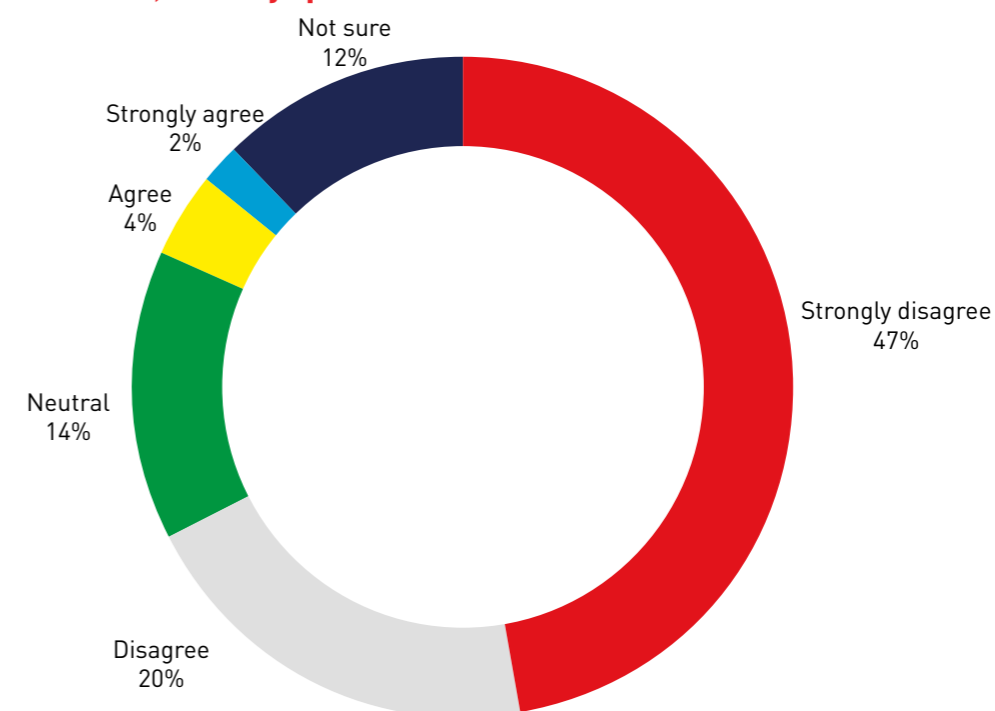
- 'They try to refer me to jobs that are unsuitable as I have 100% sole care of my young child with no childcare options available to me, they book appointments during school holidays despite the fact they aren't meant to and I have to drag my child along to sit in an office for over an hour while they run late only to hand my job search activities to the receptionist 99% of the time cos they are too busy for consultant to see me despite having a booked appointment.' *Female, 25-49, single with children, SA*
- 'I lack motivation so good to have someone on my back supporting and pushing me.' *Female, 25-49, single with children, SA.*
- 'I need assistance to find work. While not great, my current Jobactive provider is helping.' *Male, 50+, single with no children, VIC*
- 'The only thing you are qualified for after Work for the Dole is Work for the Dole.' *Male 50 years+ NSW.*



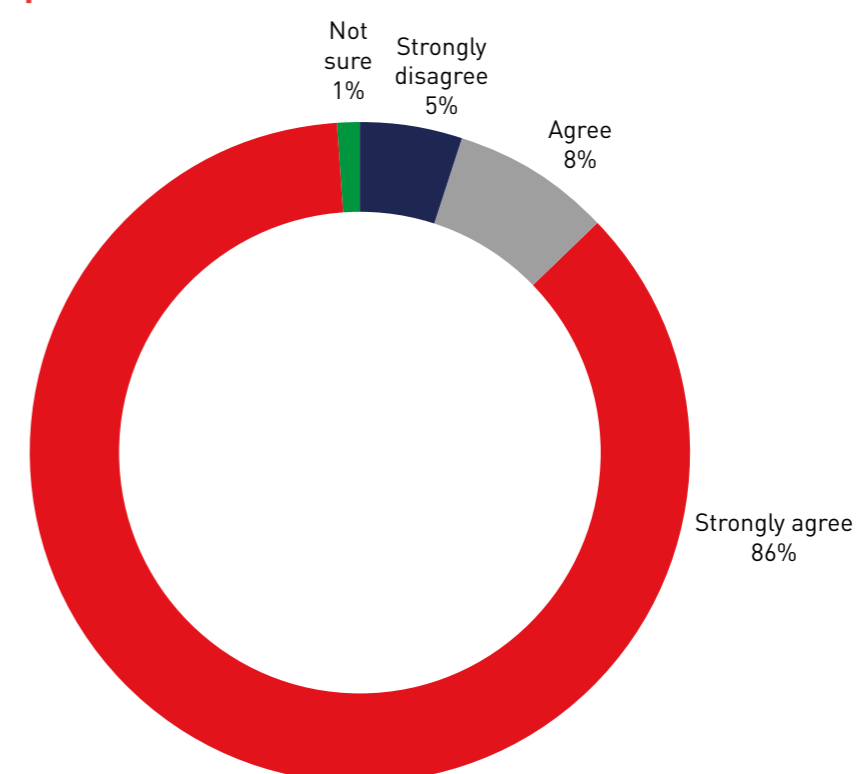
## 7. Choice and control

Overwhelmingly, respondents gave high priority to being able to change their provider (94%) and having a say over their employment plan (90%). Many thought that allowing people to make informed choices would improve service quality.

**People should be able to change jobactive providers if they are not satisfied with the service (n= 282, survey question #8)**

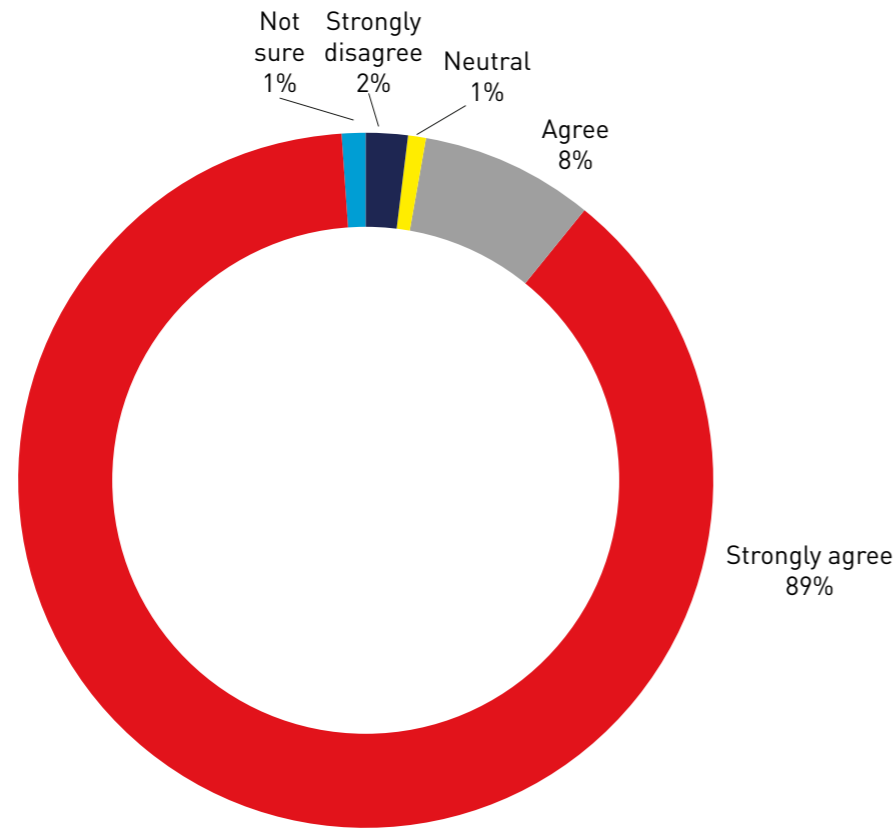


**It is important to have a say over your employment plan (n= 275, survey question #15)**



However, only 33% chose their last provider while the 67% were assigned to a provider by Centrelink. One reason for this conflict between ideal and reality was that only a minority of those who chose a provider (45%) had enough time and information to make an informed choice. Further, many reported that their consultant prepared their employment plan and asked them to sign it with little or no input from them.

**Was the jobactive provider chosen or assigned? (n= 284, survey question #9)**



**When choosing your current (or most recent) jobactive provider, did you have enough time and information to make a well-informed choice? (n= 94, survey question #10)**



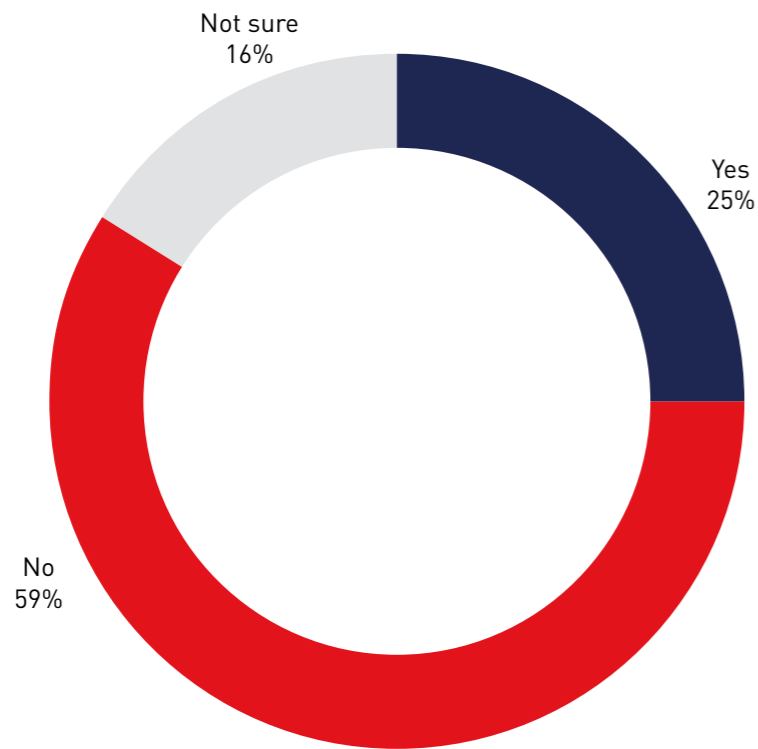
**User experiences**

- 'I relocated to Sydney to increase my prospects of finding employment and basically just went with who I was allocated to which was a disaster, so was able to research providers and transferred but to be honest from the frying pan into the fire. Truly horrendous treatment.' *Female, 50+, single with no children, QLD*
- 'Standards vary widely between providers and competitive pressures would improve quality and hopefully encourage providers to treat clients with respect.' *Male, 25-49, single with no children, NSW*
- 'If any kind of service provider is not providing satisfactory results, nobody would continue with that service provider, so why should you be forced to stay with a jobactive provider that is not providing satisfactory results? An unemployed person doesn't have time or money to waste stuck with a jobactive provider who isn't doing their job!' *Female, 50+, single with no children, SA*
- 'I was expected to pick my provider during a short phone call with Centrelink.' *Female, 25-40, single with no children, NSW*
- 'I had a call from Centrelink they gave me a choice of two. I said I've never heard from either of them, give me more information or let me Google. They said choose one or don't get paid.' *Other, 25-49, single with children*
- 'No I did not choose as I was not given a choice. I wanted out from them within 1 month as I felt them most incompetent. They refused to let me go, and I would have to force my hand, but it seems to me by checking stats on the different providers, so many providers have lousy service judging by their performance stars some averaging 1-2 stars - obviously providing poor service - So how do you get a good job service active provider???' *Female, 50+, single with children, VIC*

# 8. Benefit compliance

Of all respondents, 59% had compulsory activity requirements and 25% were exempted from these.<sup>3</sup>

Are/were you exempted from compulsory activities? (n= 276, survey question #16)

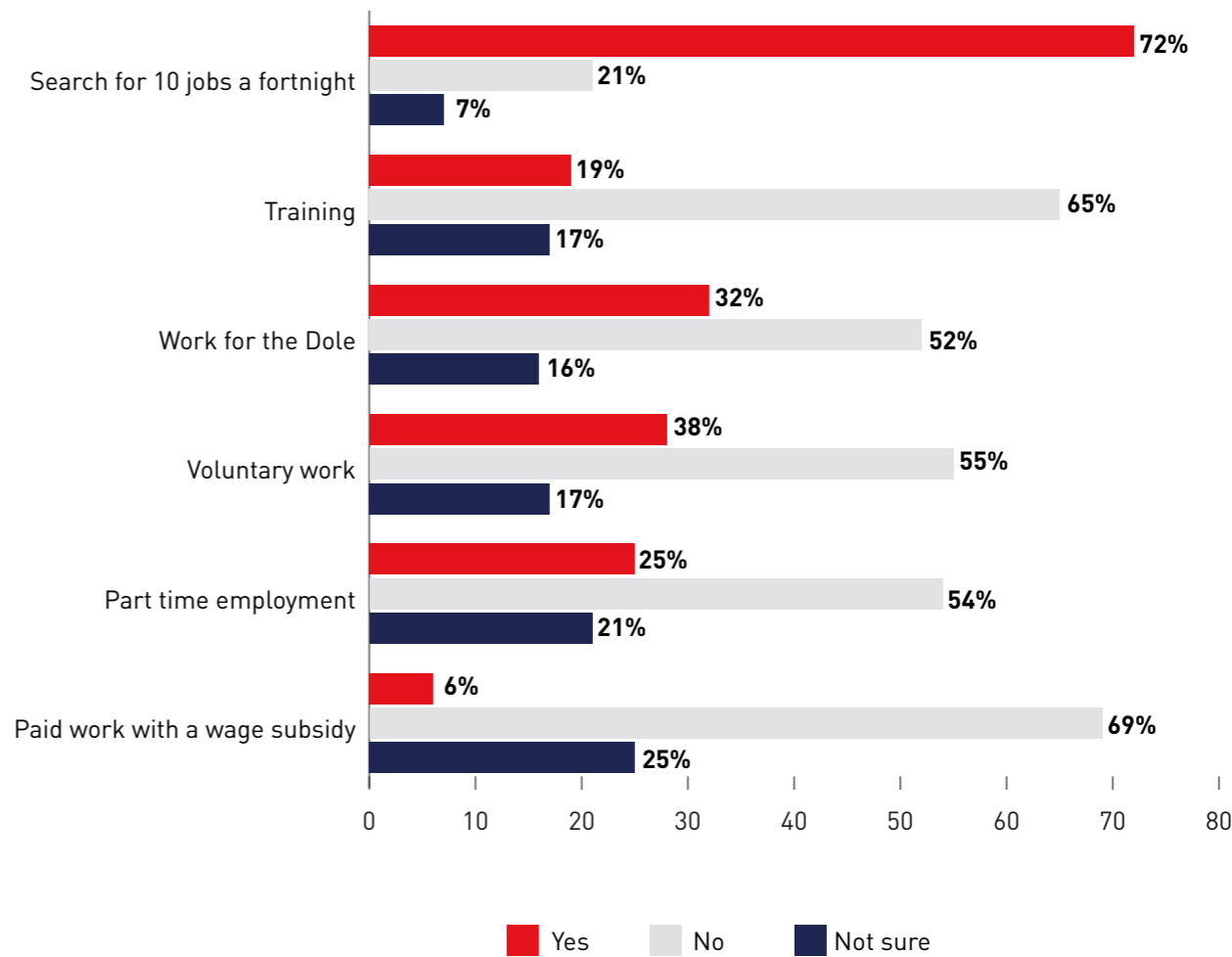


The main Employment Plan requirements reported included applying for 20 jobs a month (72%), Work for the Dole (32%), voluntary work (28%), part-time employment (25%), training (19%) and a subsidised job placement (6%).



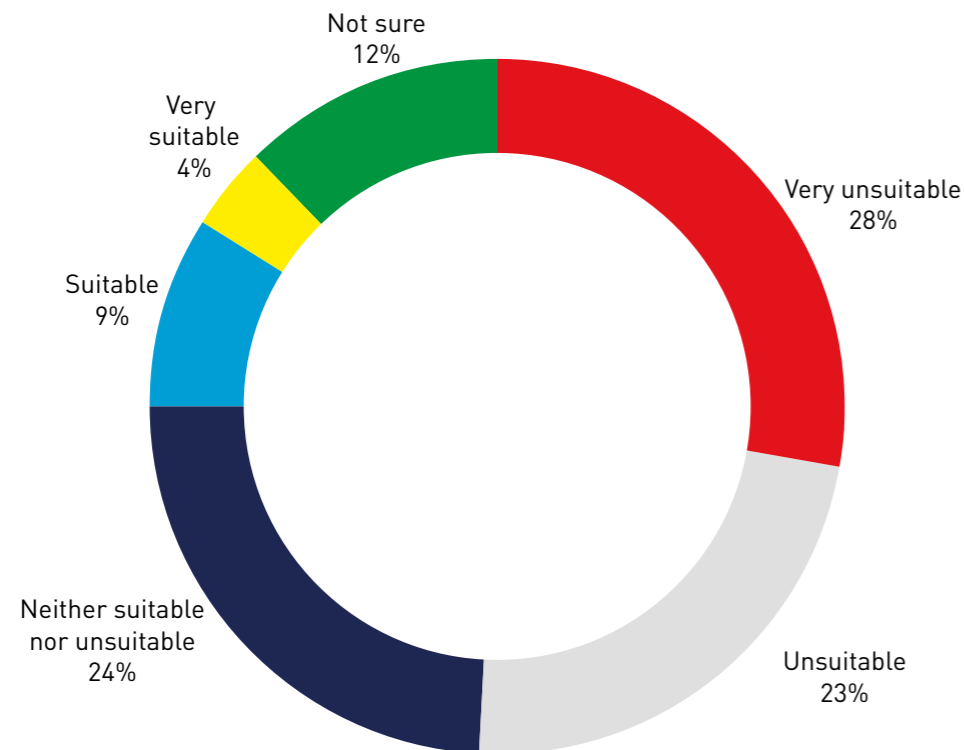
Many people expressed concern that the requirement to apply for 20 jobs a month was rigidly enforced, including in regions where there were few jobs available, or where they were caring for a family member with a serious illness or disability. In regions with high unemployment, this meant that people applied repeatedly to the same employers, which they acknowledged caused inconvenience for employers. There was little awareness of the exemptions available for such reasons as family emergencies.

## Compulsory activities in employment plan (n= 197, survey question #17)



A majority (51%) considered that the requirements in their employment plan were not suited to their circumstances, while 13% reported that they were suitable. The 20 jobs a month requirement and Work for the Dole were widely criticised on these grounds.

### Suitability of compulsory activities in employment plan for own situation (n= 195, survey question #18)



Although the survey did not include specific questions on activity test breaches or benefit sanctions, the fear of losing benefits was a recurring theme. Many people mentioned that they had been breached (they were the subject of participation reports to Centrelink) and considered they had not been fairly treated.

### User experiences

- 'I never know whether I am ok or whether I might be cut off payments. Desperate to maintain person to person contact just in case I get things wrong.' *Female, 50+, single with no children, VIC*
- 'When you have nothing, having a person constantly threaten to take the last little thing you have away from you is hell. I have come close to killing myself on several occasions when I have had payments stopped.' *Male, 25-49, single with no children, SA*
- 'They suspend your payment and give you demerit points for being homeless. They don't class that as a reasonable excuse even though Centrelink do. It makes no sense in them doing this when they are aware of your situation already.' *Male, 25-49, couple with no children, WA*

- 'The services provided me with nothing except elevated levels of stress about attending appointments (which were often scheduled while I was working). At least once I was breached for not attending an appointment for which I was not notified. Again, this required hours of phone calls and emails to correct.' *Female, 25-49, single with children, VIC*
- 'I was repeatedly put with short-term employers who were shonky (i.e. paid cash, didn't pay, unreasonable conditions, dangerous), but if I left I would be suspended.' *Male, 25-49, single with no children, NSW*
- 'Provider stopped my payments after my husband was in hospital having surgery. They did so because I could not submit 20 job applications.' *Female 50 years+, couple no children*
- 'It was not taken into account that I was, at the time, carer for my mother who had breast cancer and my older daughter who has an intellectual disability.' *Single female 50 years +, VIC*
- 'I have a full time casual job but they still ask me to find 10 jobs per month, *Female sole parent, 50 years +, VIC.*
- '10 jobs a fortnight is kind of ridiculous - submitting 10 badly written applications over 2 or 3 well-written and well-presented ones seems to only succeed in inundating employers with poor quality applications.' *Single female, 25-49 years, VIC*
- 'I turn 65 soon and think due to the rampant age discrimination it is very difficult to find 20 jobs a month.' *Single female, 50 years +, QLD*
- 'When I was forced to work for the dole, I did not get a choice as to where! I do volunteer work at Melbourne Museum, but I couldn't do it there... I was forced to do it during school holidays when there was no available childcare- I had to take my 8 year old with me!' *Female, 25-49, single with children, VIC*
- 'My original compulsory activity (and why I am switching to full time study) was for a religiously based charity that was culturally unsuitable, lacked hygienic conditions, and was unheated in an open three walled shed in winter whilst my job agency was aware I was pregnant.' *Female, 25-49, couple with no children*

## 9. What should stay the same?

The main aspects of employment services appreciated by respondents were practical supports such as access to computers, convenient locations, private interview rooms (where available), help with incidental expenses (such as travel and short training courses). People also appreciated referrals to suitable training courses and wage subsidies, though as discussed, these were not often available.

If you ran jobactive, what are three main things you'd keep?



### User experiences

If you ran jobactive, what are three main things you'd keep?

- 'Computers.' *Female, 25-49, single with no children, VIC*
- 'Training to some who need it.' *Female, 50+, couple with children, SA*
- 'Job board, computer access, phone use all remains available and free.' *Female, 25-49, single with no children, VIC*
- 'Private areas for consultations.' *Female, 50+, single with children, VIC*
- 'Location... close to Centrelink, shops and transport' *Female, 50+, single with no children, VIC*
- 'Courses to improve skills/knowledge' *Male, 25-49, single with no children, QLD*
- 'Subsidies for mature aged job seekers' *Male, 50+, single with children, NSW*



# 10. What should change?

The main things respondents wanted changed included a less punitive approach to benefit compliance, better recognition of special needs (including illness, disability and caring roles), more personalised service and interviews, and more help with training and job referrals. A common concern was that providers were motivated by profits rather than improving people’s lives. Many older respondents advocated that the (former) Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) should be restored.

## If you ran jobactive, what are three main things you’d change?



## User experiences

### If you ran jobactive, what are three main things you’d change?

- ‘They need to understand that I am unwell 63 years old and not yet pension age. Not reliable for volunteering. There should be something other than Newstart for people in my predicament.’ *Female, 50+, single with no children*
- ‘Awareness of chronic and mental illness. The caseworker my jobactive provider assigned to me did not believe that I suffered from an anxiety disorder until I had two anxiety attacks on their premises.’ *Female, 25-29, single with no children, NSW*
- ‘Limited time to 10 mins, no privacy ie. appointment was not done in office where others couldn’t hear. Were done at front reception and standing. It was tick the boxes so the provider gets paid, nothing done to assist me.’ *Female, 50+, single with no children, VIC*
- ‘A realistic expectation based off my current health issues and medical needs. While simultaneously undergoing multiple procedures in hospital and dealing with chronic pain from a fall/back injury during contracted activities for which there is no WorkCover, no accountability or apology, and yet after 30 months of suffering and multiple medical certificates for the same condition, I require “new” medical evidence to gain an exemption from activities, yet luckily my new provider/employment consultant understands my limitations and inability to work, so without DSP my activities are fulfilled through continuing medical care and treatment.’ *Male, 25-49, couple with no children, VIC.*
- ‘I would like to see job service providers resource jobseekers assist in a holistic way by assessing what is preventing jobseekers from finding work, and engaging them with other activities that will motivate and edify their experiences, re-engage with the community and boost mental health and skills. I have been employed a few times out of applications job network made on my behalf, but those jobs disappear when the subsidy runs out. I have been recommended to great courses, but the encouragement peters out according to government policy, and being forced out of a course when you have it half done is devastating. So I would like to see these providers developing customised plans and supporting clients through their unemployment experience.’ *Female, 50+, single with children, VIC*
- ‘Scrap it and revert back to the CES. Just because the government outsources its responsibilities it won’t hide its failures. The jobactive providers contract is one of them.’ *Male, 25-49, single with no children, QLD*
- ‘The system needs to be less punitive and more helpful. At the moment, the system is a bureaucratic nightmare of red tape and compliance. So much money is being wasted on jobactive employees whose sole purpose is to tick boxes, when what is really needed is individualised specialist support. For example, financial counsellors, social workers, and other support workers that address the needs and/or barriers faced by each individual to help them find work. This one-sized-fits-all approach is not working!’ *Female, 25-49, single with children, VIC*
- ‘Stop giving them the power to dictate penalties and override our basic rights as humans.’ *Male, 50+, single with no children, SA*



# APPENDIX A: Personal Stories

Linda<sup>4</sup>, married with children, SA

## Background information

Gender:	Female
Age:	50 or over
Family status:	Couple, children
Duration of unemployment:	Over 24 months
State/Territory:	SA
Last time in jobactive:	1-3 years ago
Jobactive stream <sup>5</sup> :	B

## 1. General experience of unemployment and jobactive

I was lucky, qualified as a nurse, then ran a child care centre so I had strong skills and employment history.

Then I spent a number of years as a stay-at-home mum, so lacked a recent history of paid work. I re-entered the workforce after my husband lost his job and our family business (a café) didn't work out, and found myself unemployed in my late 40s.

I was '2nd best candidate' for jobs on many occasions. There aren't many jobs in the country town where I live.

The Newstart payment is ridiculous, we couldn't live on it.

Our finances went downhill. We'd paid off the home but took out a loan for the café and fell behind in mortgage payments. My husband had to withdraw from his super three times. On one of those occasions, the local Council would have forced us to sell our home if we hadn't pay three years of overdue rates (\$6700). We survived off credit cards and support from our daughter.

Eventually I found paid work where I was volunteering, teaching people IT skills. I teach unemployed people and seniors. I love doing it. My husband had to take up a job interstate so I haven't seen him for six months, but at least our finances are improving.

## 2. How much do you value choice and control (and did you get this?)

I've used two different providers out of around three in this area.

I had to change providers after the first one lost their contract. Centrelink didn't ask me to choose, they just assigned me a new provider. They just put us wherever, my husband and I with separate providers.

In a way whether I had a choice didn't matter because I didn't know much about the options at the time. But once you know, you do want to decide. I had problems with the second provider, but decided to stay with them when the boss there made amends.

## 3. What were the main services you needed to secure a job (and did you get them?)

It's important for people like me that they assess your skills when you get there. Where you have transferable skills that could land you a job, employment services should help you assess and consolidate them, and give you guidance on your skills gap and career opportunities.

My first provider suggested I do a business course focussing on IT at TAFE. I wouldn't have taken it otherwise. The consultant was very good at working out what I needed and guiding me to it, but I think it depends a lot on the consultant you get.

I was glad I did the TAFE course (Certificate 2 in business studies, which was free in those days). It helped me updating skills, and that's how I got the job I have now.

While at TAFE volunteers visited the class wanting someone to teach people to use ipads, and I volunteered there for four years where I was given the opportunity to gain a Certificate 4 in training and assessment, and eventually got paid work as a trainer at a community centre. That's what I do now. Jobactive never mentioned anything like that. I wasn't offered formal career counselling at any stage, nor did I receive any financial help with vocational training.

Aside from career guidance, a self-service arrangement would have worked better for me. Employment services probably do help the people who needed it more; but I'm not sure I needed the service. They can't put us all in the same box.

## 4. How were you treated by consultants – and did consultants have the skills and time needed to provide the service?

Most of the consultants were pretty nice to me. That's how it is in a town where we all know one another.

But your treatment does depend on 'who you are' in the community, where you come from in life. Some people don't do the right thing, but they need to take into account people's backgrounds and circumstances. People are vulnerable when they're unemployed, so how they are treated personally matters a lot. Most people really value employment: my husband cried when he found his friend (who had also been unemployed) a job.

I've heard of consultants telling people: 'You won't get a job, you're too fat, or too old'.

I've been treated without respect by some consultants myself, and by Centrelink. Some consultants are on a power trip, and they have too much power over unemployed people. Once I didn't bring in payslips from a job, as requested by my provider. The consultant was abusive, telling me 'I told you to bring them'. I later found out this wasn't something unemployed people were required to do.

My worst experience with a consultant and Centrelink was three years ago when I had to drive 600km to Adelaide to pick up my adult daughter, who was suicidal at that time, and bring her home to provide the support she needed. I think I searched for 12 jobs that month instead of 20 jobs. The consultant reported me to Centrelink, even though I told him I had a family crisis but he didn't care.

Centrelink then threatened to cut my payments, and I spoke on the phone with a woman from Centrelink in Adelaide to try and keep my payments. I was reluctant to explain my daughter's circumstances at first, and when I did I became tearful. She implied I was over-acting, and made a disparaging remark about my lack of 'emotional intelligence'. In the end she said: 'I do believe you.' but still imposed a penalty. I complained about this treatment to Centrelink but nothing came of it.

They should give people some leeway in terms of benefit requirements when we face a family crisis like this [interviewer explained people can be exempted from activity requirements temporarily for exactly this kind of reason, but she was not told about this].

I then visited Centrelink in town, and they were lovely, because they know me as a person in the community. They restored my payment straight away.

In services assisting unemployed people, an empathetic, caring approach is essential: don't be rude, be nice!

5. Were activity requirements reasonable and relevant – and were they fairly administered?

The 20 jobs requirement was a ridiculous waste of time. I never got a job in that way. If they trusted me to get a job and left me to do it, I could. A rule like this doesn't work in a town like this: you're just going over the same jobs over and over. [Interviewer explained jobactive providers have discretion to reduce the 20 jobs requirements in areas where unemployment is high. She was unaware of this and said: I don't think they know what they're doing.]

People look for jobs in different ways. I've always been shy, so searching online suits me better: I don't like confronting people with a resume. My husband is the opposite: he goes out and charms the employers.

For me, volunteering was a good way to get a job, but I wasn't happy when my provider wrote voluntary work into my Employment Plan as a compulsory activity. I was volunteering because I wanted to not because it was something the employment provider made me do and when I first volunteered I wasn't on a Centrelink payment, you love it you really want to go there, and it can open up opportunities. But it's wrong to make it compulsory as it is under Work for the Dole. Jobs like writing numbers in front of houses should be properly paid: that's a job.

6. Comments and ideas for reform

Raising it (Newstart Allowance), that's the most important thing to do.

For people like me, a self-service arrangement like the old Job Boards at the CES could work. Others who haven't had the advantages in life I've had do need face to face help. That will only work when people make a conscious decision to better themselves, but that's more likely to happen if people are treated with empathy and respect. At the moment your treatment depends on who you are in the community, and it shouldn't.

I think one of main roles of employment services should be to find employment for people. But I heard other unemployed people were told: 'we're not here to get jobs for people, we're here to help you find one yourself.'

One challenge for employment services in regions like ours is the few jobs are available, and many of them are seasonal – 3-6 months a year.

There would be more jobs in the community if funding for essential services was extended by governments, where there's a need. IT training is one example: the community organisation where I had my first volunteer teaching job lost its funding, and I had to move to a similar job in another community organisation.

Ken<sup>6</sup>, single, Tas

Background information

Gender:	Male
Age:	37
Family status:	Single
Duration of unemployment:	Currently unemployed, on and off for about 4 years
State/Territory:	TAS
Last time in jobactive:	Current
Jobactive stream:	Stream C

1. General experience of unemployment and jobactive

Pretty miserable. Not really where you want to be. Not a positive experience. Talking about both unemployment and jobactive. Probably jobactive more. Too focussed on being punitive, all just about box ticking. One size fits all doesn't address the barriers you are facing. More focussed on compliance. They don't listen to you, they don't take into account your circumstances. You go in there once a month and fill out a job plan, and that's it.

When I was couch surfing I had problems attending work for the dole because I was moving every couple of days. They suspended my payment and I had to get it reinstated. The jobactive provider was over zealous. No way of disputing that or fighting it with them, I had to make contact with Centrelink to get it reinstated.

2. How much do you value choice and control (and did you get this?)

Choice and control doesn't exist. You have very little control over what happens. I wish that I had choice and control over training, or a work placement, some control over what I did as part of my plan. When you are first unemployed you are allocated a provider, and you have the capacity to change, depending on how long you have been engaged with them and what stream you are in. I think it would be better if you could change providers more often.

3. What were the main services you needed to secure a job (and did they get them?)

Pre vocational training, careers counselling, a work trial: I didn't get any of these.

4. How were you treated by consultants – and did consultants have the skills and time needed to provide the service?

Consultants are very indifferent towards you. They are not interested in helping, they are just interested in ticking boxes and getting you out the door. Probably because they don't have the time to give a good service. Their attitude is focussed on getting the pay cheque and they don't look beyond the stereotype of the dole bludger. They are there to play policeman.

High turnover of staff is also a major problem. I have to rehash my story over and over again. The new staff don't seem to have a great knowledge of the technical side of things. They just suspend your payment, they don't have an understanding of reasonable excuses.

It would be good if they had a better understanding of the industries in the local area. The main problem is it is too much of a cookie cutter approach, they all operate in the same way.

5. Were activity requirements reasonable and relevant – and were they fairly administered?

The case management phase is not overly unreasonable, but the number of job searches was unreasonable when I was couch surfing. The number of appointments per month is OK. The number of job searches is probably something they need to look at.

Work for the Dole was a waste of time. It was never going to lead to anything.

I was referred to a state government program: a Cert. III in Community Services through a private RTO. Wasn't much help – if you go to an employer, you need experience, not just a qualification.

I told the case manager I couldn't attend an appointment because I was couch surfing, and they suspended my payment. I had to go to Centrelink to get it reinstated. Very tedious.

6. Three main things you'd keep

There is nothing good about the jobactive system. I can honestly say I cannot find one thing that acts as it should. I can't really think of any positives.

7. Three main things you'd change

Compliance regime – too overzealous, too punitive. I get that there needs to be some form of compliance, but it should be the option of last resort, not first resort. They need to take their foot off the accelerator a bit and back off.

System needs to be more personalised and tailored to your individual circumstances. Shouldn't be one size fits all. Doesn't currently recognise individual circumstance.

Needs to be more support available if you need it – housing, disability etc. If you have multiple things going on in your life, you need support from day one.

Siobhan<sup>7</sup>, single, Vic

Background information

Gender:	Female
Age:	Not given
Family status:	Single parent
Duration of unemployment:	Over 12 months
State/Territory:	VIC
Last time in jobactive:	8-12 months ago
Jobactive stream:	A

1. General experience of unemployment and jobactive

More burdensome than helpful.

Being without paid work was very, very hard. I've definitely struggled. Very isolating – I lost touch with friends because I couldn't afford to do anything other than pay my rent. It was a very difficult time.

I'd often cry after I left jobactive appointments. Put me down rather than uplifted me. Just the whole atmosphere of appointments.

2. How much do you value choice and control (and did you get this?)

I was allocated who I would be with. There was pretty much no choice at all.

I did feel like I had control only because I am a very assertive person and I knew the system. I wasn't angry but had to be overly assertive.

I had to often stand my ground. Would go home and email them after. This happened several times.

I didn't change providers. Didn't want to - didn't really know the alternatives – better the devil you know.

3. What were the main services you needed to secure a job (and did they get them?)

Really all I needed was there to be jobs available. During that period there were absolutely no jobs available in the area.

Did think about seeking work in Melbourne. Inquired about help with travel costs to go to Melbourne for an interview, but there was a lag in time between getting financial assistance from the job agency for the travel to the interview. Did not have money upfront to cover that cost so couldn't do it. Didn't get anything in Melbourne.

4. How were you treated by consultants – and did consultants have the skills and time needed to provide the service?

In the beginning, they were very matter of fact. But once they started to get to know me they were a lot nicer. Obviously because I was a complainer (I put in a few complaints).

There was a different person every time I went there throughout. It was like I never saw the same person twice. I understand it is a challenging role. There was a high turnover at the agency.

Consultants did not have the skills or time. I told them the legislated rules and guidelines. I knew more than they did. I researched the system when the changes came into effect.

Appointments were generally very quick - in and out - but I was happy with that because there wasn't a lot that they could do for me.

The one thing they did do was provide a subsidy for my employer, which helped me find paid work.

I'd get out of work and get the Centrelink exemption and then have to go back.

While I was working 30 hours a fortnight, appointments started again. Agency blamed Centrelink and Centrelink blamed them. That was probably one of the biggest issues: no one is really accountable.

High turnover of staff is also a major problem. I have to rehash my story over and over again. The new staff don't seem to have a great knowledge of the technical side of things. They just suspend your payment, they don't have an understanding of reasonable excuses.



5. Were activity requirements reasonable and relevant – and were they fairly administered?

When I was working, it was very easy for them.

When I was out of work, they were looking for something for me to do. They said to me that there was no position for eight hours. They were all 15 hours.

Early on in the program, they mentioned getting me to photocopy stuff at their office but then they realised that they weren't allowed to do that.

Found paid work and then did not need to worry about the eight hour requirement.

Once I had an appointment and the girl that was meant to do it couldn't do it and called to let me know that someone else would do it. He then called and had to cancel. That night (after 5PM) I got a text message that my payment was suspended. I called the next day and it was sorted.

6. Three main things you'd keep

Wage subsidies.

7. Three main things you'd change

The staff should be of assistance, rather than be there to monitor or be punitive.

A more relaxed atmosphere would help some people speak with their employment provider with ease. It was a very uptight, 'we're going to breach you' attitude.

For example, at one point there was about 20 of us in the room and they had one day to get everyone's job plans in place. He [the manager] stood there and said: 'If you don't sign off on your job plans today, you'll be cut off'. I stood up and said: 'Actually if you don't get them done today, your payments will be cut'. Just the way he stood up and said that it's your responsibility to get the job plan done, when it was theirs. I had called up twice to check where my job plan was up to.

The agency got used to me and they would take on board my complaints. Whether that was to keep me quiet or something, I don't know. I had emailed Ministers.

I feel for all the people who can't speak up for themselves.

They should actually have more jobs advertised. They had newspapers there but were no Seek jobs.

I put my name down for Centrelink work, but the agency did not let us know about that work being available.

8. Other comments and ideas for reform

They need to abide by school hours. I often had appointments scheduled for school hour pick-up time.

I received no info on courses that could up-skill me more. They wanted down-skill me into hospitality and things, when I had skills in accountancy. They just wanted to get paid for courses that aren't based on actual needs.

Paul<sup>8</sup>, single, Vic

Background information

Gender:	Male
Age:	50+
Family status:	Single
Duration of unemployment:	Over 24 months
State/Territory:	VIC
Last time in jobactive:	Current
Jobactive stream:	B

1. General experience of unemployment and jobactive

I have been unemployed for four years now and have used a number of jobactive agencies.

Generally speaking, I haven't received the help I really need to gain employment.

Providers have triage systems where they decide whether or not to put much effort into helping you, and unfortunately many people like me seem to be classified as 'too hard'.

2. How much do you value choice and control (and did you get this?)

I highly value being able to choose providers and to have a degree of control over my job search and the employment services I receive.

The right to choose or change providers has been compromised because many people don't know about it, so Centrelink ends up allocating people to providers. Also, it's become harder in recent years to transfer. You used to be able to apply online, but now seem to have to go through the complaints line.

I was able to change providers a few times, at first online and then using the complaints line, but I imagine many people would find it difficult.

The power imbalance between providers and unemployed people is huge, and the 20 jobs requirement limits the scope for people to follow their own job search strategies. On the whole, the rights of unemployed people are being trampled by the present system.

3. What were the main services you need to secure a job (and did you get them?)

The help you receive should depend on your education and background. I have an Arts degree so the help I need is different to many others.

One provider gave me career counselling, but the test result was not credible: they narrowed down my career options to a single occupation: processing insurance claims.

Another offered a special course, but apparently I didn't qualify for this and the consultant failed to follow up with me to explain the outcome. I was just left in the dark. I should have complained at the time, but let it go.

There's not much scope to receive vocational training. I thought about doing a management course, but it's become more expensive in Victoria. Providers haven't offered much help with referrals or course expenses.



When they have referred me to training courses, they were usually inappropriate. For example, one provider suggested a security course but I'd be unlikely to find work in that area. I did call centre training but there was no guarantee of a job at the end of it, just an interview.

Providers seem to throw everyone in together (for example into courses). That's not necessarily a bad thing but they need to take more account of individual needs. Many of the compulsory courses I've done were on things like resume writing, motivation, and getting a balanced diet. These may be helpful for some people but were not helpful for me. They seem to jam you into these kinds of courses regardless of your background and needs.

I've had some referrals to job interviews, mostly low-skilled manual jobs such as cleaning. Providers have tried to match me with suitable jobs, but they seem to have a narrow range of positions available to them.

I haven't been offered a wage subsidy – in the past unemployed people were given vouchers to approach employers with an offer of a wage subsidy, but they don't seem to do that any more [Paul was not aware of increased promotion of wage subsidies in recent years].

4. How were you treated by consultants – and did consultants have the skills and time needed to provide the service?

Seven out of ten consultants are fine, but I wonder about their capacity to do the job. Many are young and inexperienced.

Some staff assume people aren't really trying. Once I was asked: 'are you really looking for a job?' I found this insulting.

Some consultants view their role as police for Centrelink.

I meet my consultant fortnightly, but it's mostly a quick box-ticking exercise for my Jobs Plan.

I usually see the same person, though the offices are small these days so there's not many options: often just 3-4 people.

5. Were activity requirements reasonable and relevant – and were they fairly administered?

The 20 jobs requirement is not appropriate. When you've been unemployed for four years, the quality of job search is much more important than quantity.

In the past (e.g. CES) there was much less monitoring of job search.

I was unfairly reported to Centrelink on one occasion. I was referred for a job interview (where there were many applicants) and rushed to the employer's office early, skipping breakfast. While I was waiting for the interview I went downstairs to buy something to drink. Although I returned quickly and explained my absence, the employer reported me to the provider, which reported me to Centrelink. This was overturned by Centrelink because the provider failed to contact me to seek an explanation before recommending a penalty.

6. Comments and ideas for reform

We need a Charter of Rights to bring some balance into the relationship between us, providers and Centrelink. Providers are supposed to treat us with respect (that's on posters in their offices) but there's no effective process to resolve problems with providers. The complaints line sometimes helps, but there's nothing in writing, and you have to be very persistent to get results.

Beyond that, I think it's hard to find solutions to the problems we've discussed.

There should be less emphasis on compliance.

One option is greater reliance on self-help. People could be asked to choose between this and regular contact with a provider.

The Newstart payment absolutely should be increased.

Susan<sup>9</sup>, single parent, VIC

Background information

Gender:	Female
Age:	48
Family status:	Single parent with an adult child
Duration of unemployment:	Unemployed four years, starting a new job soon
State/Territory:	VIC
Last time in jobactive:	Current
Jobactive stream:	A

1. General experience of unemployment and jobactive

Frustrating! Noone could help me with a proper CV for professional jobs. Could only get support for a basic CV. If you have never done a CV before in your life they are helpful, but if you are a professional, they aren't helpful.

I suffered PTSD in my previous career. The first job active placement caused me to relapse, because there was no flexibility. The consultant was negative and difficult. I moved to another provider, where they were supportive but not very helpful.

The online stuff is double handling things. I am technologically capable, but others are not. 20 jobs a fortnight, where you have to write selection criteria, is more than a full time job. You can't genuinely apply for 20 jobs a month and do it properly.

2. How much do you value choice and control (and did you get this?)

Choice and control of my provider was so important. I sought references for alternatives via facebook. It meant I moved to a provider that was at least empathetic.

I never had any choice and control over my plan. I was doing a masters, looking for 20 jobs a fortnight and I am a part-time carer. The masters was not considered to be an approved activity. At the time, because I had a bachelors degree I couldn't do the certificate courses. Plus I was expected to attend interviews every fortnight.

3. What were the main services you needed to secure a job (and did you get them?)

Help getting a professional level job, including the capacity to write selection criteria.

Connections and help with networking.

Careers counsellors to assist with pointing me in the right direction



4. How were you treated by consultants – and did consultants have the skills and time needed to provide the service?

With my first provider, I was treated appallingly. I had to jump their hoops and they didn't have to help me. At the next one they were very empathetic.

As far as their qualifications – they are checking boxes. There is not a lot of recommending me for various roles. It would be nice if there were more jobs that came through that they could recommend for me.

We need different services than someone in their 20s who is unqualified.

My current provider has this institute that they try and put you in. But there is no chance that that will lead to anything, because they are in areas where there is already high unemployment. They keep plugging the aged care qualification. For every position, there is 10 people with that qualification. Plus the aged care facilities hire the people with 457 visas anyway.

5. Were activity requirements reasonable and relevant – and were they fairly administered?

I don't think it is reasonable to have to apply for 20 jobs a fortnight. Neither for the jobseeker or the employer. I did get some part-time work – 13 hours a week for 6 weeks. After that, I came off that and still had to do Work for the Dole. This has happened twice. This is pointless – redundant almost.

It is a bit scary when you are two hours late for training for a good reason, when you already have a demerit. It is very punitive.

6. Three main things you'd keep

I like the idea of having someone you can touch base with.

Seems great for people non-professional qualifications.

7. Three main things you'd change

Staff need more training on how to help people with professional qualifications

Would be good if they worked more with recruitment firms.

More flexibility. So that you don't get a demerit for asking to rearrange an appointment when something comes up. I understand that that is reasonable if you don't tell them and don't turn up, but you should be able to rearrange an appointment.

Another offered a special course, but apparently I didn't qualify for this and the consultant failed to follow up with me to explain the outcome. I was just left in the dark. I should have complained at the time, but let it go.

There's not much scope to receive vocational training. I thought about doing a management course, but it's become more expensive in Victoria. Providers haven't offered much help with referrals or course expenses.

Ron<sup>10</sup>

Background information

Gender:	Male
Age:	50
Family status:	Single
Duration of unemployment:	-
State/Territory:	NSW
Last time in jobactive:	-
Jobactive stream:	A

1. General experience of unemployment and jobactive

Touch and go in employment a few years ago. Had some resources, but then found myself in a country town (cheap rent).

Started with a job matching service while not receiving income support.

Often good in the country because you can pick up casual work.

Applied for Newstart and then went into case management.

They told me straight up that I have six months before I go onto Work for the Dole.

I signed up to the vacancy data base but didn't find a single vacancy ever.

When I asked the job service provider if I could get training for an RSA, they asked: 'Are you staying in town, or are you just here to get back on your feet?' They did not want to set up training if I was going to leave town. They kept submitting activity plans.

I found a job without the help of the job service. Six months with a job service provider with no assistance with anything.

I had difficulty getting on [payment] – marriage breakdown, and there was an asset that made getting the payment hard. Eventually it come through. But just \$220 bucks per week. It paid for fuel and the telephone. That's what it paid for. With the fuel and the telephone, I could apply for work. I was lucky to have someone who could give me a place to live.

Social security is meant to be about living. Jobactive is meant to be about looking for work.

2. How much do you value choice and control (and did you get this?)

Asked to go to a certain agency because they were the biggest and best connected.

So I had choice of provider but got no assistance at all.

3. What were the main services you needed to secure a job (and did you get them?)

Discussed treatment by job service agencies of other people he knows: I know one fellow who was in his 50s who got one of the job subsidies. Others got certificate 4.

They could have done something. Looking for work in the community services, you needed to get a first aid certificate



They wanted him to do the Green Corps program, even though that was not what he wanted. Made no sense at all. I essentially had to join their casual pool of labour. I'm 50. I work behind a desk.

4. How were you treated by consultants – and did consultants have the skills and time needed to provide the service?

Good people, working hard, trying to do their job. They had been in the game for a while.  
Saw two consultants over a six month period.

5. Were activity requirements reasonable and relevant – and were they fairly administered?

Didn't mind the activities. But when they got something wrong, I drove into town to tell them that I was in there on the day that they said I didn't show. Was resolved quickly. The way to resolve it was to give them letter and ask them to stamp them.

6. Three things you'd change:

Should be able to nominate who provider is (which he could) but should be able to switch easily. It's easy to choose, but not easy to move.  
I agree with mutuality in the system. But there needs to more than just compliance. They've become compliance checkers rather than directing people to jobs and training.  
When I was sitting there [at Centrelink], a number of age pensioners coming through because something has gone wrong and being directed to the self-service thing. It was harrowing for those folks. I felt for them.  
There's not much dignity in going to Centrelink for people. Older people lined up with people with addiction. Need more people at Centrelink for different areas for each payment.

APPENDIX B: Survey questions

Getting the juice on jobactive

Have you used jobactive (employment services) within the last three years? Do you have ideas about what could be done to make jobactive work better for people?

If you answered YES to both questions, please complete this jobactive surveybefore Sunday 22 July 2018 by clicking on NEXT below. It will take about 15 minutes and you can choose to be identified or remain anonymous.

This survey will help us identify real improvements needed in employment services, and we will talk to government about changes that need to be made as part of the current [government review of jobactive](#)

A word about ACOSS

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) is a national advocate for action to reduce poverty and inequality and the peak body for the community services sector in Australia. We are not a government agency. For more information about us see [here](#).

Our privacy policy can be viewed [here](#).

Getting the juice on jobactive

Before the start of the survey, please note that:

- It's only for people who have used jobactive servicesin the last three years
- It doesn't cover Disability Employment Services (DES) or the Community Development Program (CDP).
- At the end of the survey you can choose whether to identify yourself or remain anonymous, and whether you'd like to join our ACOSS email group on employment services or get a copy of our submission on reform of employment services.

Getting the juice on jobactive

Introduction

\* 1. Have you used jobactive services in the last three years?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Getting the juice on jobactive



Introduction

2. When did you last use jobactive services?

- ☐ I currently use a jobactive service
- ☐ Sometime over the last 12 months
- ☐ 1-3 years ago

3. At that time (or now), how long were you unemployed?

- ☐ 1 - 6 months
- ☐ 7 - 12 months
- ☐ 13 - 24 months
- ☐ >24 months
- ☐ Not sure

4. Do you know what jobactive stream you were placed in?

- ☐ Stream A
- ☐ Stream B
- ☐ Stream C
- ☐ Not sure

5. What are the main reasons you became unemployed? [you can tick more than one box]

- ☐ Lost my job
- ☐ Sickness
- ☐ Left education and couldn't find a job
- ☐ Returned to workforce after caring for a family member
- ☐ Relationship breakdown
- ☐ Left workforce to care for a family member and couldn't find a job
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Getting the juice on jobactive

About choosing your provider

\* 6. Have you used more than one jobactive provider in the last three years?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Getting the juice on jobactive

About choosing your provider

7. Why did you change providers?

8. Do you agree or disagree with this statement:  
People should be able to change jobactive providers if they are not satisfied with the service

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Why?

\* 9. Did you choose your current (or most recent) jobactive provider or were they assigned to you?

- ☐ I chose the jobactive provider
- ☐ The jobactive provider was assigned to me

Getting the juice on jobactive

About choosing your provider

\* 10. When choosing your current (or most recent) jobactive provider, did you have enough time and information to make a well-informed choice?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No (please explain)



Getting the juice on jobactive

About choosing your provider

11. Was there a reason you didn't choose a provider?

☐ No

☐ Yes (please specify)

Getting the juice on jobactive

About the services required by jobactive

\* 12. How satisfied are you with the assistance you received from your jobactive provider?

Very Unsatisfied

Unsatisfied

Neutral

Satisfied

Very Satisfied

Not Sure

Getting the juice on jobactive

About the services provided by jobactive

13. What is missing from your jobactive provider's service to you?

Getting the juice on jobactive

About the services provided by jobactive

14. Has your current (or most recent) jobactive provider:

	Yes	No	Not sure
Referred you to an employer?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Referred you to a training provider or course?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Referred you to health / other assistance / programs?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Offered you a wage subsidy?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped you with the costs of job search or training?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Assisted you in other ways (please specify)

15. Do you agree or disagree with this statement:  
It is important for me to have a say over my employment plan.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 16. Are you currently exempted from compulsory activities in your employment plan (either temporary or ongoing)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Getting the juice on jobactive

About the services provided by jobactive

17. Do the compulsory activities in your employment plan include the following (answer yes, no or not sure for each activity):

	Yes	No	Not sure
Search for 10 jobs a fortnight	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Training	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work for the Dole	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Voluntary work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Part time employment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Paid work with a wage subsidy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other (please specify)

18. How suitable are the compulsory activities in your employment plan for your situation?

Very Unsuitable	Unsuitable	Neither Suitable nor Unsuitable	Suitable	Very Suitable	Not Sure
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If unsuitable in any way, please explain.

\* 19. Did you or do you care for children under the age of 16 or other family members while using jobactive services?

☐ Yes

☐ No

## Getting the juice on jobactive

### About the services provided by jobactive

20. Does (or did) your provider offer suitable assistance for you as a parent or carer?

Very Unsuitable	Unsuitable	Neither Suitable nor Unsuitable	Suitable	Very Suitable	Not Sure
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please explain your answer.

## Getting the juice on jobactive

### About the services provided by jobactive

21. If you had a choice, would you prefer to use a jobactive provider or rely on your own efforts to find a job?

☐ A jobactive provider

☐ My own efforts

☐ Other

Please explain your preference

## Getting the juice on jobactive

### About jobactive consultants you've dealt with

22. Do you usually see the same jobactive consultant?

Never	Rarely	About Half the Time	Most of the time	Always	Not Sure / I've only started with jobactive recently
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

23. Do you agree or disagree with this statement:

It's important for people to see the same jobactive consultant regularly.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

24. How often is/are your jobactive consultant/s supportive and respectful?

Never	Rarely	About Half the Time	Most of the Time	Always	Not Sure / It varies with the consultant
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please explain

## Getting the juice on jobactive

### About jobactive consultants you've dealt

with

25. What qualities or traits do you think a jobactive consultant needs to do the job well?

26. Do you think the jobactive consultants you've dealt with have been well-skilled and suited for the job?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Not Sure
- ☐ No (please explain)

Getting the juice on jobactive

About people and communities that need more help

27. The area where you live has: (more than one answer can be given)

- ☐ High unemployment
- ☐ Many people who struggle to find jobs due to disabilities
- ☐ Many people who struggle to find jobs due to health issues
- ☐ Many people who struggle to find jobs due to social issues
- ☐ None of the above

Getting the juice on jobactive

About people and communities that need more help

28. Given you stated your community has high unemployment/and or people struggle to find jobs due to disabilities/health issues/social issues, how would you rate your jobactive provider in helping people facing these situations?

Poor	Fair	Neutral	Good	Very Good	Not Sure
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please explain your answer (unless you said 'not sure')

29. Do you agree or disagree with the statement:  
Jobactive providers work with local community, health or other services to help people with high needs prepare for employment.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not sure
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Getting the juice on jobactive

Your general feedback about jobactive

30. Can you describe what it's been like for you using jobactive services?

31. If you ran jobactive, what are three main things you'd keep?

1	<div></div>
2	<div></div>
3	<div></div>

32. If you ran jobactive, what are three main things you'd change?

1	<div></div>
2	<div></div>
3	<div></div>

33. Do you have any other comments or suggestions on how the government could improve jobactive?

Getting the juice on jobactive



About you

34. Name (optional)

35. Postcode

36. Age

☐ Under 25

☐ 25 - 49

☐ 50 or over

37. Gender

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Other

38. What is your family situation?

☐ Single with no children

☐ Single with children

☐ Couple with no children

☐ Couple with children

39. What social security payment do you receive (or did you receive when last using jobactive)? You can select more than one.

☐ Newstart Allowance

☐ Youth Allowance

☐ Parenting Payment

☐ Disability Support Pension

☐ Family Tax Benefit

☐ Rent Assistance

Getting the juice on jobactive

Confidentiality, further information and involvement

\* 40. Confidentiality

☐ I agree to my responses being made public WITH my name and other identifiers being included

☐ I agree to my responses being made public WITHOUT my name and other identifiers being included

☐ I do not agree to my responses (apart from boxes ticked) being made public

41. Further information and involvement

☐ I would like to receive a copy of the ACOSS submission on reform of employment services when it is finished

☐ I would like to be included in the ACOSS email group on employment services to receive further information on the jobactive review and future developments

☐ I would like to become an ACOSS supporter

☐ I do not want to be contacted further

Getting the juice on jobactive

Further information and involvement

\* 42. So that we can get in touch with you, please provide your email. This will be kept confidential.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Department of Jobs and Small Business (2018): *The next generation of employment services* – appendices. One explanation for the difference is that people receiving social security payments are more likely to give responses they believe are acceptable to government in a government survey. The impact of the use of social media to recruit respondents for our survey on the responses is not known. For a discussion of issues with ‘customer satisfaction’ surveys in employment services, see Productivity Commission (2002), Independent review of the Job Network.

<sup>2</sup> There are three streams in jobactive services, which determine the level of assistance people generally receive:  
Stream A is for those assessed as close to employment  
Stream B is for those assessed as required more substantial help for secure paid work  
Stream C is for those assessed with more complex issues such as disabilities.

<sup>3</sup> This can occur, for example, where the person reports an illness or disability.

<sup>4</sup> Not her real name.

<sup>5</sup> There are three streams in jobactive services, which determine the level of assistance people generally receive:  
Stream A is for those assessed as close to employment  
Stream B is for those assessed as required more substantial help for secure paid work  
Stream C is for those assessed with more complex issues such as disabilities.

<sup>6</sup> Not his real name

<sup>7</sup> Not her real name

<sup>8</sup> Not his real name

<sup>9</sup> Not her real name

<sup>10</sup> Not his real name



