

Voices 2:
results of a survey of people
who used jobactive
2022



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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Executive Summary

This 'Voices' report is based on our second survey of users of jobactive employment services, the first of which was published in 2018. The title of this report 'Voices' reflects ACOSS's commitment to amplifying people's experiences of employment services. In recognition of a significant finding of this year's analysis we have changed the title to 'Voices 2: results of a survey of people who used jobactive'. This is because a major finding of this study is that people wanted to be listened to and not defined as someone who was unemployed, and/or a "job seeker".

The survey explored respondents' views on the quality of services and supports offered, on the quality of interactions with workers and providers, about the extent to which services were personalised and to which choice and control were offered, the quality of services provided during lockdown and in Online Employment Services, and on fairness in relation to payment suspensions and complaints.

Key Findings

The survey results from 299 respondents highlighted several chronic issues with jobactive employment services relating to quality, usefulness, and fairness.

- People were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the services provided: 75% of respondents reported they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their jobactive service, while just 10% reported they were satisfied. 46% of respondents indicated that appointments were for less than 10 minute and were a tick-a-box exercise.
- Consultants and providers were not helpful: 59% of respondents reported that they did not see the same consultants regularly; 61% did not agree that consultants are well-trained; 62% said consultants were not sympathetic and 65% said they did not provide appropriate support.
- There was a lack of personalisation, choice and control: though 89% of the respondents agreed it was important to have choice about the requirements in their job plan, 65% of respondents did not choose the activities in their plans, 75% believed the number of hours of activity were not right for them, and 52% said the job plan did not accommodate their caring responsibilities or disability.
- Services during lockdown were inadequate: Of the 126 respondents who had been in lockdown for more than a month, 74% said they had not been offered useful services and 74% disagreed that they'd been offered other forms of useful support. 79% reported they had been required to undertake training that was not appropriate to their needs. 66% did not find the telephone contact they had with their provider useful, and 66% reported that providers were not flexible about making changes to job plan requirements.
- Payment suspensions are unfair: 61% thought unemployment payment suspensions they had received were unfair, 58% indicated they had received 'demerit points' (which may lead to a loss of future payments) because of provider errors, and 66% said they had payment suspensions because of provider errors.
- Payment suspensions cause harm: 33% of people who had received payment suspensions indicated that they had caused high levels of stress and anxiety, while 11% indicated they were unable to pay rent on time due to payment suspensions.
- Complaints processes are not accessible or helpful: 70% disagreed that it was easy to make a complaint, 72% did not think their complaint would result in changes to the service and 59% did not find the Department of Education Skills and Employment's National Customer Service Line easy to get through to.

- Positive experiences were reported when support was provided flexibly and quickly, such as when people were directly provided with equipment or licenses that enabled them to get jobs. Examples of this included being supported to obtain white cards (for construction work), licenses, or work clothing.

Common concerns

The survey results provide a stark illustration of the ways in which jobactive contributed to the harms people experience when they are surviving on low incomes and subject to onerous mutual obligation requirements. The common concerns identified were that: monthly job search requirements were too high; training provided was not useful; consultant turnover was too high and disruptive to effective relationships; there were many people with disabilities and chronic illnesses in jobactive because it was too difficult to obtain the Disability Support Pension (DSP); people who were Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and/or Refugees along with people who were mature aged were not well supported; and in general that people were not recognised as individuals but felt they were being punished for being unemployed.

A selection of quotes like these illustrate some of these common concerns:

"It hasn't helped me get a job, it's a waste of time and resources, and just increases my stress and anxiety. Going on 8 years now, no job. I know why, it's obvious, but the system doesn't seem able to understand the simple concept that I have a chronic pain issue, therefore the chances of finding suitable work are bugged all to none. I should be on the DSP. Perhaps if jobactive were serious, they'd offer jobs for people like me, rather than rely on the open market, competing with other people that do not have my health issue."

"I have a PhD and taught at university level. I was placed on a work for the dole program to teach me about how to teach. I used to teach this. The course took me 30 minutes a week to complete. My previous job was a lecturer in teaching innovation. The assessments for this course were all open book so students could just not do any of the work and then search the pdf for the answers to the online exams. I found this a complete waste of time and a waste of taxpayers' money."

"In my area, there is approx. 1 job for every 7 people. I can't afford to move closer to the city where more work exists because rents are outside my means (and I do have a casual position when not in lockdown). Every time I've asked for help, I get told its "unrealistic". They always ask me to do aged care, child care, hospitality or disability work. I am not a carer. I have no interest in carer positions whether they're young, or old or disabled. I am not suited to that. And hospitality is dead-end casual hours. Every real career is "unrealistic"."

"This is such a dysfunctional system wasting tax payers money! Jobactive repeatedly called me over two hours past the set meeting time, meaning I had to carry my phone around with me all day. I missed a call in this manner as I went to the toilet and didn't take my phone with me. Impossible to phone them back for hours then finally told no one can talk to you for a few days, so I hit a suspension for missing a meeting! Next one was their website glitched and entered one of my job searches 8 times so they suspended me for not having unique job applications, even though I did indeed submit the required amount of unique ones. Even though I explained it at great lengths...they still gave me a demerit point and raved on in a rude condescending manner that 'people go for jobs they can't do, like a waiter who went for a chef's job' even though that was NOTHING to do with why I was suspended."

1. Short history of jobactive and Workforce Australia

Employment services are funded by the Commonwealth government and delivered by private companies and not-for-profit organisations. Employment services were privatised in 1998 and have been through four major name changes and model versions: the Job Network (1998-2007); Job Services Australia (2007-2015); jobactive (2015-2022); and in July 2022 they will be replaced by Workforce Australia (2022-2032).

Jobactive comprised approximately 47 for-profit and not-for-profit providers across 42 employment regions. At the time of writing this report there were approximately 960,000 people receiving JobSeeker payment (formerly known as Newstart) or Youth Allowance (other) who were required to use employment services. In jobactive there were three Streams: A, B and C. People who were assessed as likely to find it harder to get a job were in Streams B and C.

In broad terms, jobactive providers help people look for employment, prepare a résumé and get ready for job interviews; provide referrals to jobs; provide help to become job ready, including targeted training that is suited to the skills that local employers need; provide individualised support so participants are ready to take up and keep a job; coordinate the provision of Work for the Dole or other activities, and monitor people's compliance with mutual obligation requirements and attendance at appointments.

Jobactive providers administer activity requirements which people must meet to keep their unemployment payments. These requirements, also called Mutual Obligations, include applying for a certain number of jobs each month (job searches), attending regular provider appointments, and participating in programs such as Work for the Dole or training. People who don't meet these requirements may have their payments suspended until they comply. They may also accrue 'demerit points' after their suspension, which eventually accrue and lead to payment penalties which are cuts to income support payments. These financial penalties are administered within a set of rules called the Targeted Compliance Framework, which was introduced in 2018.

Jobactive costs approximately \$1.3 billion per year, but the cost grew during the pandemic because there were more people out of paid work and who were required to use employment services. During the COVID lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, the number of people on unemployment payments doubled and job vacancies were greatly reduced. Most people assessed as closer to employment were diverted from jobactive providers to Online Employment Services and activity requirements were suspended or eased.

A new model of employment services has been in development since 2018, which involved trials in two employment regions alongside the development of new online employment services.

This new model called 'Workforce Australia' is based on the recommendations of a review by a government appointed Expert Panel which gathered evidence from a range of stakeholders including employment services providers, policy advocates, people who had used employment services, business groups, peak bodies and academics.

In Workforce Australia, people who are classified as 'job ready' will mostly use Online Employment Services for the first year they are looking for employment. The remainder of participants, who are assessed as having more significant barriers to getting jobs or a lack of digital literacy, will be referred to a Workforce Australia service run by a 'panel' of private companies and not-for-profit organisations. These services will include appointments with providers to establish and review job plans, to connect people with employers, and referring them to training and other support to assist with barriers to employment.

Since 2018 many employment service functions, such as reporting attendance at activities and job search applications, have been provided through online interfaces such as a jobseeker dashboard and a mobile phone App. A new online employment feature called the Points-Based Activation System (PBAS) will replace job search application targets in Workforce Australia from July 2022.

The following table shows the estimated budgetary expenditure for jobactive and Workforce Australia and related programs over the forward estimates.

Table 2.4.1: Budgeted expenses for Outcome 4

Outcome 4: Foster a productive and competitive labour market through policies and programs that assist job seekers into work and meet employer needs.					
	2020-21 Estimated actual \$'000	2021-22 Budget \$'000	2022-23 Forward estimate \$'000	2023-24 Forward estimate \$'000	2024-25 Forward estimate \$'000
Program 4.1: Employment Services					
Administered expenses					
Ordinary annual services (Appropriation Bill No. 1)					
jobactive	1,863,198	2,003,915	2,768	-	-
New Employment Services Model	-	8,456	1,467,079	1,765,816	1,690,059
Seasonal Worker Programme	250	500	250	-	-
Transition to Work	244,168	255,599	309,762	343,924	320,089
Time to Work	3,401	3,422	-	-	-
ParentsNext	100,062	107,255	114,046	94,989	95,917
Skills and Training Incentive	6,530	6,379	-	-	-
Entrepreneurship Facilitators	5,027	4,927	-	-	-
Regional Employment Trials	3,097	-	-	-	-
Career Revive Initiative	500	937	1,073	1,073	-
Local Jobs - COVID-19 Recovery	8,652	53,836	49,072	49,072	48,975
Administered total	2,234,885	2,445,226	1,944,050	2,254,874	2,155,040
Total expenses for program 4.1	2,234,885	2,445,226	1,944,050	2,254,874	2,155,040
Outcome 4 Totals by appropriation type					
Administered expenses					
Ordinary annual services (Appropriation Bill No. 1)	2,234,885	2,445,226	1,944,050	2,254,874	2,155,040
Administered total	2,234,885	2,445,226	1,944,050	2,254,874	2,155,040
Departmental expenses					
Departmental appropriation	386,788	422,614	349,043	316,939	317,341
s74 External Revenue (a)	27,448	26,498	26,566	26,565	26,567
Expenses not requiring appropriation in the Budget year (b)	49,722	63,097	66,454	61,027	61,027
Departmental total	463,958	512,209	442,063	404,531	404,935
Total expenses for Outcome 4	2,698,843	2,957,435	2,386,113	2,659,405	2,559,975

Source: DESE Portfolio Budget Statements 2022-2023

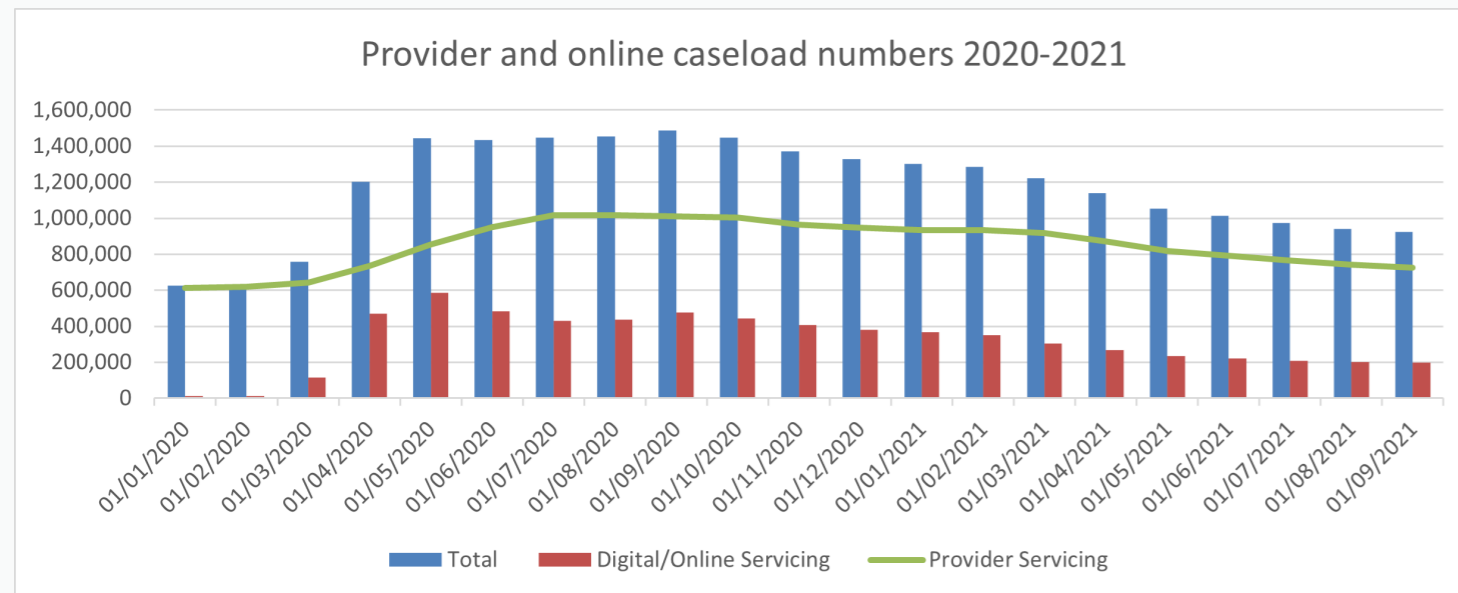
2. Methodology

This survey was undertaken towards the end of the jobactive era in late 2021 at a time when there had been significant disruption to the labour market and jobactive employment services because of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were two significant stretches of lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, during which mutual obligations and face-to-face employment services were reduced or suspended. Throughout much of those lockdown periods there were fewer job vacancies as employers wound back or shutdown their operations.

This meant that unemployment rose dramatically, the number of jobactive participants doubled, and there was widespread disruption to the role that employment services normally played in providing support to respondents.

Figure 1 shows the change in the numbers of people who used jobactive during the pandemic.

Figure 1 - Provider and online caseload numbers 2020-2021



There were some changes to the survey questions in the 2021 iteration of the survey, due to the disruption the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the labour market and employment services and the higher number of people claiming unemployment payments who used Online Employment Services (OES) only. Accordingly, there were additional questions on people’s experiences of employment services during lockdown and of Online Employment Services.

In addition, the survey was redesigned to incorporate insights obtained from related research that explored experiences of personalisation, choice and control; the impact of financial sanctions, and a range of other factors that have been identified as important elements of employment services users’ experiences.¹

¹ O’Halloran, D., Farnworth, L., & Thomacos, N. (2022). The development of the Australian Unemployed Workers Union Rating Scale (AUWURS) of employment service providers. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*. The subscales that were used “responsive to feedback”, “friendly”, “trustworthy”, and “realistic” (Q21). Casey, S. (2022). Back to the future: coercive conditionality in the jobactive era. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 25(1), 1-24.

The survey questions explored:

- Demographic background of respondents;
- General experience of jobactive and services and supports offered;
- Interactions with providers and consultants;
- Personalisation, choice and control;
- Experience of lockdown;
- Experience of online employment services; and
- Compliance measures.

The survey consisted of 34 questions with either yes/no or other descriptive response fields or five-point rating scales. Free text commentary boxes were used throughout to collect qualitative responses to add to the richness of the information that was collected.

There were a total of 299 usable responses. Over half (53%) of the respondents indicated they had been in an area that had been locked down for more than a month since January 2021.

Forty-three (15%) respondents reported having used Online Employment Services only and did not complete the other questions relating to services from jobactive providers. As some of the questions were voluntary, the numbers of responses for each question are included in the findings.

The highest response rate was for questions that appeared early in the survey (such as reason for using jobactive services) where there were 247 usable responses, and further into the survey 193 completed the mandatory questions at Q21.²

Rich qualitative data was collected in the free text commentary boxes. The survey included a field for respondents to provide permissions to have their verbatim comments reproduced in the report. Accordingly, it is only verbatim commentary from people who provided permission that has been used in this report.

This report is based on analysis of the survey results (quantitative data) as well as the respondent commentary (qualitative data). Two ‘Voices’ case studies are included, based on interviews with respondents who agreed to be contacted further. The case studies were limited to two because the thematic analysis reached saturation, so that more data collection was not required to provide evidence of the arguments presented in this report.

A sample of Wordclouds has been included to illustrate the dominant sentiments people used in the respondent commentary. The Wordclouds were generated in Nvivo and the largest words in the illustrations are the words that appeared the most. ‘Stop’ words and common words such as job, jobs, job provider, jobactive were omitted so that the dominant sentiments could be identified.

The survey questions are set out in a separate attachment to this document.

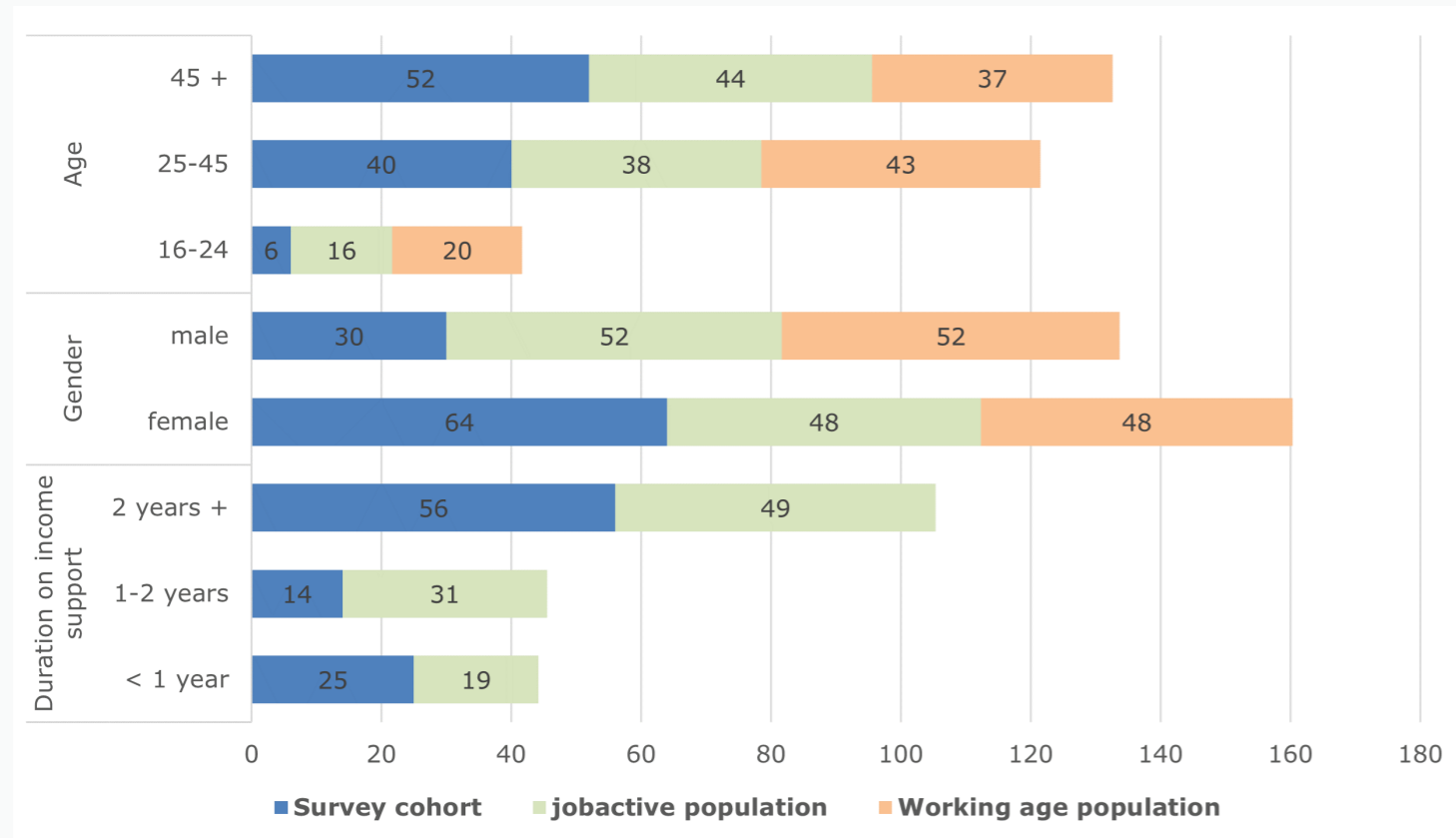
² Future iterations of this survey should be sensitive to the impact of voluntary questions on survey completion

3. Profile of respondents

The survey sample comprised individuals who were using/or had used jobactive services within the last three years.

Figure 2 shows that the demographics of the survey respondents generally reflected the overall makeup of people who use jobactive services. For example, people unemployed longer-term (two years+) comprised (56%) of respondents compared with 49% of jobactive participants in January 2021. The only significant variations to this were the overrepresentation of people identifying as female (64% versus 48% males), people aged 45+ and people unemployed between one to two years.

Figure 2 – Demographics of respondents



As Figure 3 shows, most of the respondents (64%) did not know which stream they were in. The distribution of respondents among the three Streams was similar to the 2018 survey, with the exception that there were fewer people who identified that they were in Stream B.

Reason for using jobactive

The main reason people reported they needed to use jobactive services was that they had either lost their job before (24%) or during (14%) the pandemic. As Figure 4 shows, there was a marked increase in the number of people who reported they were unemployed because of sickness or disability (28%). However, this may reflect the inclusion of the word 'disability' in the wording of the question in the 2021 survey, as opposed to only the word sickness in 2018 (8%).

Figure 3 – jobactive stream

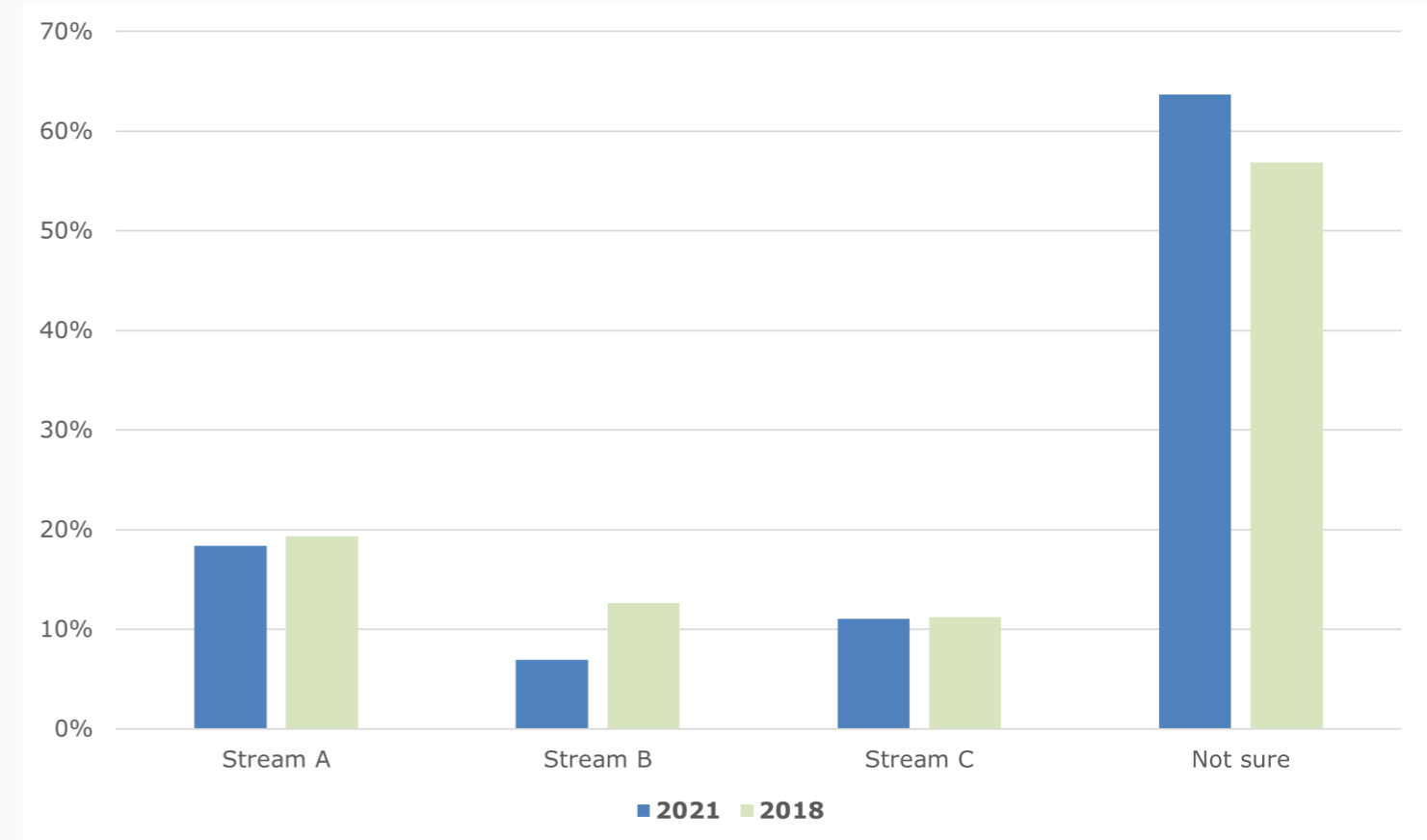
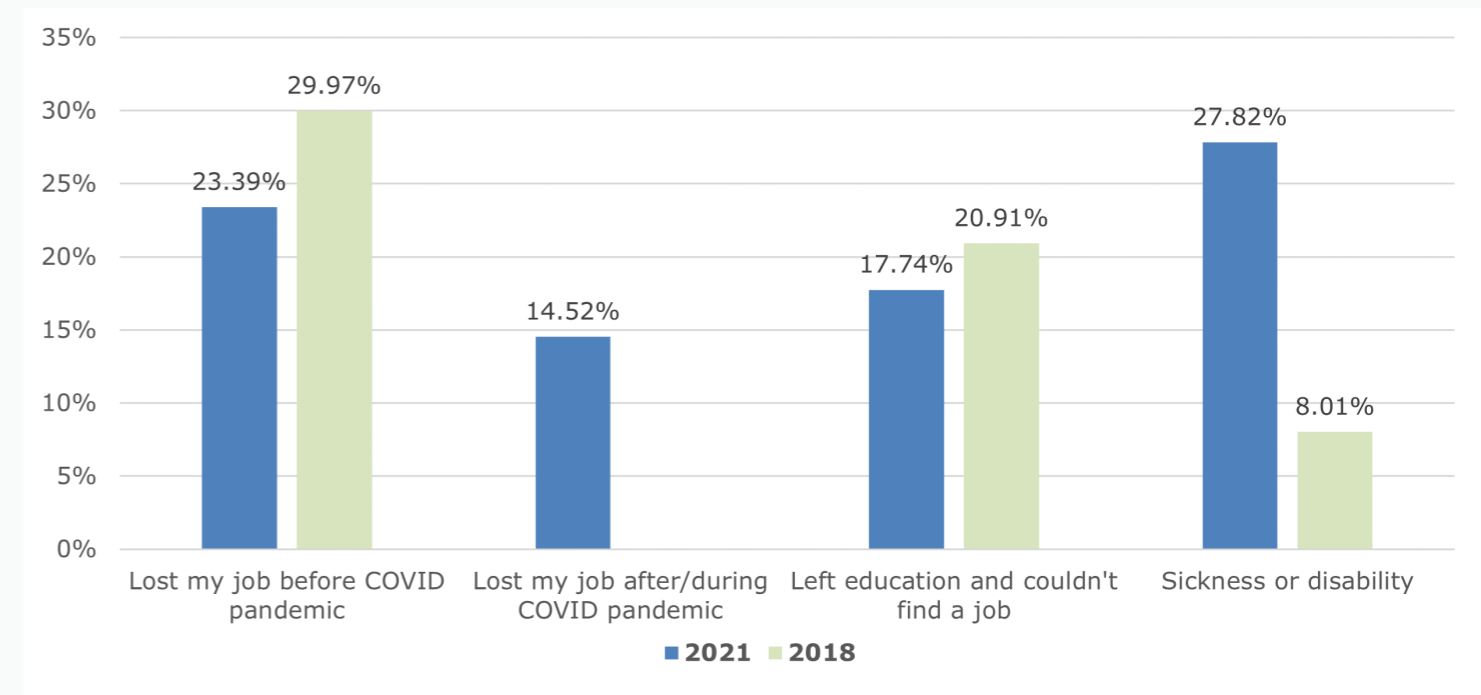


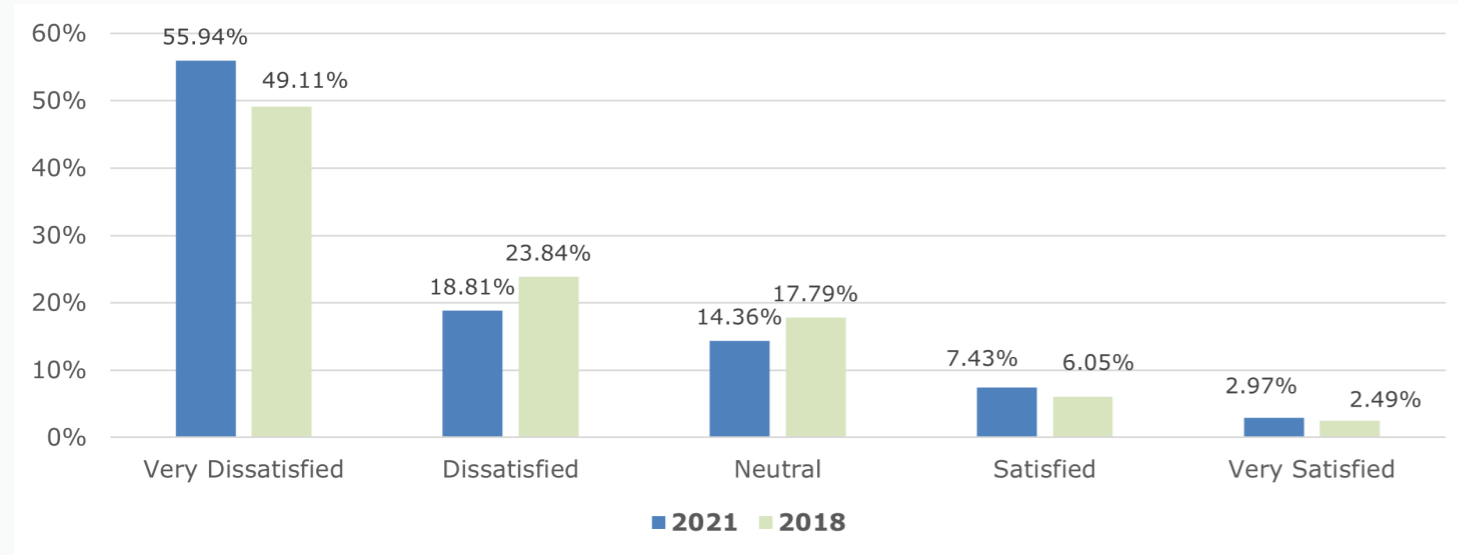
Figure 4 – reason for using jobactive



4. Overall satisfaction and quality of services

The results on overall satisfaction with jobactive were very similar to those reported in 2018. In 2021 75% of respondents reported they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their jobactive service, while just 8.5% reported they were satisfied.

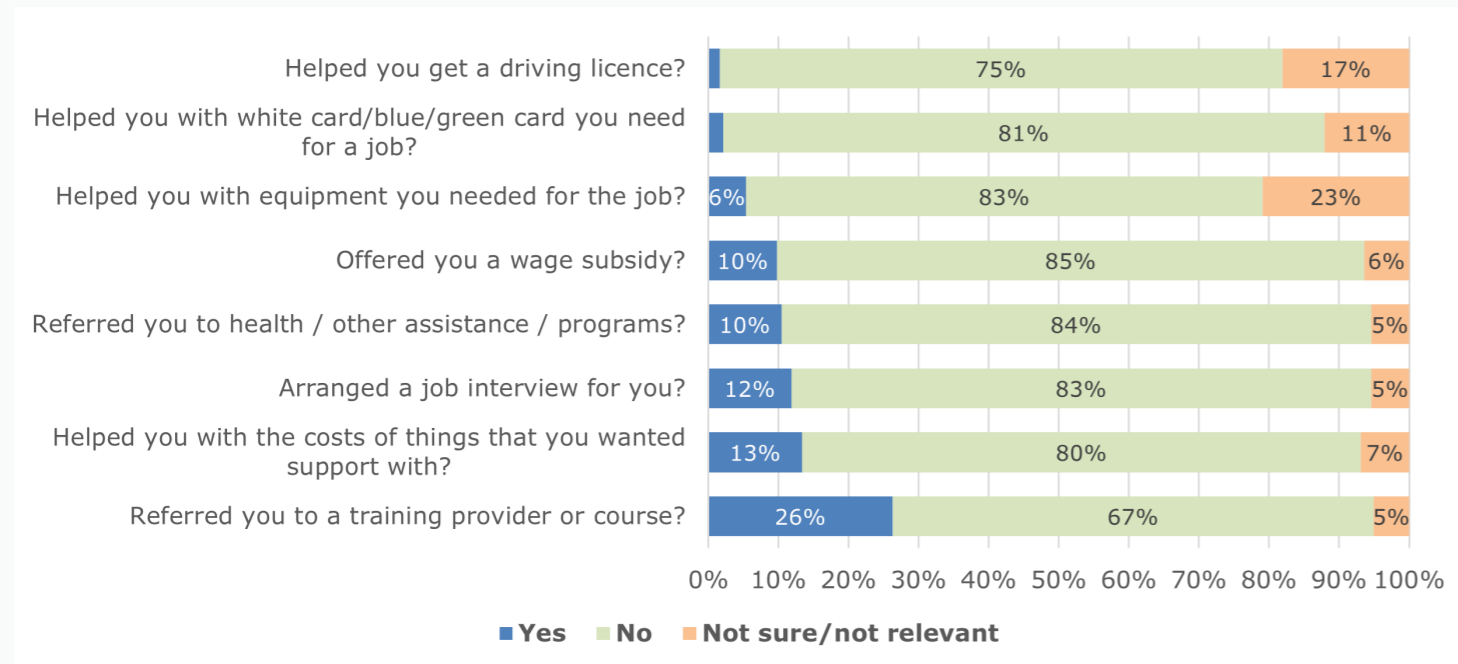
Figure 5 – Satisfaction 2018/2021



Supports offered by jobactive provide

This year’s survey assessed supports offered using the same measures as the 2018 survey. These questions were for specific forms of support that had been identified as highly beneficial to people in the past. There were very weak responses on all forms of practical support with only 1.5% indicating they had been offered support with driving; 2% with work-related tickets, 6% with equipment needed for jobs, 10% with wage subsidies and 10% with other forms of health or related services.

Figure 6 – Supports offered by jobactive providers



The 2021 survey indicated there was a significant decline in the number of respondents who reported having been referred to a job interview (from 19% in 2018, to 12% in 2021). There was an increase in referrals to training courses (26% in 2021 compared to 22.7% in 2018). These differences may reflect the impact of the pandemic on job vacancies and the extent to which online training replaced other forms of face-to-face activity.

The respondent commentary on the kind of supports that people wanted included practical assistance with transport costs and the cost of getting help for psychological conditions. The following quote illustrates a common sentiment of not receiving the support that was needed, while at the same time being threatened with payment suspensions.

"Fuel to get to the appointments, psychologist or counsellor (I suffer agoraphobia and the jobactive people DO NOT CARE at all and threaten to cut me off if I don't attend a meeting... It's very hard for me to leave my house.)"





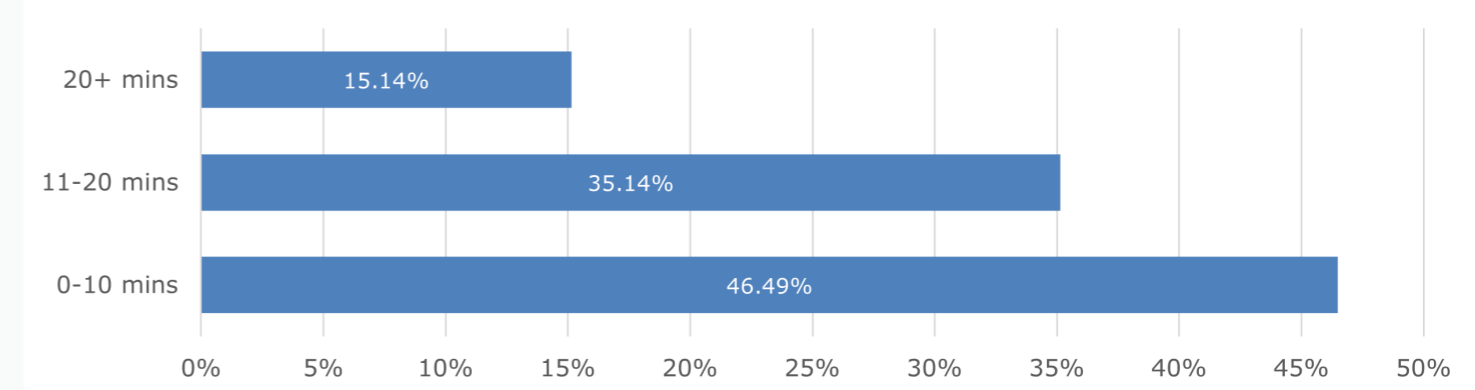
"I experience panic attacks when required to attend face-to-face appointments, which can be completely debilitating with effects lasting for days, yet I am still coerced into attending."

Appointment length

The question on appointment length is also an indicator of the quality of jobactive services because it reflects the amount of time people had to discuss their situation and the options available to them. In jobactive it was not uncommon for workers to have over 100 people to make appointments within a month, and this made it difficult to establish positive relationships.

The results showed that in 2021, 46% of respondents indicated that appointments were for less than 10 minutes.

Figure 7 – Length of appointments



This reinforced the observations of the 2018 survey in which respondents often commented that provider appointments were 'tick-a-box' exercises. This year's respondent commentary reinforced the view that appointments were not useful.

"No, the appointments were very short and contained no notable information and/ assistance... tick and flick."

Due to the pandemic, many appointments were conducted by telephone in 2021. This may also explain why appointments were short. For some, not having face-to-face appointments was beneficial.

However, there was an overwhelming view that appointments were not useful.

As one respondent said:

"It's a numbers game. The more jobseekers a provider can push through the doors each day, the higher the revenue stream. I've had appointments for 9am and had to wait 30 minutes to see my consultant, even though I was their first appointment. Appointments last less than 5 minutes, unless I need to sign another revised job plan. The providers are overservicing jobseekers, in terms of appointments regularity. I have an appointment every fortnight and I get asked the same basic questions every time. The appointments provide me with nothing of any real value to assist me with job searches. The appointments are a waste of time. I would happily attend if they were useful. Their sole purpose, however, appears to be to meet the needs of the employment consultant to tick the boxes to meet government requirements."

Uniformity of job plan

Uniformity of job plan requirements is also an indicator of a lack of customisation of services to individual circumstances. As Figure 8 shows, the results on the question on compulsory activities³ in job plans showed a high level of uniformity or standardisation, consistent with the 2018 results.

However, the number of respondents who identified searching and applying for jobs as the main activity in their job plan at the time of the survey increased in 2021, while volunteering showed a decrease, perhaps reflecting a shift in the range of activities that it was possible for people to attend during the pandemic.

Working in disadvantaged communities

These questions assessed the effectiveness of jobactive in areas where there are high levels of labour market disadvantage. Many of the respondents (62%) reported that they lived in areas where there was high unemployment, where people struggled to find jobs due to health issues (50%), or where people faced other social problems (58%). Sixty-three per cent of respondents indicated that they thought providers were poor at helping people facing disadvantage in their communities.

Respondent commentary provides an indication of the kind of support that people valued:

"Help with transport, help with phone credit, actually listening to the client, help with doctor's medication, feeling supported."

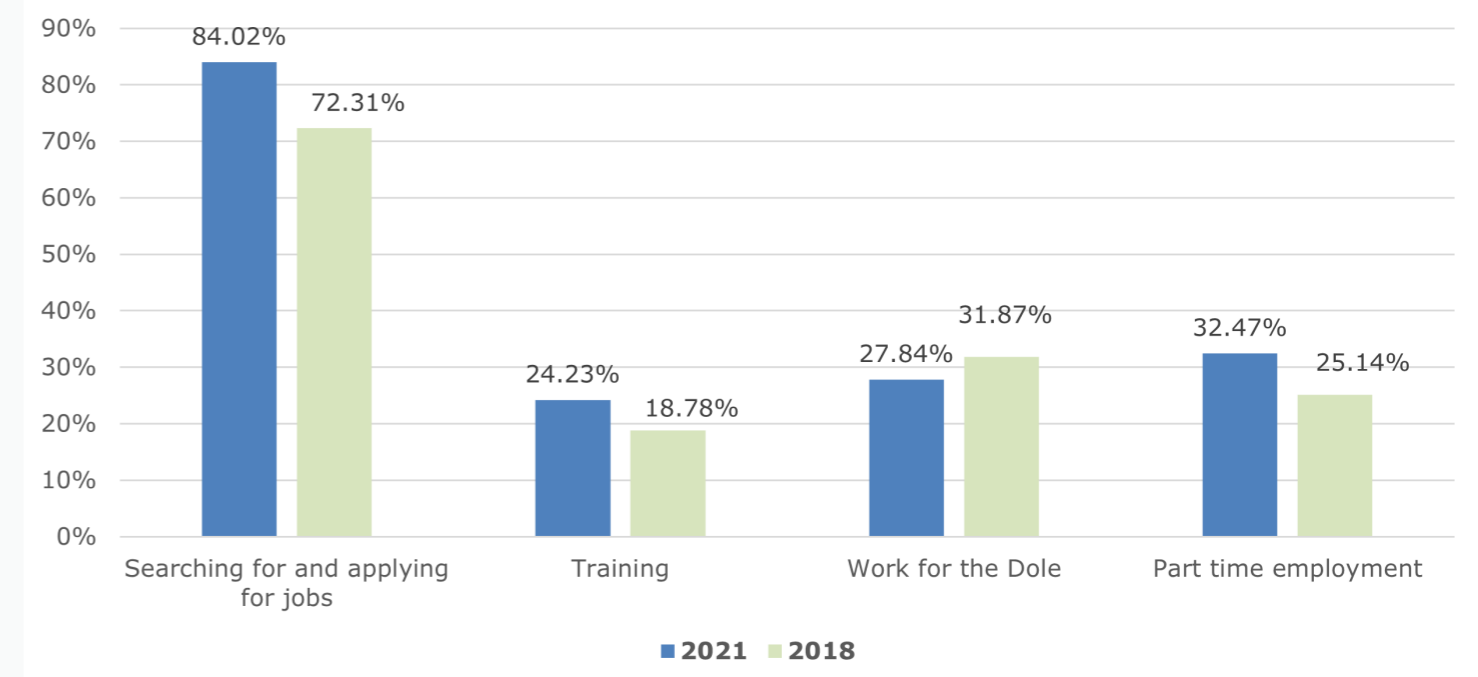
However, there were many instances where people had asked for specific forms of support that had not been provided.

"Maybe paying for a relevant training course that would lead to a job e.g., a forklift license is several hundred dollars."

It was clear that when this very practical support was offered if it was highly appreciated despite the view that the onus was on individuals to chase the providers about to get it.

"Well, they have helped me in my car insurance, pink and green slips and some car mechanical repairs payments to my mechanic. However, I had to continue to chase them up many times to see if they had paid in what they said they'd pay for? Sometimes they hadn't kept their word and I had to keep chasing them up in what they promised me to pay for."

Figure 8 – Main activities in job plan



Section Commentary

The results in this part of the survey indicated little change in the overall satisfaction with jobactive services between 2018 and 2021. This was reflected in the responses to the questions on the range of supports that were provided, the length of appointments and the capability of jobactive providers to adapt to the conditions of the communities in which they operated.

The results reflect the extent to which the activities available to people in job plans are prescribed by policy rules which limit the flexibility of activities available to jobactive providers, and the limitations on their resources such as working with high numbers of people. It is important to ensure that providers can access a wider variety of supports for people in the future.

³ NB there can be more than one compulsory activity in job plans

5. Interactions with providers and consultants

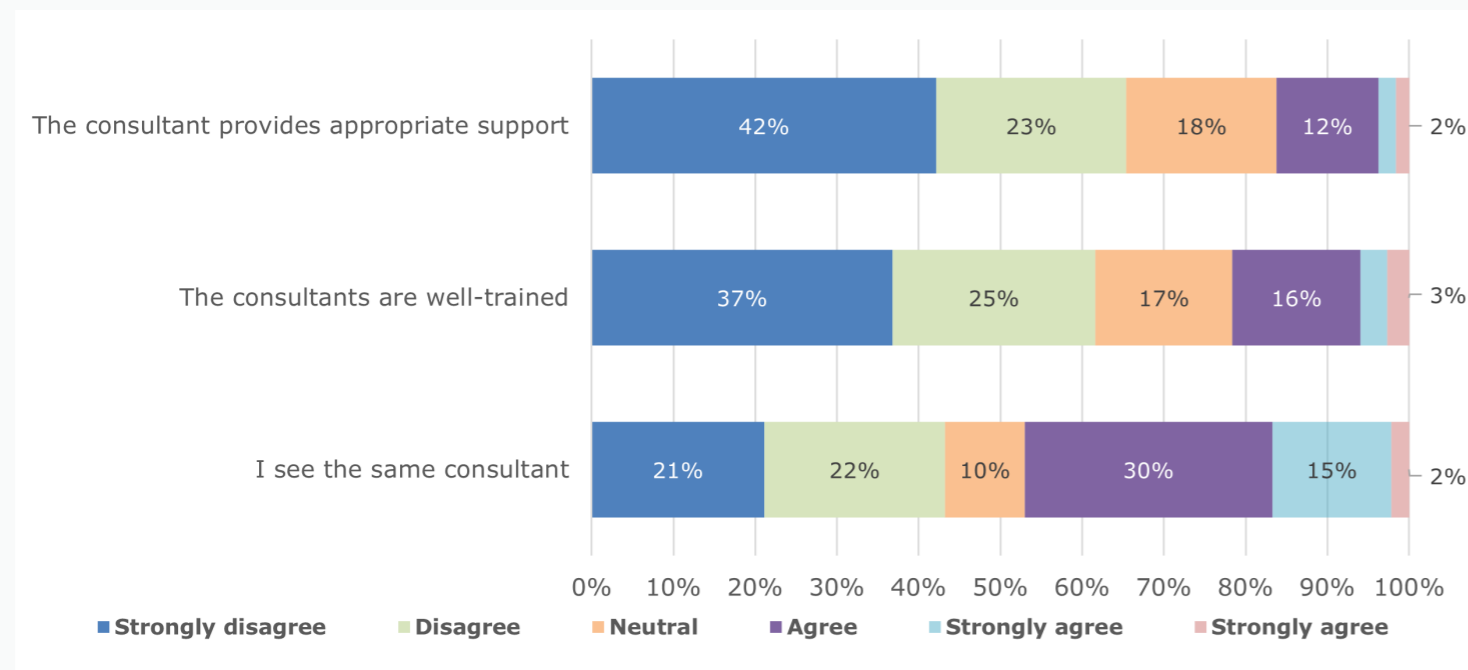
To assess the nature of interactions between providers and consultants the questions focused on the capabilities of employment services workers (usually called employment consultants) and people’s assessment of the trustworthiness and friendliness of providers.

Consultants

There were four questions that explored participants’ observations of employment consultants and their ability to do their jobs well.

Most respondents (58%) reported that they did not see the same consultants regularly; 61% did not agree that consultants were well-trained; 62% said consultants were not sympathetic; and 65% said they did not provide appropriate support.

Figure 9 – Experience of consultants



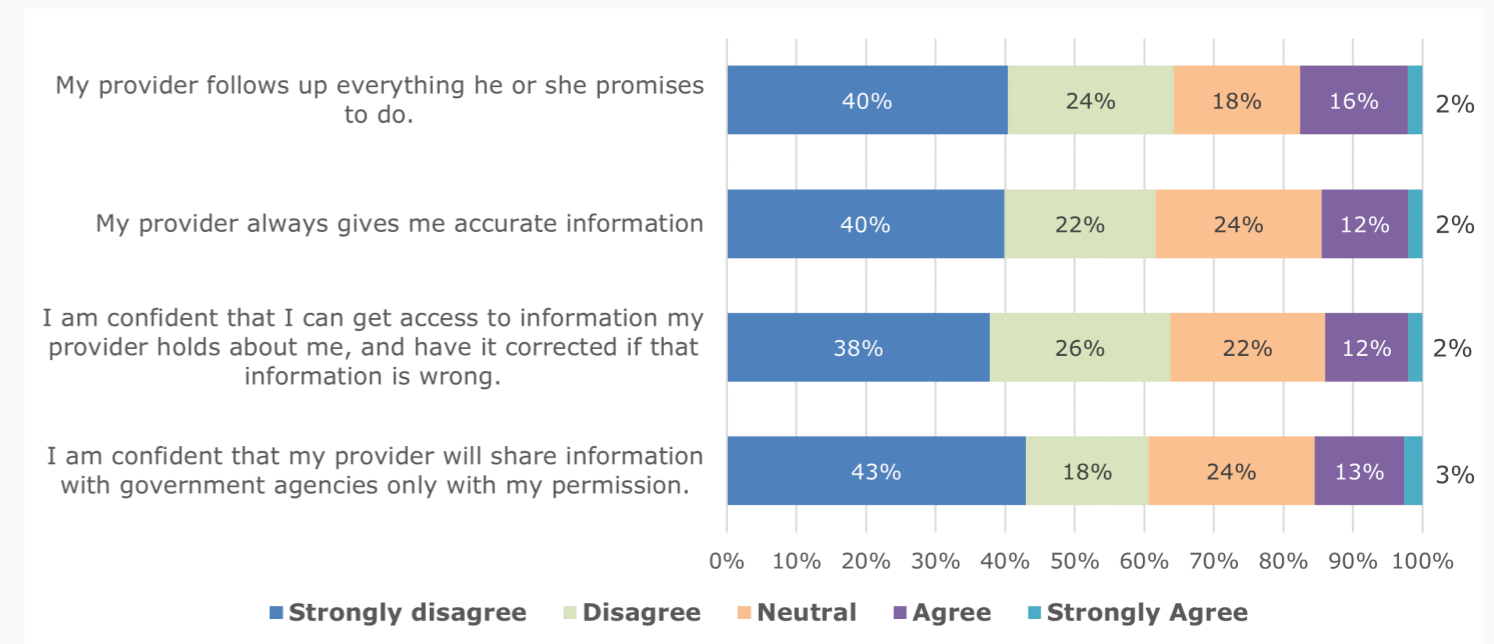
The respondent commentary highlighted the view that jobactive workers were not well-equipped for the job even though individual workers who did the job well were valued by people using jobactive services.

"Staff have no empathy; they are hiring young staff because it's cheaper. In my view, in jobactive: the experience depends on the individual caseworker/case manager, and I've found most of them don't have any idea how to get me a job that's right for my experience."

Trustworthiness and friendliness

The questions on trustworthiness and friendliness were new in the 2021 survey. Trustworthiness was included because it is an important factor in establishing good relationships with providers. The results indicate that people did not trust providers to follow on commitments they had made (65%), to give them accurate information (61%); to access and update information held by the provider (62%), or to share information appropriately (61%).

Figure 10 – Trustworthiness of providers



Commentary such as this below indicates that some respondents thought providers acted dishonestly, without consideration to the very real struggles experienced by the people using their services:

"My jobactive consultant encouraged me to lie about when my employment started so they could receive a bonus. I refused to and told them it was illegal and that since they did nothing to support me (in fact I got a public transport fine because of a compulsory meeting and not having enough money to travel) they didn't deserve the money and it should be paid to the person starting a new job to help support them."

"I have never been more disheartened in my life looking for work until I had to go on Centrelink and look for work through an employment matchmaker. It's hard enough living on so little - let alone being downgraded by your employment worker because there are only so many jobs to apply for and not get and they feel superior to you."

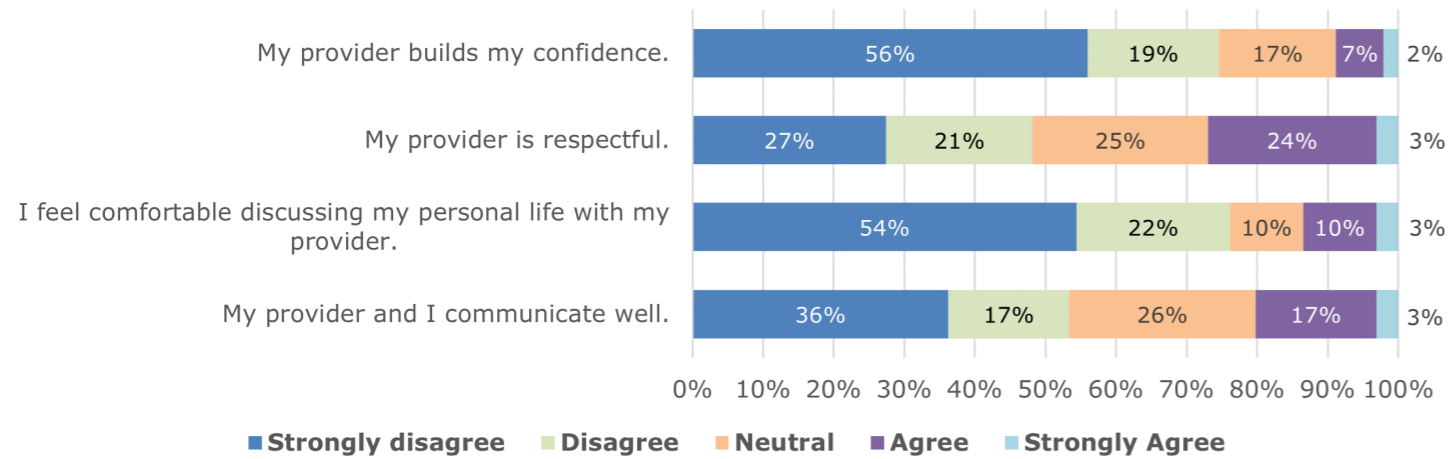
Friendliness

Friendliness is an indicator of approachability that enables people to feel confident when they speak to their providers. It is also an indicator of the extent to which they feel confident disclosing personal and sensitive information to providers, especially when they may not have had a great deal of time to get to know them, or when their providers change.

Most people did not find their provider built their confidence (74%), and 76% did not feel comfortable discussing their personal circumstances with their provider.

"I've found most of them don't have any idea how to get me a job that's right for my experience."

Figure 11 – Friendliness of providers



Section Commentary

These survey results indicate that most people who used jobactive services did not have the positive interactions with jobactive providers necessary to build strong case management relationships. Respondents perceived that that this was partly because employment services workers were not well-trained and changed jobs frequently. Further, respondents said that providers behaved in ways that led people to distrust them, and that they did not feel confident disclosing personal information. Only a minority stated that they received positive support that built their confidence.



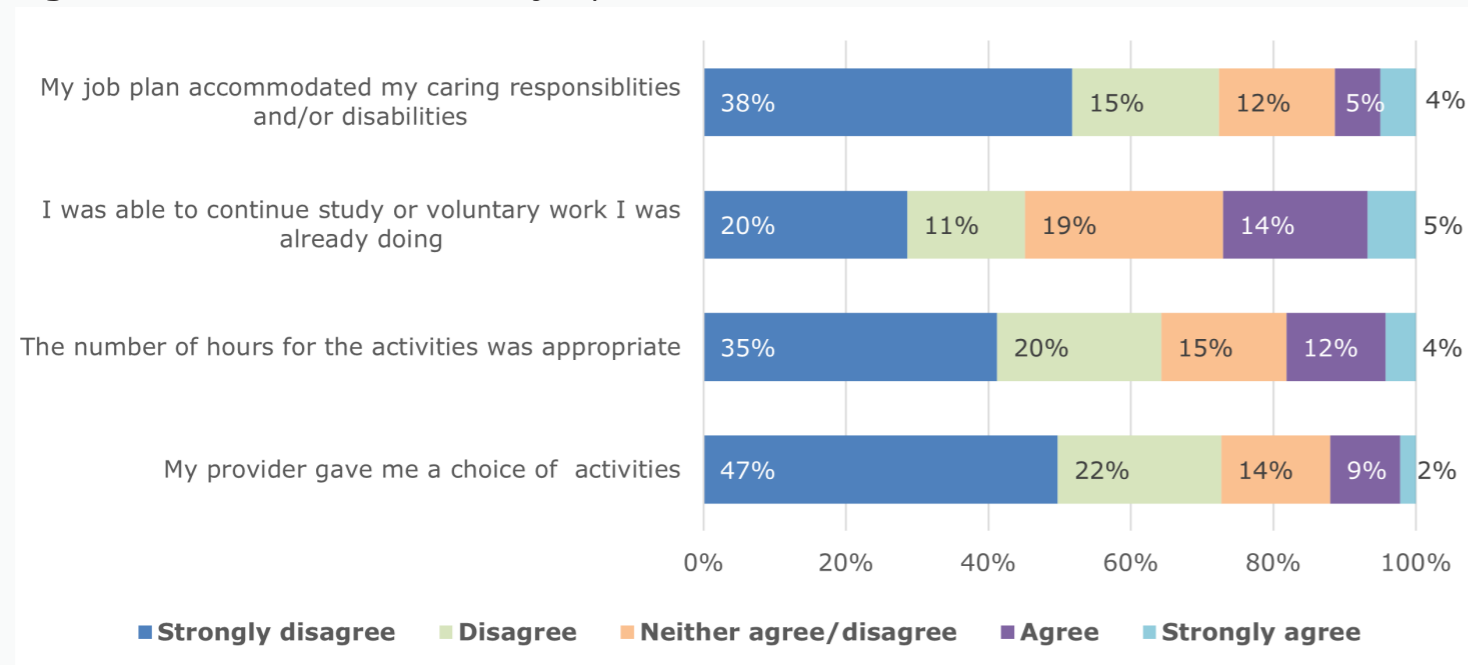
6. Personalisation, choice and control

The 2021 survey included a broader range of questions relating to personalisation, choice and control than the 2018 survey. The questions explored choice of provider, choice about what went into people’s job plans, and the capacity to negotiate changes to the job plan.

Choice in job plan

The responses on choice over job plan requirements revealed that although 89% agreed it was important to have choice, most (68%) of respondents did not choose the activities in their job plans, 55% believed the number of hours of activity were not right for them, and 52% said the job plan did not accommodate their caring responsibilities or disability. Concerningly, 31% said they were unable to continue studying or volunteering in activities they had already commenced.

Figure 12 – Choice and control in job plans⁴



The respondent commentary on choice over activities in job plans suggest that jobactive services were not attuned to the individual circumstances and needs. For example, this commentary from a single parent is indicative of the lack of sensitivity people such as carers experienced when using jobactive services.

"I felt simultaneously patronised and ignored. I didn't need to be told about appropriate clothing and hygiene, or how to write a job letter or resume. I needed to find a job that would fit with the fact that I'm a single parent with sole custody, and assistance with the exorbitant cost of childcare."

Another respondent comment indicates that their jobactive provider referred people to training that was incompatible with the paid work they were likely to get. It also highlights the costs to individuals of being forced to attend Work for the Dole, which in this case led the person to cancel their payment to avoid the pointless activity.

"I was given training in warehousing which I had never worked in before and never have since, it was totally irrelevant for my skill set. I was also required to work for the dole at the factory for 25 hours a week over 4 days 30 mins drive from my home which cost me so much I actually cancelled my payments without having found work."

⁴ Responses for not relevant were omitted

Choice of provider

On the questions relating to choosing and changing provider, only 32% indicated they had chosen their provider, and only 13.6% reported having been able to change provider.

There were numerous comments like "I didn't know I had a choice", as well as comments indicating that choice of provider did not really benefit individuals because there was no real difference in the service offered:

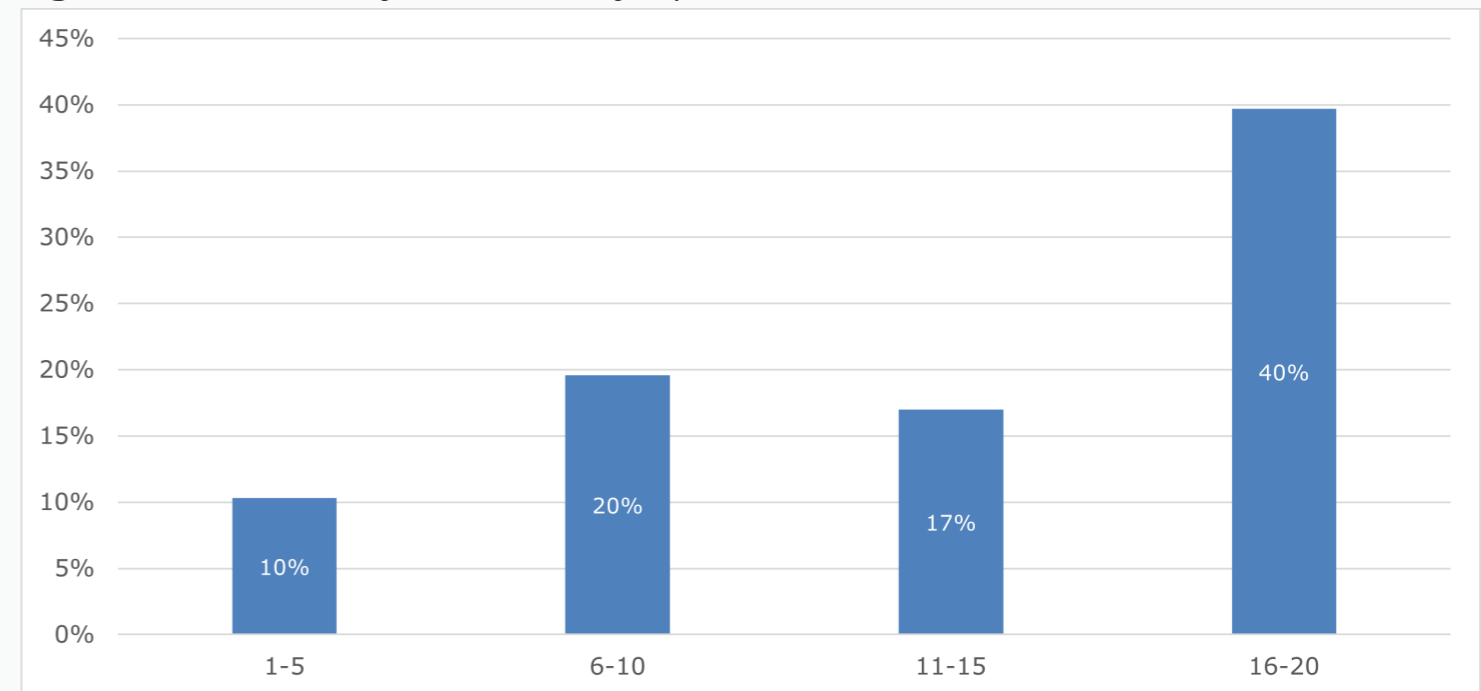
"I chose my current jobactive provider based on the proximity of their office to my location. Whilst one has choices, in my experience, there's not much difference in service delivery from one jobactive provider to another provider."

Control over job search

The 2021 survey asked people to indicate whether they had tried to change their job search requirements. Fifty-seven per cent said they had not or that they didn't know they could change job search targets. While 43% said they had tried to change job search requirements, much of the respondent commentary on this question indicated that even though they had tried to change them, they had not been successful.

We also asked people how many monthly job searches were required in their job plans. Despite the pandemic's impact on the availability of jobs in late 2021 when the survey was undertaken, 40% of people were required to apply for 16-20 jobs each month.

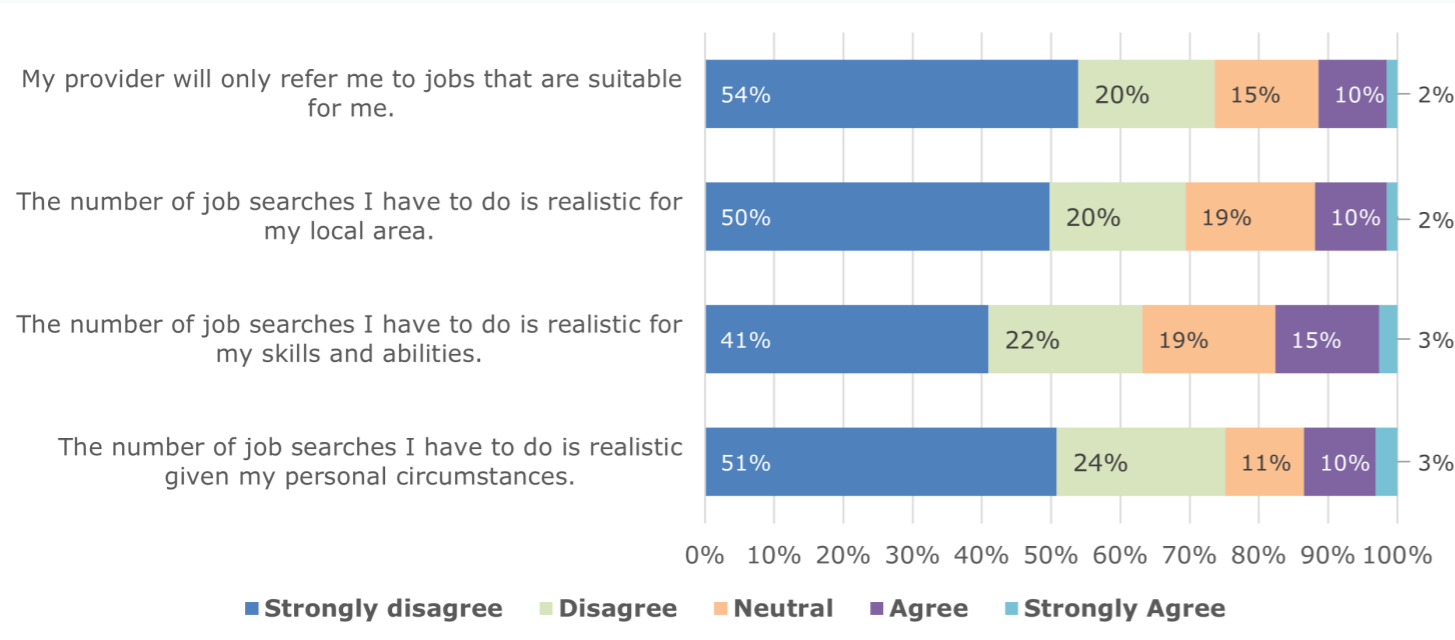
Figure 13 – Number of job searches in job plan



Fairness of job search requirements

The 2021 survey also collected responses on people’s views on the fairness of job search requirements. Overall, 74% of respondents disagreed that providers referred them to jobs that were suitable for them, 70% reported that job search requirements were not realistic for their local area, 63% said they were not realistic based on their skills or abilities, and 75% said they were not sensitive to their personal circumstances such as being a parent, carer, or having a disability.

Figure 14 – Fairness of job search requirements



Respondent commentary on the questions relating to the fairness of job search requirements showed the difficulties people experienced when they asked their providers to reduce them.

"The consultant dismissed my request and stated it was not a negotiable point. My current provider had me doing 20 job searches a month, even after I turned 60 years of age. It took several months before they realised their error and agreed to reduce my job searches to 12."

"I told them I live in a small rural town and that I'm over 40 and I feel like this was not taken into account."

Section Commentary

Overall, survey results on personalisation, choice and control show that this was lacking in jobactive. People lacked input into the contents of their job plans, choice of provider, and the number of jobs they needed to apply for. Most believed that decisions made on their behalf about activity requirements were not fair.

These results on personalisation, choice and control reflect the jobactive program rules that specified the number and range of activities that must be undertaken, limiting providers’ capacity to customise services according to individual needs. As the Employment Services Expert Panel recommended, users of employment services should have more power to negotiate requirements in way that is consultative and flexible. This would strengthen personal agency, autonomy and self-efficacy in relation to people’s job search efforts.

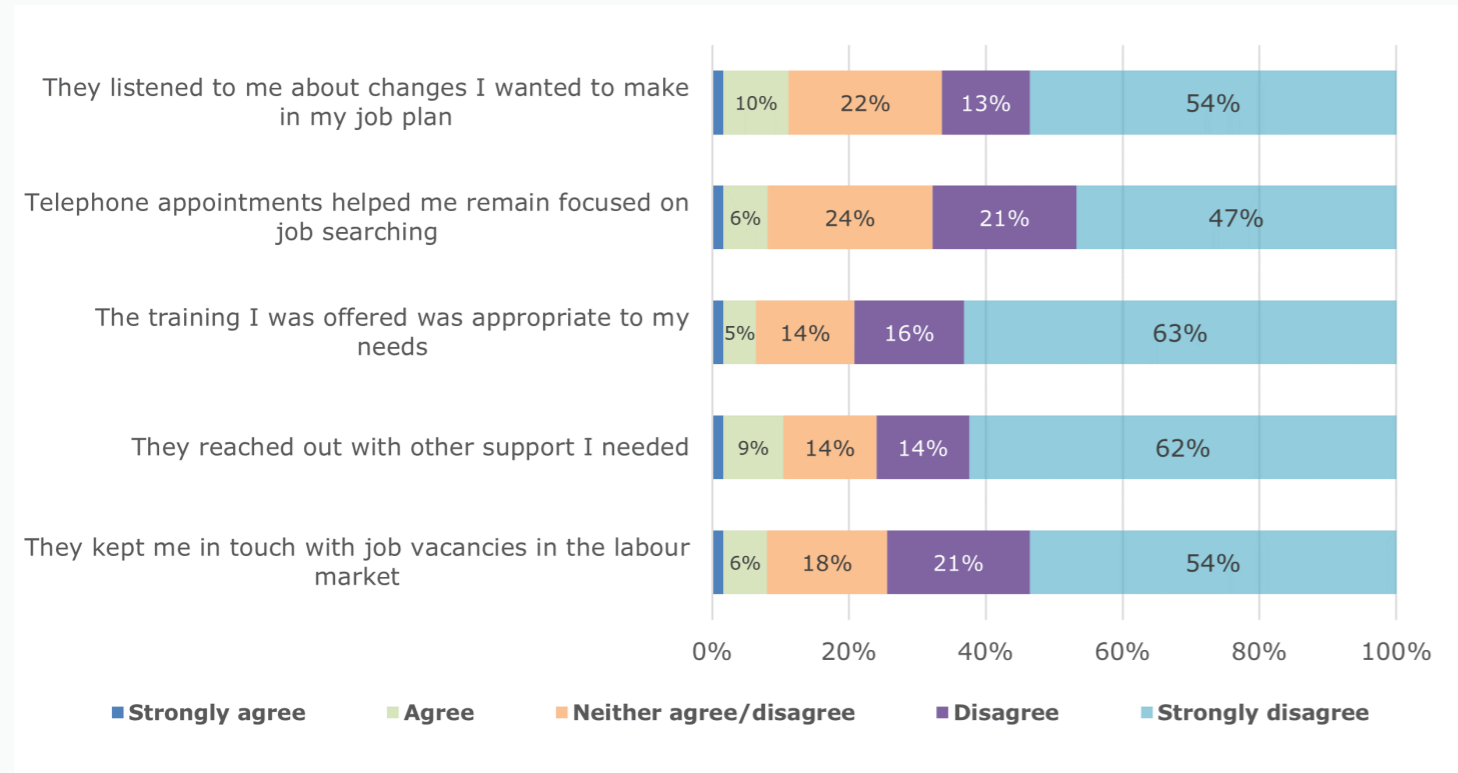


7. Services during the COVID-19 lockdowns and online employment services

Questions on experiences of jobactive during the lockdowns were included because of the large numbers of people who had been in areas that were locked down during the survey collection period.

Over half (53%), of the respondents indicated they had been in an area that had been locked down for more than a month since January 2021. Very few agreed that the services they had received were useful. On the questions relating to useful support such as being kept in touch with job vacancies, 74% disagreed that they'd been offered this support, and 74% disagreed that they'd been offered other forms of useful support. Seventy-nine per cent reported they had been required to undertake training that was not appropriate to their needs. Sixty-six per cent did not find the telephone contact they had with their provider useful, and 66% also found that the providers were not flexible about making changes to job plan requirements.

Figure 15 – Services during lockdown



These responses reflect the impact of lockdowns on job vacancies and access to services, but also suggest that the services on offer and activity requirements were not adjusted appropriately to the new conditions.

As this respondent commentary shows, COVID related economic downturns had a significant effect on the availability of jobs in regional areas, and this was not helped by imposing job search targets that were simply unrealistic:

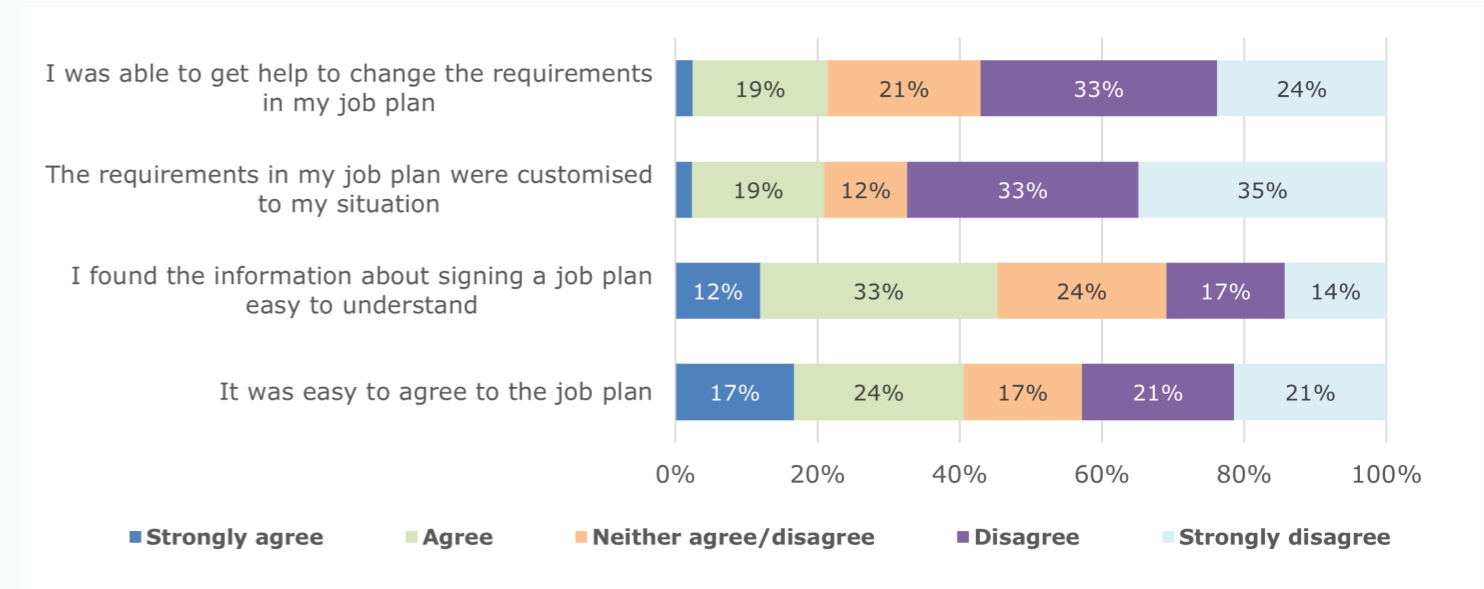
"A small town affected by Covid. Many small businesses have already closed. 20 job searches a month is an unrealistic and stressful goal. Being forced to look for jobs that don't exist does not make an employer hire you. It just causes stress and kills your confidence."

Online employment service

The increase in the number of people using Online Employment Services during the pandemic provided an opportunity to gather some feedback on people's experiences of these. Forty-three (15%) respondents indicated that they had only used Online Employment Services rather than jobactive services.

The first set of questions related to the ease with which people could adjust their job plans online and obtain information about how to agree to and sign the job plan. The responses indicated that 40% said it was easy to agree to the job plan. However, people reported more negative experiences on measures related to being able to customise the job plan. For example, 67% reported it was difficult to customise the job plan, and 57% reported problems getting help to change it.

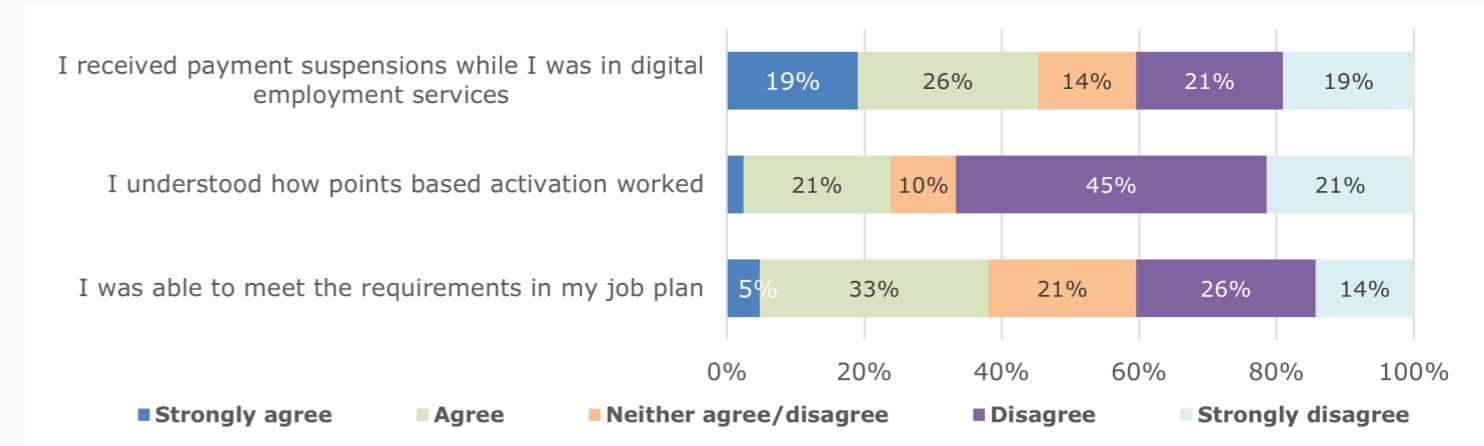
Figure 16 – User friendliness of online job plan





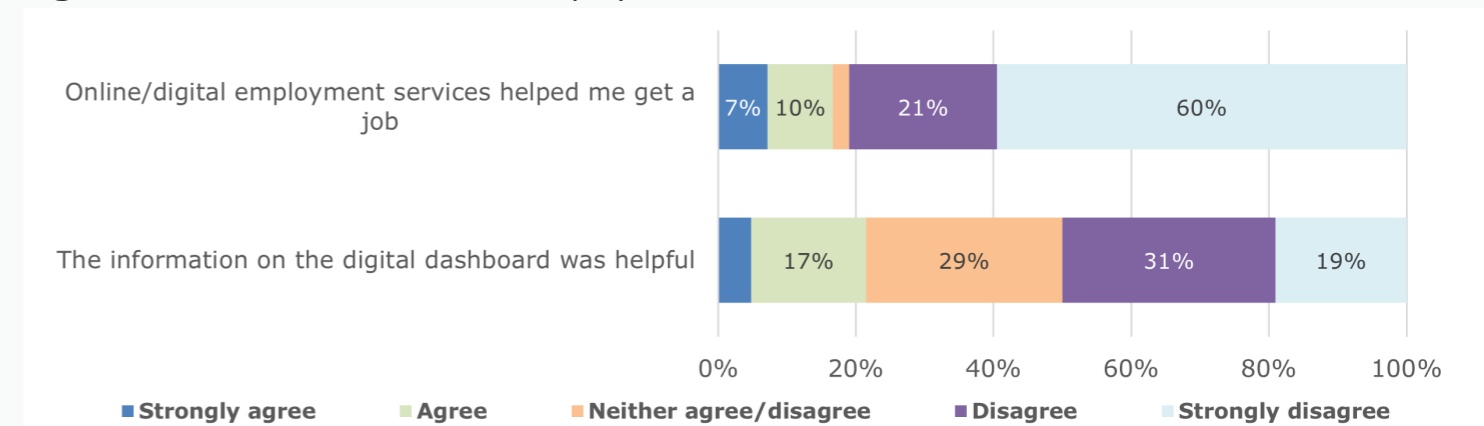
There were further concerns about Online Employment Services identified in the survey results relating to whether people understood the requirements in the job plan, including the new Points-Based Activation System. For example, over 67% reported not being able to understand how Points-Based activation worked. Nearly 50% of those who were using online employment services reported having their payment suspended.

Figure 17 – online employment services and compliance



On the questions relating to the usefulness of Online Employment Services, 80% did not agree that digital interfaces helped them get a job, while only 31% of respondents found the online dashboard helpful.

Figure 18 – Usefulness of online employment services



Section Commentary

These findings on services during lockdown reflect the difficulties employment services had adapting their services to lockdown conditions. In normal conditions they enforced activity requirements, but these rules were lifted when mutual obligations were suspended during the lockdowns. It was therefore difficult for them to adapt to providing one-on-one support during the pandemic because the previous focus had been on enforcing the rules.

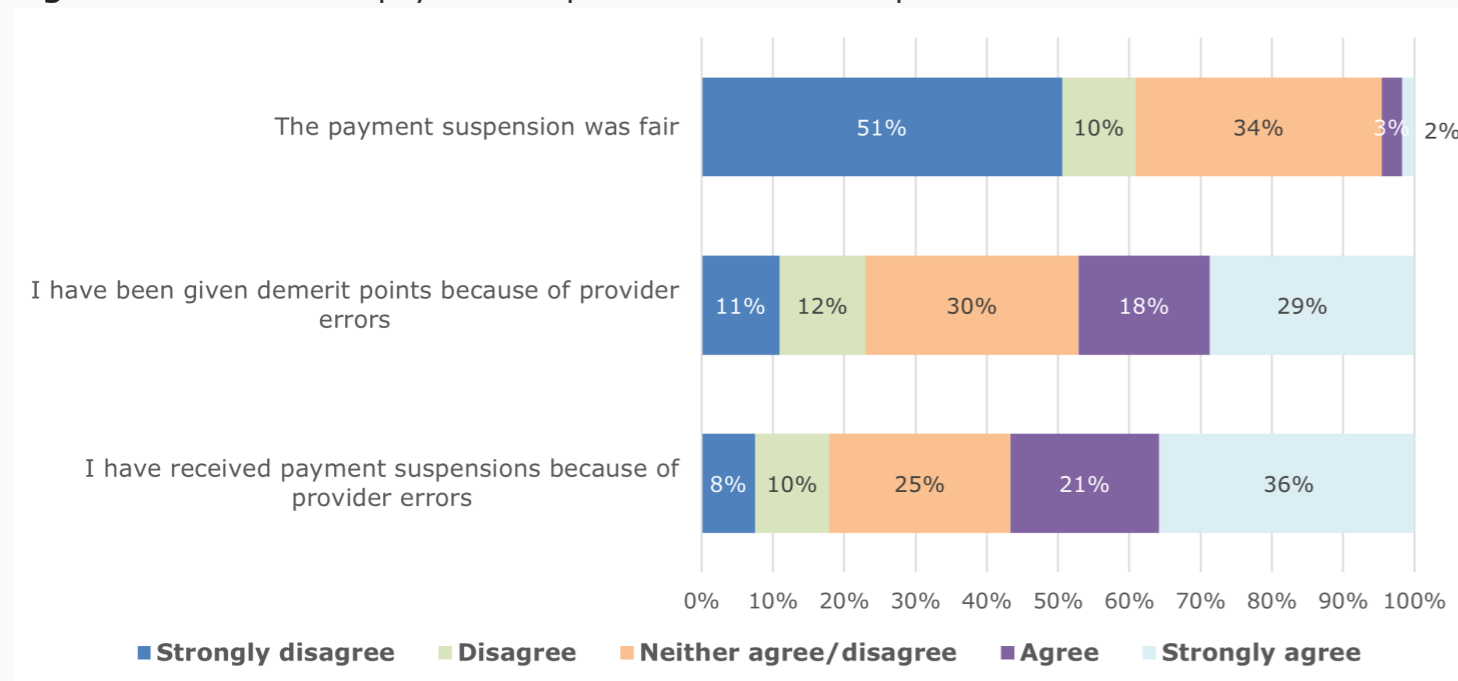
The findings on online employment services are important because they may be indicative of some of the problems that may arise due to the greater reliance on Online Employment Services in Workforce Australia.

8. Financial Penalties, payment suspensions and demerit points

The 2021 survey included questions on the fairness of payment suspensions and demerit points that were applied under the Targeted Compliance Framework, and the effect these had on their well-being.

Sixty per cent of respondents had received payment suspensions and demerit points. A further question examined how fair these were. Sixty-one per cent disagreed that their suspension was fair, 66% said they had payment suspensions because of provider errors, and 58% indicated they had received demerit points because of provider errors.

Figure 19 – Fairness of payment suspensions and demerit points



The commentary on the fairness of payment suspensions was extensive and included many examples of errors made by providers:

"I called to say I was unable to attend an appointment once because I was not feeling well that day. I was informed that if I did not attend my payment would be suspended unless I provided a doctor's certificate. It was not possible for me to see my doctor for 2 weeks and so I felt I had to attend the appointment even though I was sick."

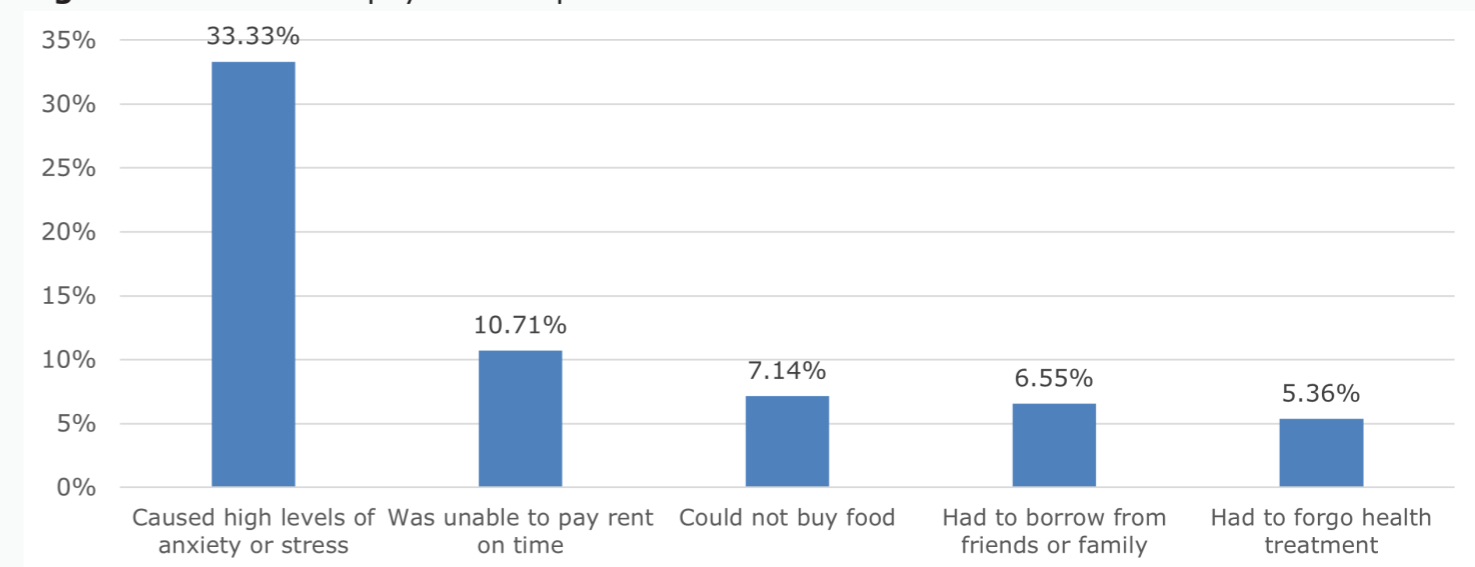
"Both demerits and payment suspensions have occurred for reasons beyond my control, including temporary closure of job active member site at no notice (and despite promptly calling provided number to report attendance). I have also had payments suspended for no apparent reason, despite satisfying all JobSeeker requirements upon reconnection with a new provider - failure to notify Centrelink. This suspension was overturned, only to be brought up at a later phone interview as if for valid reason."

"I called immediately on being threatened with a payment suspension due to provider error and it was fixed. I had to call the provider several times that day for different errors they were making."

Effects of suspensions on well-being

A further question asked people to indicate how payment suspensions had affected them. Of the 119 respondents to this question, 33% of people who had received payment suspensions indicated that they had caused high levels of stress and anxiety, while 11% indicated they were unable to pay rent on time.

Figure 20 – Effects of payment suspensions



The commentary also indicated how respondents felt that providers used threat of payment suspensions in ways that were coercive and harmful to their well-being.

"My provider has absolutely destroyed my mental health to the point of suicide. These feelings increased when I offered my provider ... a copy of Verification of medical conditions. Refusing to accept it, the site manager then increasing my job search requirements from 15 to 20. Suspending payments is taking food off the table, it causes more undue stress on the individual, the providers don't care. Withholding food is going against basic human rights, you have to be able to get food. What they do is criminal."

Section Commentary

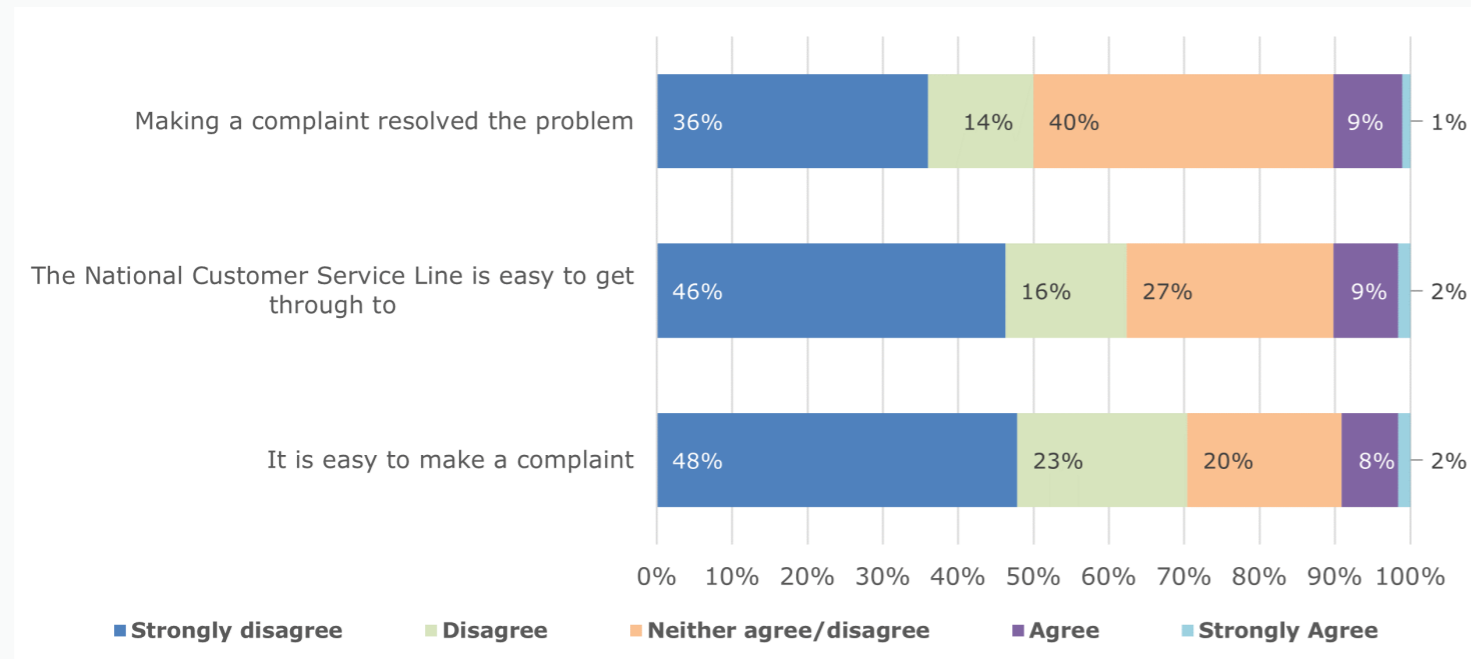
These results show that payment suspensions cause people harm. It is ACOSS's view that automatic payment suspensions should not be used in employment services. Contrary to a view that payment suspensions are not 'penalties' and do not cause harm, our findings show that there is a high level of distress associated with them that affect the well-being of people using the jobactive system. The 'threat' effect of payment suspensions causes people great anxiety that is harmful to their well-being, regardless of whether the suspension results in a delay to the payment or not.

9. Making complaints

These questions related to the visibility and accessibility of complaints processes for people using jobactive services. These questions provide an indication of people’s perceptions of the fairness of services, as well as the extent to which they are able to access administrative review of decisions made by employment service providers. The 2021 survey included questions on the ease with which people could make complaints, and the extent to which the complaints were followed up in a satisfactory manner.

Seventy per cent disagreed that it was easy to make a complaint, 50% indicated that complaining resolved the problem and 59% did not find the National Customer Service Line easy to get through to.

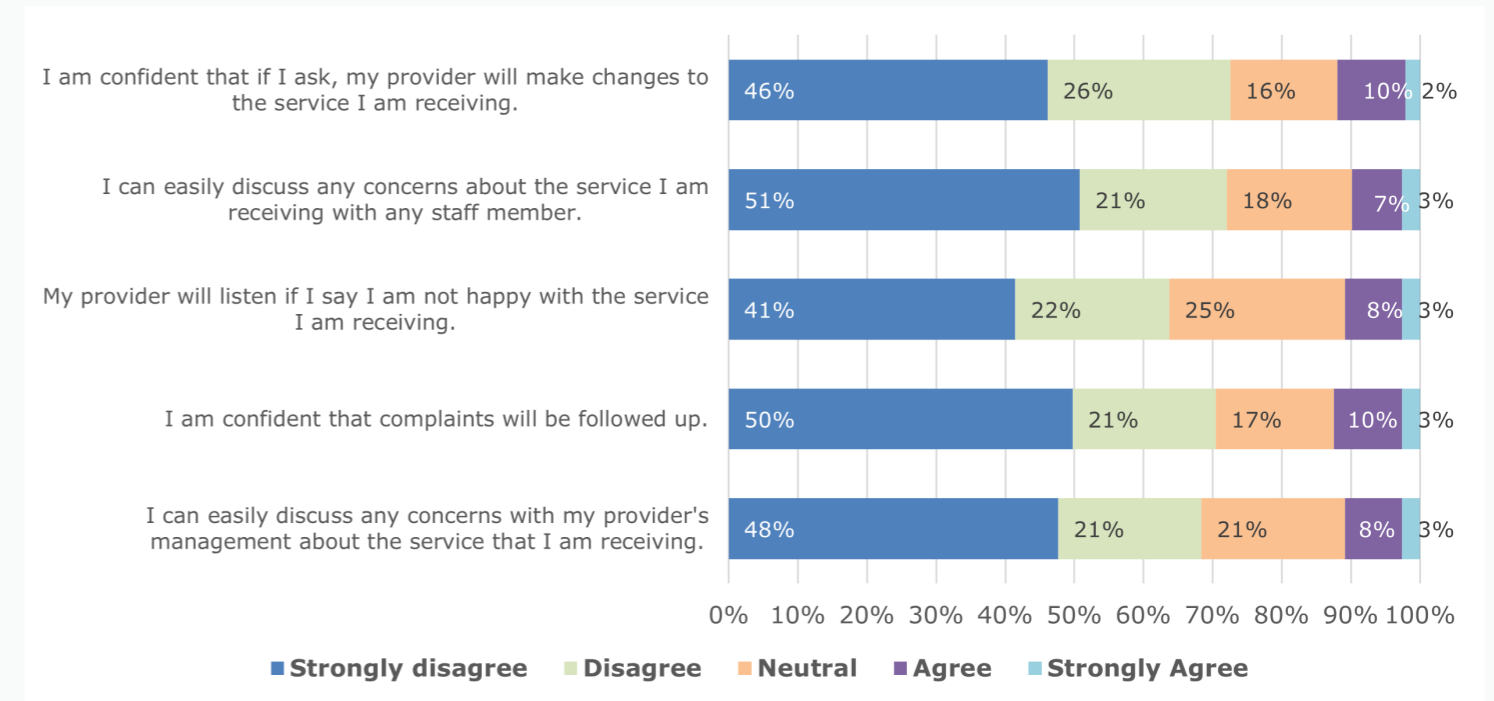
Figure 21 – Access to complaints



Being able to make complaints and have them acted on is an important aspect of any service. To understand the issues faced by people making complaints, we asked some further questions about people’s views on their provider’s responsiveness to complaints.

The results showed that 72% did not think their complaint would result in changes to the service, 72% did not find it easy to discuss their concerns with their provider or worker, 63% said they thought the provider would not listen, and 71% were not confident the complaint would be followed-up.

Figure 22 – Provider responsiveness to complaints



The commentary indicated the people had grave doubts about the benefit of making complaints. Concerningly fear of retaliation was repeatedly mentioned as a factor that prohibited them from pursuing complaints.

"I won't complain because of the fear of what they will do to me."

"Every complaint I made was ignored, and saw retaliatory action taken towards me. After two complaints I stopped making them since it was obvious I was not anonymous and I feared further retaliatory action."

Section Commentary

These results show that complaint mechanisms are not accessible enough to people who use jobactive services, and that they have little confidence that their complaints will be followed up. Complaints processes in employment services need urgent attention and reform to overcome the lack of accessibility and accountability identified in this survey.

10. Case studies – Voices of people who used jobactive

This year's case studies are written in the form of life history narratives. There were two interviewees, a man in his mid-60s in a suburb in a Tasmanian city whom we have called Robert. The second interview was with a woman in her early 50s in regional New South Wales whom we have called Claire.

Robert's story

Over 20 years employment history of including in sales, real estate, and manufacturing. A health issue has meant I had to leave my industry, but I've been told it's not worth applying for the DSP.

So, I am classified as a job seeker in jobactive, until I reach age pension.

I would describe the overall service as degrading. I really want to work but I'm finding there's a lot of age discrimination out there, and I can only get casual hours here and there. I've been able to get work over the Xmas period but it's not ongoing and that means I have to search for jobs.


At one stage the job searches were set at 20 per month, but I've got a good consultant now who has set them at 12. I didn't know that I could negotiate this they just tell you and half of them don't know what they are doing. They also don't respect your privacy and put you into rooms in groups where everyone can overhear what's going on with the others.

I don't have issues using it myself, but I know others who struggle with all the IT. The Centrelink app/jobactive app - complicated at times and not up to date. The job matching function is useless.

The courses assigned by providers are useless, because they give people with experience training on areas already learnt about. I've been sent on retail training course even though over 20 years' experience working in retail and managing a sales team.

The only useful thing I ever got out of my job provider is a uniform and boots, when I was starting a job. I'd keep that but the services are degrading services, and they make it more difficult to get a job. The staff turnover is so high I get the impression they just don't know what they are doing.

In my view the services need to be targeted to the individual, and they need to give people more opportunities to train and retrain, including people as they get older. They also need to make the technology easier to use.



"Most provider staff don't know what they are doing."

Claire's story

I am a qualified nurse and have held a range of registered nursing and related roles in health and aged care settings. I became unemployed/underemployed due to workplace incidents, and I am applying for DSP due to psychological injury. I have been in jobactive for a couple of years now and I am classified as Stream A, even though I have a diagnosed psychological injury and am applying for the DSP. I've been able to get a few contract jobs, but my health conditions have made it hard for me to keep going in them, and there are unreasonable demands on casual and contract staff in health and aged care.

In my view, in jobactive the experience depends on the individual caseworker/case manager, and I've found most of them don't have any idea how to get me a job that's right for my experience.


I had a good worker, but she left and then I had to deal with the manager who was worse. At no time have they ever understood the needs of clients with trauma who are not given any exemption or compassion. They have not provided me with referrals or support to services that could have helped me.

The situation has got so bad that I have been referred to the Services Australia social worker to discuss my case. They keep threatening me but because I am an independent person and have some resources to draw on, I am able to stand up to them. But it's making me go backwards financially, and it's adding to the stress and trauma I am already dealing with.

It shouldn't have to be like this. It should be a more cohesive system and people should have access to qualified practitioners like Occupational Therapists. I think they should re-nationalise or regionalise employment services so that there are localised hubs who know about the jobs that are available, and the community's needs.

It would be great if they could organise appointments to be held on the jobactive/Mygov website rather than have to go in, especially with COVID around.

This system is designed for an archetype of "dole bludgers", and the truth is we are far from that.



"Jobactive is just giving a job to people to punish others who don't have a job."

Voices 2:
results of a survey of people
who used jobactive
2022



