

Work Programme evaluation: Findings from the first phase of qualitative research on programme delivery

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This report presents preliminary findings based on the first phase of qualitative research as part of the official evaluation of the Work Programme, a 'black box' (minimum-specification) contracted employment programme introduced nationally in June 2011. The research investigated delivery and experience of the programme up until the end of June 2012. Fieldwork included qualitative in-depth interviews with Work Programme participants, Jobcentre Plus and provider staff and observations of participant-provider meetings. The research focused on 12 local authority areas across 6 contract package areas involving 11 different prime providers and their subcontractors.

Delivery models

Who provides the support?

The basic structures of the delivery models operated by Work Programme providers across the areas examined were very similar in their broad features. Most pre-employment provision was delivered by end-to-end providers which supported participants from the point of referral to the Work Programme to the point at which they entered work¹. In some cases these end-to-end providers were themselves prime contractors with DWP; more often they were subcontractors to the primes.

In some supply chains, there was, in addition, some use of specialist end-to-end providers, which focused on particular groups of Work Programme participants (e.g. young people, ethnic minorities or ex-offenders), but which also supported them for the

¹ These providers may also provide the subsequent in-work support to participants.

whole of their time on the programme.

End-to-end providers could refer participants to other providers for specialist assistance and specific interventions (e.g. training courses) or other support targeted at specific groups or to address specific barriers to work (e.g. mental health conditions, drug or alcohol dependence, housing problems). These were termed 'spot providers', irrespective of the period of support they offer. It was notable, however, that use of spot provision was relatively rare, and less common than suggested by the supply chains described in many prime providers' contracts with DWP. When such spot provision was used, in many cases the end-to-end providers turned to organisations outside the formal Work Programme supply chain which offered services free of charge or at low cost.

In-work support, to help participants sustain employment once they start work, was delivered through a variety of models in the six CPAs examined. In some instances, the same organisations that provided the pre-employment support also offered in-work support. In others, specialist in-work support providers were contracted to deliver the service.

Stages of support provided

In all the areas examined, a common structure of support was offered by the various providers involved, including the following stages:

- handover and engagement;
- assessment;
- out-of-work support;

- in-work support;
- exit from the Work Programme.

Most activity centred on the out-of-work support stage, and it was common for providers, following assessment, to divide participants into several streams, according to their assessed distance from the labour market (or ‘job-readiness’) and the barriers to work they face. The nature and intensity of out-of-work support varied significantly between the streams, as well as between different providers.

Entry to the Work Programme

The role of Jobcentre Plus

Claimants were referred to the Work Programme by Jobcentre Plus, and it was clear that Jobcentre Plus staff played a key role, both in preparing them for Work Programme entry and for ensuring a high quality handover to Work Programme provision.

The research highlighted both a lack of knowledge among many Jobcentre Plus advisers about the details of provision offered by providers, reinforced in some cases by a lack of direct communication with Work Programme providers, which limited the scope of preparation for the programme that they were able to provide to claimants. Equally, there was evidence among some Jobcentre staff of negative views about the underlying model of the Work Programme and the involvement of private sector providers, which contributed to their disinclination to improve links and involvement with the providers.

Referral and handover

The evidence from providers, Jobcentre Plus and participants indicated that all parties felt that more could be done to improve referrals and handovers in practice, both at Jobcentre Plus and prime provider level. In particular, there was seen to be a need for Jobcentre Plus to improve the amount and quality of information about participants and their needs which is transferred to prime providers with referrals, and for prime providers to ensure this information is passed on to subcontractors in its entirety. This,

respondents believed, would help to minimise the time between referral and engagement with the programme by giving those contacting, assessing and inducting new participants the information they need to do this quickly and effectively. In addition, participants’ accounts illustrate that they would often benefit from clearer and more comprehensive information (perhaps written) about what they should expect from the programme.

One measure encouraged by DWP and Jobcentre Plus to enhance the referral process is the ‘warm handover’, an initial three-way meeting between the claimant, their existing Jobcentre Plus adviser and their new Work Programme adviser. Despite being envisaged in prime providers’ bids, the evidence suggested that genuine warm handovers were far from widespread.

Assessment

Most providers conducted an assessment of new entrants to the programme, based on initial information submitted at the time of referral, and supplemented with the use of more comprehensive assessment tools and dialogue with the participants. The assessments, which varied in their level of detail, typically fed into a classification of participants according to their degree of job-readiness, which was in turn a key element in determining the amount and type of provision offered by the provider to the participant. The assessments were also commonly used by the provider, in discussion with the participant, to construct an action plan setting out the agreed activities to be undertaken by both parties during the participant’s time on the Work Programme.

Pre-employment support

The dominant approach among generalist end-to-end providers was to deliver pre-employment support by allocating participants to personal advisers on a one-to-one basis. This approach was also used by some spot and specialist providers, depending on the nature of the interventions they delivered.

As might be expected with a black box programme that serves a wide range of participants, the pattern of contact between personal advisers and participants was extremely variable, both between different providers and between different types of participant (often according to their degree of assessed job-readiness). Advisers often had considerable autonomy in managing their caseloads. This autonomy notwithstanding, it was common for providers to report that the frequency and intensity of adviser-participant contact in practice was lower than providers envisaged and desired. Many reported, despite the differential payments regime (with higher payments offered for hard-to-help groups), that they prioritised more job-ready participants due to higher than expected caseloads and growing pressure to achieve job outcome targets.

Advisers also reported considerable (frequently cost-driven) limits on the additional support that could be offered to participants, particularly where that support might involve referrals to external, paid-for, provision. Partly as a result of these constraints, the routine use by end-to-end providers of specialist and spot subcontractors was by no means universal. However, there were numerous examples of their use and reports suggested that, where used, providers generally reported that the provision functioned effectively.

Action planning

In line with the programme's flexible design, although use of individual action plans was the norm, the details of how, when and with what intensity they were used, varied considerably in practice, as did the degree and manner in which the participants' own preferences and views were incorporated into the planning process. There was some evidence from participants that they would often prefer more involvement in this process, and that this would increase their engagement with the programme.

Amongst end-to-end providers, action plans were widely and regularly used to monitor participants' progress and to actively move them in stages towards their job goals. The frequency with which

the plans were reviewed was highly variable between providers and types of participant. Once again, it appears that large caseloads have resulted in the prioritisation of more job-ready claimants, who reported experiencing greater use of, and more frequent reviews of their action plans.

There were also varying degrees of autonomy in action planning procedures. Some providers within the study operated computerised action planning systems which generated generic actions. In some cases advisers could not change or adapt these actions, which limited the degree to which they could be tailored to individuals' needs and circumstances. Others used paper-based approaches, allowing advisers to negotiate and personalise the actions for individuals. The need for some skill in leading the negotiation of actions was apparent. Disagreements sometimes arose between advisers and their participants about their support needs. However, the benefit of the ongoing review and updating of action plans was seen as a supportive process to allow time for participants to change their views and willingness to co-operate.

Ongoing communication between the key actors

A common finding, drawing on the views of staff in providers and Jobcentre Plus, was that a lack of effective communication between the two types of organisation was a source of difficulties at several different stages of the programme (i.e. referral, handover and sanctions activity). This is not to say that poor or inadequate communication was the norm: there were also examples of good, well-functioning communication channels, in both directions, but these were far from universal.

More generally, some aspects of the research suggested that potentially difficult relationships between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers sometimes lay beneath any communication problems. This appeared to stem, in part, from a belief among some Jobcentre Plus staff that their own support is superior to that of the Work Programme, and a concern about the increasing role of external providers in the delivery of employment services.

In-work support and sustainability

Since the Work Programme focuses on sustainable employment, the evaluation is looking not only at what providers do to get participants into work, but also their approaches to delivering in-work support (which may involve support to participants and their employers).

At this early stage of the programme and its evaluation, evidence on the extent and nature of in-work support is limited. Where it did take place, in the early phases of work (e.g. through telephone follow-up to identify problems and offer reassurance) participants generally reported that it had been helpful and appropriate. Providers also confirmed the potential value of this support in helping to prevent people from dropping out of work, although they reported reluctance among some participants to remain in touch with their provider. This could make it difficult for the providers to help participants to sustain employment, as well as making it more difficult for providers to acquire evidence of (sustained) job outcomes. These early and limited data on in-work support suggest that work to enhance participants' understanding of the potential benefits of continued support may be beneficial.

Providers and participants who had entered work, however, emphasised that sustainability was not solely about ongoing in-work support; it relied on the quality of the match between the participant and the job in the first place. Employment which matches the aspirations and skills of the participant, especially if the participant is well-prepared for it, was much more likely to be sustainable than employment which did not match in these ways, or for which the participant had not been appropriately prepared.

Conditionality and sanctions

To encourage some participants to engage with the Work Programme, providers can choose to require them to undertake work-focused activities under

threat of a benefit sanction. Where a participant fails to undertake one or more of these mandatory activities, the provider should refer the case to Jobcentre Plus for a sanction decision.

The (qualitative) evidence gathered so far indicates that most sanctions are due to failure to attend initial Work Programme meetings rather than for non-compliance in subsequent mandatory activities, and that most sanctions referrals are made by generalist end-to-end providers, rather than spot or specialist providers.

The findings suggest that poor communications between Jobcentre Plus and providers (in both directions) undermined the effectiveness of the sanctioning process during the early months of the programme. For example, a large proportion of sanctions referrals were reported to be made erroneously as a result of providers not being notified by Jobcentre Plus of changes to participants' circumstances. Furthermore, many providers reported that a high proportion of participants referred for decisions were not sanctioned by Jobcentre Plus for 'technical' reasons (i.e. procedural errors on the providers' part), the effect of which was damaging to the provider-participant relationship, and reduced the potential impact on participants of the sanctions 'threat'. An additional difficulty reported by providers was that they did not consistently receive feedback about the reasons why sanctions were not applied, which hindered improvements in their sanctioning procedures.

Many staff in providers and Jobcentre Plus questioned the effectiveness of the sanctions process, and some questioned its need, highlighting that most participants complied fully and willingly with the requirements of the programme. However, this view may under-play the extent to which participants' knowledge that sanctions can be applied drives their compliance with programme requirements.

Participants were widely aware that the Work Programme involved an element of conditionality, but their detailed knowledge of the circumstances under which sanctions may be applied was often much weaker.

Attitudes and motivation

The research suggested that one reason why most participants complied with the requirements of the Work Programme was that most wanted to work and were prepared to make efforts to find appropriate work. That said, there was considerable variation between participants in their degree of engagement with the programme and it was clear that underlying attitudes and motivation were influences on engagement.

The findings suggested that the quality of the initial contact with the Work Programme provider was a critical influence on attitudes and motivation and subsequent engagement with the programme. This quality was enhanced by the personal manner, perceived reliability and pro-activity of the participant's main adviser. The findings suggest that regular, positive engagement with advisers can increase the engagement and motivation of participants over time.

Conversely, quality was adversely affected in cases where the participant perceived they were being asked to engage in inappropriate or irrelevant activities, or to enter unsuitable employment.

Addressing barriers to work

It was clear that many Work Programme participants faced multiple and complex barriers to work, which may have included caring responsibilities, health conditions, drug or alcohol dependence, housing or debt problems and many others.

It was much less clear from the evidence whether these kinds of barriers were being tackled in an effective and consistent manner by the provision offered under the programme. Rather, the evidence was mixed, and there were differences between the views of providers and participants on these issues.

The evidence suggested that providers were able to do more for participants with fewer and less severe barriers to employment, and that support for those who might benefit from specialist interventions was less widespread. In part, this appeared to reflect the tendency for many end-to-end providers, for

reason of cost, to attempt wherever possible to meet support needs either in-house, or through referrals to cost-free support services.

Participants' reported experiences in this respect were variable. Many of those whose barriers to work centred on confidence or motivation issues did indeed report a positive impact from supportive regular inputs from advisers. Others, including some with health conditions, reported being seen as 'job-ready' and were encouraged to enter work without any further specialist support. In those cases where participants were referred to specialist provision to address specific needs, this was typically provision which was available free of charge to the Work Programme provider (e.g. because it was a free service available from the voluntary sector, or because it drew on other funding sources).

Personalisation of support

A key intention of the Work Programme is that participants should receive a highly personalised package of support to help them into work through addressing their individual needs.

The research with providers and participants suggested that a degree of procedural personalisation was established through the development of high quality one-to-one relationships between participants and advisers and the assessment and ongoing action planning activities.

The evidence was however, more patchy, in respect of substantive personalisation in the sense of participants receiving distinct and, if appropriate, specialised support aimed at addressing their identified individual needs. On the one hand, the research did find a few examples of providers offering less personalised 'work first' approaches to the most job-ready participants, while those with more barriers to work received more personalised, 'human capital' focused support. On the other hand, the findings suggested more generally that the widespread claims of providers to offer a highly personalised service were at odds with the frequently-observed reluctance to make referrals to specialist support, especially where there were significant cost implications of the latter.

Creaming and parking

A risk inherent in minimum specification, payment-by-results programmes such as the Work Programme, is that providers will concentrate their resources on participants who are more likely to achieve outcomes, whilst providing less or no help to those who require more (costly) support to generate a paid outcome. To reduce the risk of this opportunistic behaviour, known as ‘creaming and parking’, the Work Programme employs a system of differential payments, offering bigger payments for certain participant groups to encourage providers to support (not park) those who are further from the labour market. A key evaluation challenge is to assess how well the funding model has minimised creaming and parking, distinguishing these undesirable behaviours from desired personalisation of support and efficient use of resources.

It is not yet possible from the research reported here to draw firm conclusions about the existence or extent of creaming and parking. Some of the reported experiences of participants and providers suggest, at face value, a degree of creaming and parking; for example, many providers openly reported seeing their most job-ready participants more frequently than those with more severe barriers to work. However, other interpretations are clearly possible, and less frequent contact/support is not necessarily indicative of lower quality or less appropriate support. The qualitative evidence collected to date is limited in its ability to unpack this difficult topic; it will require

further, detailed exploration through quantitative and longer-term data.

Overall views

The research provides a valuable but limited account of programme delivery and begins to identify practice in relation to some critical themes that will be tracked in future stages of the evaluation. In particular, the research suggests:

- limited use of specialist provision to address individual barriers to work, and that the personalisation of support is often more procedural than substantive in nature;
- deficiencies in communication and information flow (in both directions) between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers; and
- that many providers are prioritising more ‘job-ready’ participants for support, ahead of those who are assessed as having more complex/substantial barriers to employment.

Further qualitative research examining programme delivery will be conducted with participants, Jobcentre Plus and providers, which will enable further testing of the findings noted here. Survey work will also be conducted with participants and providers, which will allow an examination of the scale and intensity of findings. This will provide the evidence base for a fuller, more robust assessment of the Work Programme’s operation.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 909532 01 4. Research Report 821. December 2012).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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