Research report

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

by Becci Newton, Nigel Meager, Christine Bertram, Anne Corden, Anitha George, Mumtaz Lalani, Hilary Metcalf, Heather Rolfe, Roy Sainsbury and Katharine Weston

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Summary

This report presents preliminary findings based on the first phase of qualitative research forming part of the official evaluation of the Work Programme.

The Work Programme is a major new, integrated welfare-to-work measure introduced nationally in June 2011, targeted at longer-term unemployed people, and providing support for up to two years to help them into sustainable work. The programme is delivered through a network of prime providers and subcontractors, operating under a payment-by-results regime, with considerable freedom to develop innovative provision for the individuals they support.

The evaluation, over the period 2011-15, is examining the way in which the Work Programme is commissioned, how it is delivered and what the experience and outcomes are for participants. This report focuses on programme delivery, looking at the experiences of staff and participants. Initial findings from the parallel commissioning strand will be published in early 2013.

Methodology

The findings in this report draw on fieldwork conducted in spring and summer 2012 in six of the 18 (sub-regional) Work Programme contract package areas (CPAs). It draws on:

- qualitative interviews with staff from 56 different Work Programme provider organisations, and with Jobcentre Plus staff across 12 districts;

- qualitative interviews with over 90 Work Programme participants; and

- observations (in four of the six CPAs) of meetings between frontline staff in Work Programme provider organisations and participants in the programme.

Because the research is qualitative in nature, and conducted at a relatively early stage of the Work Programme, caution should be exercised in generalising from the findings presented here. Definitive conclusions about the effectiveness and impact of the Work Programme should not be drawn from this research, but will emerge as the evaluation continues and as the qualitative data are supplemented with representative quantitative evidence (from both surveys and administrative data) and as the research on programme delivery is integrated with the parallel research being undertaken on the commissioning process.

The current research, however, provides a valuable account of delivery in this early phase of implementation and begins to identify practice in relation to some critical themes that will be tracked in future stages of the research.

Delivery models

Who provided 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 work . 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 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 duration of support they offered. 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 faced. 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.

Information sessions

In addition to any briefing by Jobcentre Plus given to those claimants mandated to participate in the Work Programme (mainly people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance), providers were required to offer information sessions to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants who were potential volunteers for the programme, in order to increase take-up amongst these groups. The research confirmed that these sessions were taking place in a variety of formats, with providers generally aiming to be flexible according to the needs of these claimants . However, the early findings from providers suggested that subsequent take-up of the Work Programme was not high among these groups.

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 handover 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 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' (minimum-specification) 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.

Next steps

The evaluation of the Work Programme continues over the next two years and the subsequent stages of research will enhance the preliminary, qualitative evidence reported here. The next report in the evaluation series will focus on the commissioning approach within the programme and will be published in early 2013.

In parallel, 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.

1   Introduction

This report presents preliminary findings based on the first wave of qualitative research on the delivery of the Work Programme. The findings incorporate evidence drawn from several elements of research:

- interviews with Work Programme providers;

- interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff;

- interviews with claimants eligible for the Work Programme, and participants in the Work Programme;

- observations of interactions between frontline staff in Work Programme providers and participants in the Work Programme.

Because of the qualitative nature of the research reported here, and the fact that the data are based on experiences at an early stage of the implementation of the Work Programme, they should not be used to draw conclusions about the overall effectiveness or impact of the programme. As further results become available from future stages of the evaluation during 2013–15, including information on the commissioning process, and quantitative evidence from survey and administrative data, the scope for drawing stronger conclusions will increase. The results presented in this report provide an early qualitative insight into the delivery processes being implemented by providers in the Work Programme, and the experiences of early participants in the programme.

Complementary work is underway evaluating the Work Programme's commissioning model and the first findings under this strand of work will be published in early 2013.

Both strands of research form part of the official multi-method evaluation of the Work Programme, commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), being undertaken over the period 2011–15 by a consortium of research organisations led by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES).

1.1   The Work Programme

The Work Programme is a new, integrated welfare-to-work programme implemented across Great Britain[1] by the UK Government in June 2011. It replaces a range of predecessor programmes, including Pathways to Work[2] and the Flexible New Deal[3].

It was designed to address concerns raised about the performance and cost-effectiveness of existing employment programmes targeted at unemployed and inactive people. Thus, for example, the National Audit Office examined Pathways to Work and noted:

> *'Pathways has turned out to provide poor value for money and the Department needs to learn from this experience.'*[4]

> (National Audit Office (NAO))

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[1]   Different arrangements apply in Northern Ireland.

[2]   See NAO (2010), for a summary of evaluation findings relating to Pathways to Work.

[3]   Several published reports set out the evaluation findings relating to the Flexible New Deal: see Vegeris *et al.* (2011a and 2011b).

[4]   NAO (2010).

A key feature of the Work Programme is that it extends and builds on many previous approaches to commissioning welfare-to-work programmes[5] (particularly the Flexible New Deal, which embodied some similar principles) through private and voluntary sector contractors. This commissioning model is set out in detail in the invitation to tender issued by DWP to potential contractors under the programme[6], but particularly important features are that it further extends the 'black box' approach introduced in some other recent programmes (under which contracted providers are free to decide their own approach to provision, which is not prescribed by the Department), and that it is a payment by results (PbR) model.

The invitation to tender document also lists the Government's core objectives for the programme ('critical success factors') which are to:

- *'increase off-flow rates for WP customer[7] groups (more people into work);*
- *decrease average time on benefit for WP customer groups (people into work sooner);*
- *increase average time in employment for WP customer groups (longer sustained jobs);*
- *narrow the gap between off-flow rates/time in employment for disadvantaged groups and everyone else; and*
- *contribute to a decrease in numbers of workless households.'*

While some of these objectives are familiar from previous welfare-to-work programmes in the UK, the emphasis on sustainable employment is substantially strengthened compared to previous programmes. This emphasis confirms the intention to address a key problem with previous active labour market measures in the UK and elsewhere[8], namely their tendency to suffer from 'revolving door syndrome', whereby the programme's emphasis on getting participants quickly into work, results in a high proportion of short-term, unstable employment spells, and participants returning to benefit relatively quickly.

This combination of: a) a new approach to commissioning, with complete flexibility for providers to innovate and payment by results and b) an emphasis on sustainability of outcomes with much of the payment to providers only occurring after participants have spent a significant period in work, means that the programme's performance is of considerable interest not only as a welfare-to-work programme in its own right, but also more broadly as the largest example, to date, of PbR in the delivery of UK public services.

1.1.1   The commissioning model

The commissioning model adopted for the Work Programme is a development of the approach set out by the previous administration (DWP, 2008), and continues the direction of travel implicit in this approach. The key elements of the Work Programme commissioning model can be summarised as:

- **A prime-provider approach.** This means that the Department contracts with a single provider (known as the prime provider, or 'prime'). The prime, in turn, commissions and manages a supply chain of subcontracted providers in order to deliver the contract.

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[5]   See also DWP (2008).

[6]   http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/work-prog-itt.pdf

[7]   Note that, although this term (customers) was used in the original invitation to tender, throughout this report we refer to people in the target groups for the Work Programme as 'claimants' (during the period before their participation in the programme), and as 'participants' (during their period on the programme itself).

[8]   See, for example, the discussion in Meadows (2006), Section 6.2.

- **Outcome-based funding.** In the Work Programme model, this goes further than previous models, incorporating several new elements, in particular:

  - **emphasis on sustained outcomes.** While the amount and timing of payments to provider will vary between different participant groups (see below), the principle adopted throughout the Work Programme process is that the payment on 'attachment' (when the participant enters the Programme) will be a relatively small part of the total[9]. Participants will remain attached to the Work Programme provider for up to two years, irrespective of whether they have entered work, and the bulk of the payment will be triggered for achievements later during these two years. In particular, a 'job outcome' payment will be triggered after a participant has been in work for a number of weeks (13 to 26 weeks, depending on the target group), which aims to reduce 'deadweight' (the extent to which providers are rewarded for job outcomes that would have happened anyway). Further 'sustainment' payments are payable (on a regular four-weekly basis, subject to a variable cap on the number of payments) after a trigger point when the participant has been in work for a longer period (17 to 30 weeks, dependent on the target group);

  - **differential payments**[10], under which providers are paid at different rates for outcomes achieved by different target groups (with outcomes for the harder-to-help groups being paid at higher rates than those for groups closer to the labour market). This change to the incentive structure for providers attempts to address concerns about 'creaming' and 'parking' behaviour on the part of providers, whereby they concentrate effort and resources on those participants for whom they believe they can achieve an employment outcome most quickly and/or cheaply;

  - **ongoing performance competition**, under which DWP will manage the provider 'market' with the objective of ensuring that providers are able to compete for market share to reap the rewards from high performance and suffer the consequences of poor performance. This will manifest itself through a process known as 'market share shifting', under which better-performing providers will, over time, be rewarded by being allocated a larger number of claimants, while the poorer-performing providers (who remain, nevertheless, above the minimum quality threshold) will receive fewer claimants. The random allocation of participants to prime providers is a critical element of the performance competition model, since it allows for an objective, unbiased comparison of provider performance.

- **Minimum service prescription by the Department.** This is the 'black box' approach, the aim of which is to allow providers considerable flexibility in deciding what interventions will best help participants into sustainable employment. Underlying this is the notion that this approach will encourage providers to develop a personalised approach customised to the needs of individual participants, and stimulate wider innovation in service delivery.

- **Larger, longer contracts (typically five to seven years in length).** The intention here is that the greater market stability offered by this contractual framework will facilitate the development of provider capacity and expertise and encourage investment to support innovation in service delivery.

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[9]   Moreover, the attachment fee will reduce to zero over time.

[10]   Strictly speaking this approach is not entirely new in the welfare-to-work field. Indeed it has a provenance going back at least 20 years. Thus, in the early 1990s, Training and Enterprise Councils delivering government employment programmes under contract operated under a variable tariff for outcome payments, with higher rates for outcomes achieved by participants with 'special training needs': Meager (1995).

1.1.2   Programme delivery and service design

Who participates in the Work Programme?

Within the framework set out by the new commissioning model, the Work Programme will apply to benefit claimants in the various categories[11] (known as 'payment groups') set out in summary form[12] in Table 1.1. This also shows the time during their benefit claim at which claimants will be referred to the programme, and whether participation in the programme will be compulsory or voluntary for these claimants.

Table 1.1   Work Programme payment groups

	Payment Group	Point of referral	Basis for referral
1	JSA claimants aged 18–24	From 9 months on JSA	Mandatory
2	JSA claimants aged 25+	From 12 months on JSA	Mandatory
3	JSA 'early access' groups	From three months on JSA	Mandatory or voluntary depending on circumstance
4	JSA ex-IB	From three months on JSA	Mandatory
5	ESA volunteers	At any time from point of Work Capability Assessment	Voluntary
6	New ESA claimants	Mandatory when expected to be fit for work within three to six months. Voluntary from point of Work Capability Assessment for specified participants.	Mandatory or voluntary depending on circumstance
7	ESA Ex-IB	Mandatory when expected to be fit for work within three to six months. Voluntary from point of Work Capability Assessment for participants with longer prognoses.	Mandatory or voluntary depending on circumstance
8	IB/IS (England only)	From benefit entitlement	Voluntary
9	JSA prison leavers	From day one of release from prison	Mandatory

What do providers offer participants under the programme?

Providers are expected to deliver an individually tailored service for each participant, regardless of the benefit they are claiming. The nature of that service, and how it might vary between individual participants, and between the different participant groups is not specified by DWP, in line with the 'black box' principles underlying the programme. However, when tendering for the Work Programme, prime providers were required to indicate the level and nature of minimum service provision that they would offer to each participant group. These 'minimum service delivery standards' are specified in their contracts with the Department, and are made public through the DWP website. In addition providers are required to explain the minimum service delivery standards to participants when they enter the programme.

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[11]   The separate benefits in terms of which these categories are defined will be replaced over time, starting in 2013, by Universal Credit.

[12]   Fuller details of each of the payment group categories can be found in: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/wp-pg-chapter-2.pdf

How do claimants enter the Work Programme?

Jobcentre Plus refers claimants to Work Programme providers through the Provider Referral and Payments System (PRaP), which gives the provider basic details of the claimant with each referral. At this point the provider takes over, making the initial contact with the participant, and agreeing the action(s) that the provider and participant will undertake through the programme. This agreement should be recorded in an 'action plan', which will also incorporate any mandatory activity which the provider requires the participant to undertake. If a participant fails to comply with any mandatory activities, the provider notifies Jobcentre Plus in order that possible sanctions can be considered.

How long do participants stay on the Work Programme?

Each participant remains on the Work Programme for up to two years:

• or until the provider claims the final eligible outcome payment for that participant;

• or until the participant leaves benefit for a period of time which takes them beyond the two years of 'allotted time' on the programme; or

• unless Jobcentre Plus decides that a referral to Work Choice[13] is more appropriate for that participant.

Participants who return to benefit without completing their allotted time on the programme are directed back to the relevant provider to complete the programme. If, however, they return to benefit after the allotted time is complete, or when the provider has claimed a final outcome payment for them, they will return to Jobcentre Plus provision.

Who are the Work Programme providers?

England, Wales and Scotland have been divided into 18 'contract package areas' (CPAs) for the purposes of the Work Programme. Following a competitive tendering process, two or three Work Programme providers (drawn from the private, voluntary and public sectors) have been contracted to operate as prime providers in each of the CPAs (a list of the CPAs, showing their geographical coverage and the providers currently operating in each is shown in Appendix A). Within each CPA, providers compete with each other. Claimants entering the Work Programme are not, however, given a choice of provider. Rather they are randomly allocated to one of the primes operating in their Jobcentre Plus district and CPA with the consequence that provider performance can be directly compared. The primes may deliver services directly to Work Programme participants, or they may do so through a network of subcontractors, or both.

1.2   The evaluation of the Work Programme

The DWP has commissioned a consortium led by IES to undertake an independent evaluation of the Work Programme. Evaluation work started in autumn 2011 and will conclude in late 2014. The consortium includes the following organisations working alongside IES on various strands of the evaluation:

• Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (CESI/Inclusion);

• GfK NOP;

• National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR);

• Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York (SPRU).

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[13]   Work Choice is a voluntary DWP programme providing specialist employment services for people with disabilities or long-term limiting illness.

The evaluation is exploring the delivery and effectiveness of the Work Programme by assessing participants' experiences and outcomes. Given the innovative manner in which the programme is commissioned, the evaluation is also focusing on how the commissioning approach impacts on the provider market and influences service delivery and participant outcomes. Thus, the evaluation is split into commissioning and programme evaluation strands with considerable overlap between the two.

Key research questions for the evaluation as a whole include the following (the research questions addressed in the specific research strands covered in this first report are set out in more detail in Section 1.3):

• **Commissioning** – How does the DWP commissioning model underpinning the Work Programme impact on the provider market? How do DWP and prime providers influence service delivery and outcomes? Why do providers design their services the way they do?

• **Delivery** – What services do providers deliver to Work Programme participants and how do they deliver them? What is the participant experience? What are the key operational lessons learnt from delivery?

• **Outcomes** – What are the outcomes and destinations of Work Programme participants? How quickly do participants flow off benefit? How long do participants stay in work? What is the impact on benefit off-flows, job entry, retention and time in employment?

1.2.1   **The commissioning model evaluation**

This strand is examining how the commissioning approach impacts on the provider market and the decision-making processes of Work Programme providers, and thereby influences service delivery and participant outcomes. The commissioning strand design includes four fieldwork waves:

1   Interviews with unsuccessful bidders, non-bidders and providers who left the supply chain following contract award (autumn 2011).

2   Interviews with Work Programme prime providers and subcontractors (early summer 2012).

3   A second wave of interviews with prime providers and subcontractors, unsuccessful bidders, non-bidders and supply chain leavers (2013).

4   A final wave of interviews with prime providers and subcontractors, and unsuccessful bidders, non-bidders and supply chain leavers (2014).

1.2.2   **Programme evaluation**

Evaluation of the Work Programme service itself involves research with both providers and participants. By design, the 'black box' commissioning model provides DWP with little information about the services providers deliver to programme participants, and exploring the content of the black box is a key element of this strand.

Provider research

The provider research element of the evaluation aims to identify not only the service provided, but the factors shaping its nature, which will vary between providers, with local conditions and between different groups of claimants. The provider research is being conducted through:

• One wave of observational research (January/February 2012) – Observations of key interventions and interactions between participants and Work Programme provider staff (e.g. personal advisers, job coaches, employment liaison officers).

- A three-wave national online provider survey in 2012, 2013 and 2014.

- Two phases of qualitative research with Work Programme provider managers and advisers, DWP representatives and Jobcentre Plus staff in six contract package areas (12 locations) across the country:

  - Phase 1 – spring/summer 2012 (once provision is fully embedded);

  - Phase 2 – 2013 (after the first reassessment of market share).

Participant research

The research with participants is exploring their end-to-end experience of the Work Programme and ascertaining their views on services received, the relevance and helpfulness of services, and outcomes from the programme as a whole. This element aims to look beyond immediate job outcomes, to examine whether and how providers support participants to stay in employment, and work with employers to facilitate this.

Several waves of research are being undertaken, employing a mixed cross-sectional, longitudinal design:

- up to four waves of qualitative in-depth interviews with participants in spring/summer 2012, autumn 2012, spring 2013 and autumn 2013, using a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interview methods;

- a two-wave telephone survey of participants: wave one in summer 2012 with a follow-up wave in autumn 2013/early 2014.

Measuring outcomes and impact

An impact assessment of the Work Programme using econometric methods is being undertaken in-house by DWP staff. The consortium is providing consultancy input to support this element. Experts from the evaluation consortium are advising DWP on estimation issues, data properties and questions of interpretation and integration.

In addition, the consortium is undertaking a separate piece of econometric analysis, exploiting the opportunities offered by random allocation of claimants to primes, and drawing on both administrative data and data generated by other strands of the evaluation to identify the factors associated with variations in provider effectiveness.

1.3   Coverage of this report and methods

This, the first published report from the evaluation, draws on several elements of the programme evaluation strand, described above, namely:

- The first wave of qualitative research with Work Programme provider managers and advisers, and Jobcentre Plus staff in six CPAs

- The first wave of qualitative in-depth interviews with participants (in the same six areas)

- Observations of interactions between participants and Work Programme provider staff (in four of the six areas)

The approach adopted for each of these elements is detailed in the following sections.

1.3.1   Qualitative research with Work Programme providers and Jobcentre Plus

Interviews with Work Programme providers

This element of the research focused on the provision made by two primes (and their subcontractors) within each of six sampled CPAs[14]. Within each CPA, around ten providers were to be sampled, spread between the supply chains of the two primes operating in the area, and focusing on provision within two localities within the CPA; the localities were defined as local authority areas.

All of the organisations included in this phase of the study had provided direct support to participants, i.e. any providers which had been named as subcontractors for the Work Programme, but which had not (yet) provided support to any participants were excluded from the sample, as were prime contractors who did not themselves directly deliver services to participants.

As far as possible, the sample was structured as shown in Table 1.2, the aim being to include a range of different provider types[15], including in particular:

• generalist end-to-end provision, i.e. covering the entire participant journey, from the point of referral until participants leave the programme, for all types of participants, within the relevant geographical area;

• specialist end-to-end provision, i.e. covering the entire participant journey, but concentrating on specified groups of participants, for example ex-offenders, or disabled people or people with specific barriers to work;

• non-end-to-end provision, for example, short courses, training, job brokerage or other targeted support (in this report, we refer to those offering this kind of provision as 'spot' providers).

Table 1.2   Provider sample structure within each of the sample CPAs

Locality 1		Locality 2	
Prime 1 contract	Prime 2 contract	Prime 1 contract	Prime 2 contract
End-to-end, general	End-to-end, general	End-to-end, general	End-to-end, general
Specialist end-to-end			Specialist end-to-end
Spot/other specialist	Spot/other specialist	Spot/other specialist	Spot/other specialist
Total 5		Total 5	

It should be noted that, within the Work Programme, end-to-end generalist provision is provided, in some cases, by primes themselves and in other cases by their subcontractors within supply chains. The emphasis of this study is on delivery, rather than the commissioning process and the contractual relationships between primes and subcontractors. The sampling approach adopted in choosing the organisations for interview was, therefore, primarily focused on ensuring that the range of delivery modes (end-to-end, spot, generalist, specialist) was covered, as described above, and so the sample was not structured by prime/subcontractor status, although as noted below the sample included both primes involved in delivery, and subcontractors.

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[14]   A map of all CPAs is provided in Appendix A.

[15]   The provider types, and the different models of provision they offer are explained more fully in Chapter 2.

The design of the research was such that, within each organisation, the local manager was to be interviewed. Additional interviews were to be conducted with two frontline staff delivering the programme (e.g. personal advisers, trainers, counsellors). However, it was recognised that there might not always be two relevant additional interviewees, particularly in some of the smaller spot providers.

As the parallel strand of research on the commissioning process[16] shows, specialist and spot providers have been used less than expected. As a result the research faced some difficulties in achieving the target sample structure outlined already, and the final sample included 23 spot/other specialists, but only five specialist end-to-end providers. The achieved sample is shown in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3   Spread of achieved sample of provider interviews

	Organisations	Individuals
End-to-end, general	28[*]	94
End-to-end, specialist	5	16
Spot/other specialist	23	38
Total	56	148

[*]   Including 12 prime end-to-end providers.

Fieldwork was undertaken from May to July 2012. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured topic guide (see Appendix C), which differed for managers and for other staff. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, except when the interviewee was unwilling to have the interview recorded. In these cases, notes were taken and a visit note drawn up.

Analysis was thematic, closely following the structure of the topic guides.

Interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff

In parallel to the research with providers, qualitative interviews were undertaken with two Jobcentre Plus offices in each CPA where the provider research was located, and with the Benefit Delivery Centres (BDCs) responsible for administering benefits and sanctions in those locations. These latter interviews were undertaken by telephone, whereas the Jobcentre Plus offices were visited and face-to-face interviews conducted.

Within Jobcentre Plus offices research aimed to capture the views of Adviser Team Managers (ATMs), personal advisers including those specialising in different customer groups, and Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) staff who have ongoing contact with participants on the Work Programme who are in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

Table 1.4 sets out the overall number of each type of Jobcentre Plus staff interviewed.

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[16]   The first report of findings from the commissioning strand is planned to be published in early 2013.

Table 1.4   Spread of achieved sample of Jobcentre Plus staff interviews

	Number of individuals interviewed
Benefit Delivery Centre staff	8
Adviser Team Managers	14
Personal advisers	23
Fortnightly Job Review staff	18
Total	63

As with the provider research, fieldwork was completed between May and July 2012. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured topic guide (Appendix C), which differed for each staff role. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, except when the interviewee was unwilling to have the interview recorded. In these cases, notes were taken and a visit note drawn up. A similar thematic approach was taken to the analysis, again following the structure of the topic guides.

1.3.2   Qualitative research with participants

The key questions that the evaluation set out to explore through research with participants, focused on their experiences of the Work Programme, including the type and quality of services received, and the degree to which services were perceived as tailored to their specific needs. Work Programme services were expected to vary according to the stage in the process (the 'journey') each participant had reached. The sample for the fieldwork was structured accordingly. Five distinct stages were identified:

• Stage 1 – Initial engagement with a Work Programme prime provider ('new entrants');

• Stage 2 – During engagement, with a prime provider or subcontractor ('engaged participants');

• Stage 3 – Job entry ('job entrants');

• Stage 4 – In sustained employment of six months or more;

• Stage 5 – End of engagement with the Work Programme.

In the first wave of fieldwork, to which this report refers, interviews were carried out with participants in Stages 1, 2 and 3. In later waves of fieldwork Stage 4 and 5 participants will be added, and subsequent reports in the evaluation series will consider the experiences of participants at these stages.

When interviewing participants at Stage 1 the aim was to explore perceptions about the Work Programme, closeness to work, aspirations and expectations, motivation, and barriers and needs. From participants at Stage 2 data were collected on experiences of working with providers, changes in motivation, aspiration, and progress towards work (including the perceived impact of the Work Programme). Stage 3 interviews focused on how entry to work was achieved, the fit with aspirations and capabilities, the role of employers, and expectations about the future. The most appropriate research method for addressing these issues and the interactions between them is qualitative, in-depth interviews.

Six prime providers from different CPAs (the same CPAs covered in the provider and Jobcentre Plus fieldwork described already) were selected as fieldwork sites on the basis of their varied ranges of organisation and provision. Some provided the majority of services through their own organisation, while others subcontracted most or all provision. Some had developed large and extensive supply chains, while others relied on far fewer organisations to provide services. The six providers were also widely spread geographically, covering England, Scotland and Wales.

At the request of the research team, the selected prime providers drew separate samples for Stage 1 (new entrants), Stage 2 (engaged participants) and Stage 3 (job entrants), from which five or six were interviewed from each of the six sites. In total, therefore, interviews were conducted with 33 Stage 1 (new entrant) participants, 30 Stage 2 (engaged) participants and 31 Stage 3 participants (job entrants). Some risk was inherent in this sampling approach that providers might filter participants and include only those who would give a positive account of their experience. To avoid this, they received guidance and instruction from the research team, supported by the DWP which instructed them to release a full sample.

The Stage 1 sample is being used as a panel and further interviews will take place with them in late 2012 and in 2013. This will allow a rich understanding of people's journeys back to work, and data on change, for example in motivation, aspirations, health, and the links between these.

Table 1.5 presents the principal characteristics of the achieved samples.

Table 1.5   Principal characteristics of participants recruited to the qualitative research

	Stage 1: New entrants	Stage 2: Engaged participants	Stage 3: Job entrants	Total
Age				
18–24	6	4	9	19
25–49	21	19	18	58
50+	6	7	4	17
Sex				
Male	20	21	18	59
Female	13	9	13	35
Work Programme Status				
Mandatory	27	26	27	80
Voluntary	6	4	4	14
Benefit type				
JSA (age 18-24)	3	3	7	13
JSA (age 25+)	14	10	15	39
JSA (early access)	7	7	4	18
JSA (ex-Incapacity Benefit)	1	1	-	2
Other JSA	5	5	5	15
ESA	3	4	-	7
Total	33	30	31	94

1.3.3   Participant observations

The final strand of research covered in this report involved the use of observational techniques to examine interactions between advisers in Work Programme provider organisations and participants in the programme, thus complementing the two separate strands of qualitative research with providers and participants respectively. A key object of the observational research was to provide early insight to DWP about frontline delivery of the programme and help to shape the other strands of research on programme delivery. The fieldwork took place between January and March 2012.

Two types of interview were observed: initial face-to-face sessions between advisers and participants, and subsequent follow-up sessions and reviews once an action plan had been made. In addition, some group information sessions were observed.

Wherever possible, following the observational sessions, short qualitative interviews were conducted separately with the advisers and participants who had been observed, to obtain their perspective on the observed sessions, and to check understanding and reasoning for observed behaviours.

Fifteen observations were carried out in each of four of the locations taking part in the provider research (see above) and the team aimed to strike an even balance between observations of initial and follow-up sessions in each location.

The observations were analysed in detail for information including:

• adviser interview style – for example challenging, directive, responsive, flexible, engaged, process-led or participant-focused;

• participant response – for example passive, active, engaged, disengaged, etc.;

• use of tools and other props such as screening tools, vacancy print-outs, leaflets, etc. and how these are introduced.

In this report the findings from the observational research are, for the most part, integrated with those from the participant interviews.

1.4   Report structure

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

• Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Work Programme providers' models for delivery;

• Chapter 3 provides early insights into Jobcentre Plus preparations for the introduction of the Work Programme and reactions to it;

• Chapters 4 to 11 explore process and implementation issues using the participant journey as a structuring narrative:

  – Chapter 4 looks at information sessions delivered to voluntary participants;

  – Chapter 5 explores referral and handover approaches and experiences.

  – Chapter 6 examines the delivery and experiences of assessment on entry to the Work Programme;

  – Chapter 7 details the nature and extent of support offered to participants before they enter work;

  – Chapter 8 reviews the extent and nature of action planning;

  – Chapter 9 looks at the ongoing contact and communications between providers, participants and Jobcentre Plus;

  – Chapter 10 examines the nature and scope of in-work support;

  – finally, Chapter 11 examines the operation and experience of conditionality and sanctioning;

- the report then turns to wider thematic issues relating to Work Programme delivery in Chapters 12 to 17:

    – Chapter 12 explores how aspirations and motivations are developed and supported;

    – Chapter 13 examines barriers to work and support to overcome these;

    – Chapter 14 reviews the approach to personalisation;

    – Chapter 15 examines the extent and nature of creaming and parking;

    – Chapter 16 examines what works and sustainability;

- Chapter 17 draws together some key conclusions arising from the programme research to date.

2 Provision: overview of delivery models and their key features

This chapter provides an overview of the Work Programme delivery models implemented in the case study Contract Package Areas (CPAs) by the prime contractors and their supply chains, and describes some of the key elements of their provision structure. It draws both on the descriptions of intended provision set out in the original contracts between the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the primes, and on the interviews with end-to-end providers (both primes and subcontractors) in the research localities. Thus, it combines primes' accounts of what they said they were going to do, and reports from the frontline of what they and their subcontractors said they were actually doing. This overview sets the scene, and allows comparison to be made with the evidence from participants presented later in the report, and with the research team's observations of adviser-participation interactions, as well as the perceptions of Jobcentre Plus staff.

The analysis in this and subsequent chapters of the report does not, for the most part, distinguish between the actions of primes and those of subcontractors. The focus of the analysis in this report is on frontline delivery and not the underlying commissioning and contractual arrangements which are covered more fully in the parallel commissioning strand of the evaluation[17]. Thus, although a small number of primes who were themselves end-to-end providers were interviewed in this strand of research (see Table 1.3), the interviews concentrated on their role in delivering the programme, rather than their role on contracting delivery through supply chains.

Later stages of the evaluation will integrate findings from the commissioning and the programme delivery strands, to look at the relationship between the two and whether and how, for example, prime/subcontractor status influences delivery practice.

2.1 Structure of delivery models

The basic structures of the delivery models operated in the 12 localities by the prime providers are very similar and their supply chains are comprised in varied combinations of end-to-end providers, specialist and spot providers.

2.1.1 Pre-employment support

Looking first at the approaches adopted to providing support to participants prior to any entry to employment, all of the prime providers operated a model in which most delivery was through end-to-end providers (in some cases, this was the prime itself, in others it was one or more subcontractors). This model was supplemented by the use of (subcontract) spot or specialist providers where necessary[18].

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[17]   The first report of findings from this strand is planned to be published in early 2013.

[18]   Note that a subcontractor may be contracted to more than one prime within a CPA (or across CPAs) and that a prime in one CPA may be a subcontractor in another CPA.

End-to-end providers

End-to-end providers aim to support participants from the point of referral and attachment to the Work Programme and into employment (ideally). There was, however, some variation between the models adopted according to whether:

- all the end-to-end providers used to deliver a Work Programme contract were generalist, with participants allocated solely on a geographical basis (Figure 2.1); or

- specialist end-to-end providers were also used (Figure 2.2).

In the first of these variants, all generalist end-to-end providers were expected to have the expertise to provide general support for all types of participants. In the second, specialist end-to-end providers offered support for certain types of participants (e.g. young people, ethnic minorities, offenders and ex-offenders, lone parents, participants with mental health issues, substance abusers) or for those seeking particular types of work (e.g. self-employment, care work).

However, it should be noted that where specialist end-to-end providers were used, they did not in all cases operate across the entire CPA. In these instances, mixed models were observed, involving some generalist providers dealing with all types of participants and needs, and specialist end-to-end providers assisting specific groups in specified localities.

The referral route to specialist end-to-end providers varied:

- in some models referral was by the central administration of the prime contractor on entry to the Work Programme (Figure 2.2(a));

- in others referral was by the generalist end-to-end (subcontract) providers, and was their decision (Figure 2.2(b)).

Spot providers

Spot providers might focus on specialist assistance for certain groups (e.g. offenders and ex-offenders), training (e.g. basic skills, vocational skills) or other needs (e.g. debt counselling, health issues). The use of spot providers was observed in both of the above variants (i.e. when end-to-end provision was only by generalist providers, and in cases where specialist end-to-end providers were also used).

Contracts between DWP and the prime providers described the intended use of spot providers, often for general support (e.g. debt counselling), personal issues (health, disability and offending) and for specific routes into the labour market (e.g. self-employment and vocational training). The number of spot providers identified in contracts varied greatly. As with the referral process to specialist providers described already, there was some variation in the set-up of the model when it came to referral decisions to spot providers.

In most cases (at least where the prime was not itself the generalist end-to-end provider), the use of spot providers was devolved to the subcontracted end-to-end providers (i.e. not only the decision to use a spot, but also choice, contracting and payment), as in Figure 2.1(a). However, some primes used centralised systems, with a central list of spot providers, which were contracted with centrally, as in Figure 2.1(b).

Wherever possible, however, end-to-end providers tended to make provision available in-house and, where spot provision was required, to make use of local providers whose services could be obtained free of charge (e.g. because they drew on funding streams outside the Work Programme). It was not clear how far the relatively low use of paid-for spot providers was due to a lack of participants with specialist needs or due to providers minimising external costs.

Figure 2.1   Pre-employment delivery model: only generalist end-to-end providers used

Note: the diagrams describe functions, not corporate status: in particular, geographically-based end-to-ends may be sub-contractors of the prime or the prime itself.
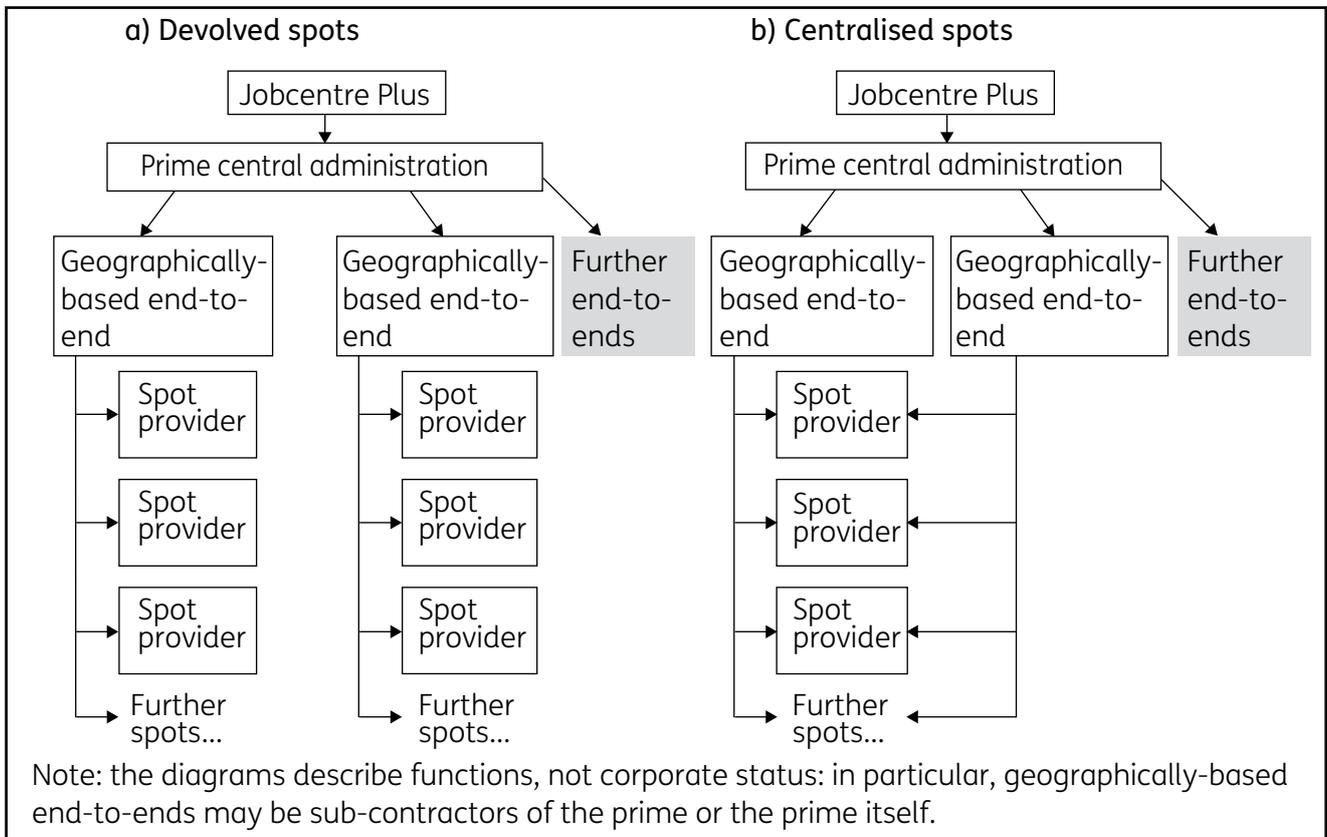
Figure 2.2   Pre-employment delivery model: combination of generalist and specialist end-to-end providers

Note: the diagrams describe functions, not corporate status: in particular, geographically-based end-to-ends may be sub-contractors of the prime or the prime itself.
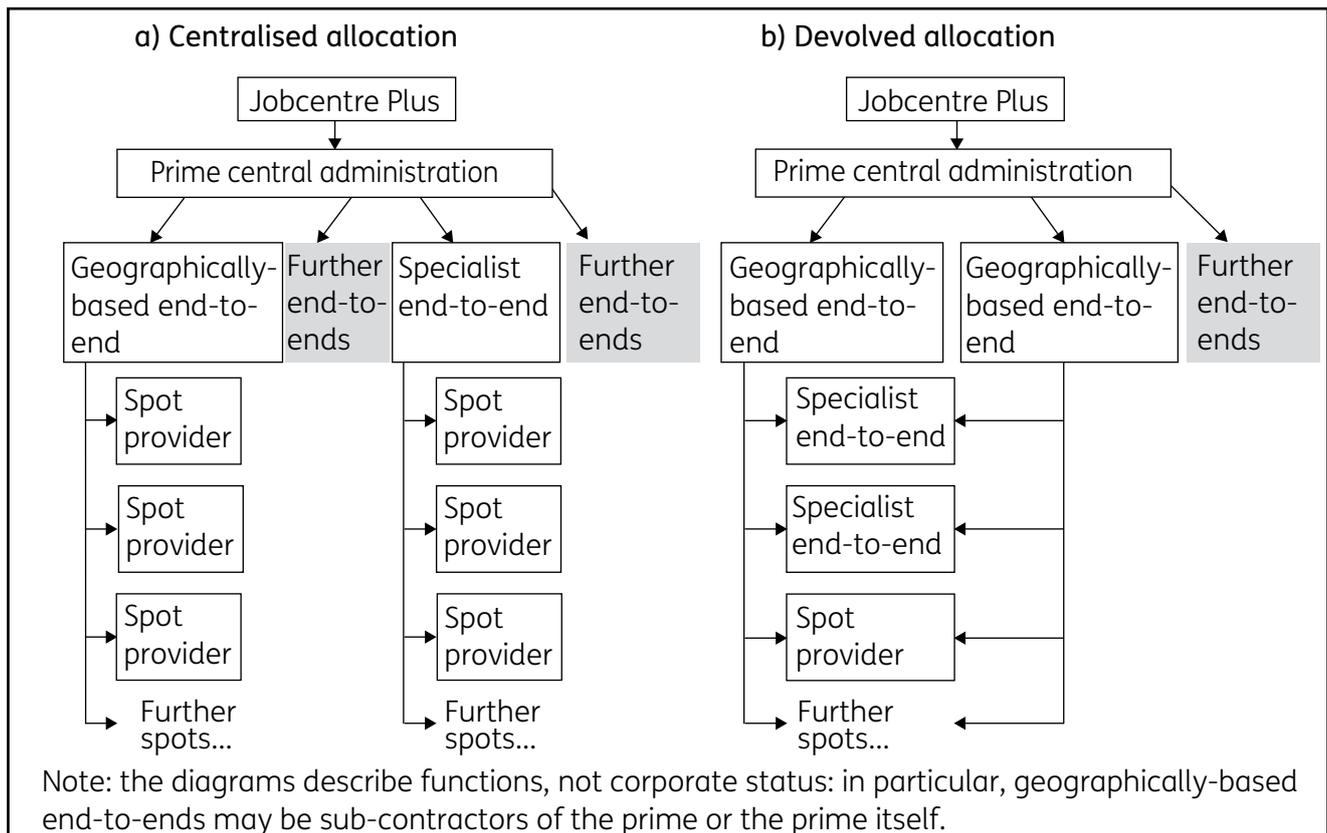
2.1.2   In-work support

There was also some variety in the models for the support of those participants who had successfully moved into work. The variations were:

a) in-work support was provided by the end-to-end provider;

b) in-work support was provided centrally for the whole CPA;

c) in-work support was provided by a number of specialist in-work providers;

d) in-work support was provided by a mixture of end-to-end providers and specialist in-work providers; in these cases, participants remained with their end-to-end providers if they offered in-work support; if they did not, participants moved onto specialist providers on entry to work.

Overlapping the separate provision of in-work support in some areas was a policy established by the prime for personal adviser support to continue to be provided by the pre-employment end-to-end provider for a set period after work entry.

2.2   Overview of support provision

This section draws on the interviews with providers to present a broad overview of the:

•   structure of support offered to Work Programme participants;

•   nature of the support packages provided and the degree to which they are individualised;

•   operation of minimum service standards and how the level of funding and support varied between types of participant;

•   approach to internal performance management operated within the providers interviewed.

These topics are explored in more detail in subsequent chapters.

2.2.1   Stages of support provided

Irrespective of the structure of the supply chain providing the support, the structure of the support, as described in the contracts with DWP, differed little between the primes and CPAs examined in the research. They all included the following stages:

•   engagement – including the handover of participants between Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme;

•   assessment – participants' needs and associated action planning;

•   out-of-work support – to help participants to move towards work;

•   in-work support – to help participants sustain work;

•   Work Programme exit.

The contracts with DWP and the interviews with prime providers suggested that (an aspiration to) a 'warm handover'[19] between Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme was the norm. Chapter 5 provides more detailed information about handovers in practice. At the out-of-work stage, all providers note the use an action planning approach, as laid down in contracts with DWP (see also Chapter 8 for more detail) and provide support through a personal adviser.

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[19]   A 'warm handover' should ideally involve a three-way initial meeting (preferably face-to-face), between Jobcentre Plus, the Work Programme provider and the individual participant.

Out-of-work provision was grouped into distinct streams, with participants allocated to a stream depending on their assessed distance from employment. The number of streams used varied from three to six, depending on the prime or (in one case, the end-to-end subcontractor). The emphasis of the different streams ranged across job application skills, job club-type activity, basic skills training, vocational training, addressing a range of external (e.g. debt) and personal barriers (e.g. health issues), and support for self-employment. Table 2.1 shows how provision might typically vary between the different streams.

Table 2.1   Typical support streams for broad categories of out-of-work groups

Stream	Support provision
Job-ready group[1]	Help with jobsearch, applications and CVs
	Vacancy identification and matching
	Job clubs
Group with moderate barriers to work	As above, plus training in general job skills and vocational skills
Group with major barriers to work	As above, plus barrier-specific support (e.g relating to health conditions or disabilities)
	Social and voluntary work activity

[1] This refers to the providers' assessment of participants. Assessment practices are elaborated in Chapter 6.

While this streamed approach was the norm across the sample, there was some variation in its implementation between the localities and providers examined. In particular, they varied in:

• which types of participants were allocated to which streams. Although allocation commonly depended on assessed needs and distance from employment, the patterns of how this was done differed between primes;

• whether a time period was specified for the length of time spent in the different streams (only one prime specified set periods of time a participant would spend in a distinct stream of support);

• the finer details of the support within each of these broad streams; and

• the intensity of support; for example, the frequency and nature of personal adviser contact and action plan reviews.

Fuller details of the support packages offered are described in Chapters 4 to 11 which focus on the 'journey' of participants through the Work Programme.

Standard packages or personalisation?

In one sense, all end-to-end providers described their offer as a standard package, i.e. participants were assessed, allocated a personal adviser, allocated to a support stream and moved between streams, depending on needs or period of time on a stream.

At the same time, provision within a stream was described as tailored to the individual, with the details of support within a stream varying with needs. Because of the individual tailoring of packages, it may be misleading to use the term 'standard packages', rather than the degree of personalisation[20]. The issue of personalisation of provision is considered in more detail later in the report (see Chapter 7 for personalisation in the pre-employment support offered and Chapter 14 which explores experiences of personalisation).

Minimum service delivery standards

All the prime providers have minimum service delivery standards set out in their contracts with DWP (see Section 1.1). In line with this all the primes interviewed reported having these standards. However, **standards varied somewhat** in what was addressed, although many related to similar services, and specified a similar level of activity (e.g. fortnightly or monthly contact with a personal adviser). Importantly from a participant perspective, some primes set a minimum service for all participants, whereas others set a standard to be met for a specified minimum percentage of participants. The latter makes it more difficult for individual participants to claim they have not been provided with the minimum service standard.

Most of the minimum service delivery standards established by the primes were clearly also relevant to their end-to-end subcontractors, and managers in these providers might, therefore, be expected to be aware of these standards. Despite all delivering for primes with minimum service delivery standards, **subcontractor managers' responses suggested differing awareness of the minima**. Some stated there were no minimum service offers, including three end-to-end providers interviewed, who were subcontractors of the same prime provider. Some referred only to a minimum for a single type of standard (e.g. frequency of personal adviser contact, speed of referral or speed of first contact) while others appeared to have a more holistic view of their minima, reporting standards for a number of support activities.

Some interviewees acknowledged there were minima, but said these were not currently being met due to much higher caseloads than expected. Others appeared to take a somewhat cynical interpretation of the meaning of some minimum standards:

> *'Meaningful contact is fairly vague. It doesn't have to be face-to-face or an individual appointment, it could be a telephone call or participation in a group employability session. We like this, we can be more flexible according to customer needs. We don't need to bring people into the office for the sake of it and it helps keep costs down.'*

> (Manager, generalist end-to-end)

The seeming lack of knowledge among managers in some end-to-end subcontractors of the minimum service delivery standards set by their prime raises a concern that these may not be being met in practice. Evidence on the nature and extent of pre-employment support is described in more detail in Chapter 7.

2.2.2   Focus of support on specific groups

The most common approach reported by providers in determining the extent and nature of support to participants, was simply that support was provided according to individual needs.

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[20]   The potential for confusion is illustrated by two managers in different end-to-end subcontractors, but contracted to the same prime within the same CPA, who stated the exact opposite about whether they had standard packages, but described similar support and similar personalisation.

However, around half said that the support provided tended to be more extensive for some groups of participants than others. Typically, this variation was not explicitly related to Work Programme payment groups, but was more often expressed in terms of distance from employment or where assistance was thought to be most effective.

There was considerable variation between the providers in how this was operationalised: in some examples, support was focused on those closest to employment, while in others it was those in the middle range or furthest from employment who received the greatest support where providers believed that impact would be greater. This variation raises the potential for the creaming and parking of participants, which is explored in Chapter 15.

Overall, the interviews did not, however, suggest a close link between the amount of in-house support for individual participants and outcome payments.

2.2.3   Additional expenditure on external provision

The provider interviews investigated how the budget for additional expenditure (e.g. payments for external provision, interview expenses and costs associated with employment) was allocated. One manager reported that their organisation, an end-to-end specialist provider, had no funds to spend on external provision. A small number reported having a maximum budget per participant or a set budget per participant. This was less common than having the flexibility to balance expenditure across participants.

Most commonly (and similarly to the approach to support provision in general, discussed already) it was stated that **additional spend per participant was driven by participants' needs**. However, it was clear that the structure of outcome payments strongly influenced expenditure in many of these organisations. Higher expenditure occurred when a person was guaranteed or seemed very likely to get a job following the expenditure.

In these cases it was unclear how much the decision to incur additional costs was driven by participant need (i.e. the additional support would contribute to getting a job) or merely enabled by the near-certain prospect of outcome payments (i.e. the expected outcome released funds to spend on the participant). However, the consequence, which was sometimes explicitly stated, was that in many end-to-end providers, expenditure was higher on those participants with lower barriers to work.

Although, as noted in Section 2.2.2, in most cases there was no clear link between the structure of outcome payments and the way in which providers organised their own support activities, interviewees, nevertheless, often explained their concentration of any additional expenditure on those closer to employment with reference to the payment structure. There were exceptions to this pattern: one specialist end-to-end provider said that it was able to focus its budget on those furthest from the labour market because its contract with the prime placed a relatively small percentage of payments on outcomes. The commissioning strand research will explore contracts and structures within supply chains in more depth.

This concentration on those closer to the labour market was not explicitly expressed in terms of different Work Programme payment groups. However, several staff reported that a consequence of this emphasis was that expenditure per head on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) participants was generally lower as they were being seen less frequently because they were deemed to be further from employment[21].

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[21]   See also Coulter *et al.*, (2012) for evidence on the support needs and job-readiness of ESA claimants, and the services offered to this group by Jobcentre Plus.

2.2.4   Use of performance pay and incentives

A key ongoing interest of the evaluation is the relationship between the external incentive structure faced by providers, particularly the system of outcome payments, their behaviour towards different groups of participants, and the nature and levels of support they provide to those participants. Also of interest is whether, and to what extent, providers construct an internal incentive structure of some kind, related to participant outcomes.

With this in mind, the evaluation explored performance pay and incentives to assess whether Work Programme provider employees had a financial interest in participants' outcomes and whether this might influence the support offered to individuals. This influence might be seen as beneficial: ensuring that support was best focused for achieving employment. Alternatively, it might contribute to creaming and parking (see Chapter 15).

Three types of performance pay and incentives were identified among providers: individual performance pay and bonuses (payments – both bonuses and salary increases – linked directly to achievement of targets); group bonuses; and promotion. However, **a close link between pay and participant outcomes was rare** and there was no clear evidence that the support provided to participants was conditioned by payments systems in any but a handful of the 56 providers interviewed in this study.

The main way in which there appeared to be scope for a performance-pay link to affect participant support decisions was through the promotion process. In a very small number of cases promotion was linked to the achievement of targets. In these, it seemed that the focus on specific actions (intermediate targets) and outcomes was likely to affect provision. However, in most instances, a much wider range of factors was considered in decisions on promotion, reducing the likelihood that support patterns were strongly target-driven in this way.

2.3   Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the delivery models in the CPAs selected for the evaluation. It shows some similarities in approach, with provision frequently centred on a 'participant journey' model from support for engagement through to sustained employment.

The primes operate some variations in their supply chain models. The most distinct is the use of specialist end-to-end providers in addition to generalist end-to-end providers. The method of contracting with other specialist and spot providers also varies; some end-to-end providers have autonomy to commission this type of support, while others have support commissioned on their behalf through centralised teams at prome provider level.

Although all primes had been contracted to deliver minimum service delivery standards, and these, frequently, were very similar in scope, not all subcontractors in the supply chain seemed fully aware of their prime's minimum standards. This raises a concern that participants may not be receiving the expected service. This is a point that the evaluation will continue to explore in future waves of research.

Provider employee payment systems seemed rarely to influence the support provided to individuals. However, there was evidence that the emphasis on a target-monitoring approach to managing staff did affect provision, resulting, to some degree, in parking of more difficult-to-help participants.

This early scene-setting chapter has highlighted a number of issues that are explored in some depth later in this report. Notably, these include how support is targeted towards different payment groups, differing approaches and attitudes to referrals to specialists, and how the payment system promotes or constrains the support available, including referrals to specialists.

3   Jobcentre Plus perspectives on the Work Programme

All Work Programme participants are referred to the programme by Jobcentre Plus, having spent up to one year (in their most recent spell of unemployment) receiving jobsearch and other work-related support from Jobcentre Plus advisers. It is clear that the relationship between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers and participants, both at the referral and handover stage, and at other stages (e.g. in circumstances where a participant is referred for sanctioning due to a failure to participate in a mandated activity) is an important dimension of the new regime facing jobseekers. Equally, it is of interest to understand how the advent of the Work Programme itself influences the behaviour of Jobcentre Plus and the services offered to claimants in the pre-Work Programme phase[22].

Throughout the rest of this report, where relevant, data and findings from the qualitative interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff are set alongside the data and findings on particular topics (referral, handover, sanctioning, etc.) from providers. This brief chapter explores the broader question of how Jobcentre Plus staff have reacted to the introduction of the Work Programme model and operation, and how they have been prepared for Work Programme implementation. It puts a spotlight on some critical issues that appear to colour their views of its operation.

3.1   Knowledge of Work Programme provision

The interviews explored with Jobcentre Plus staff their knowledge and awareness of the Work Programme. As might be expected with a flexible (black box) service specification, many **Jobcentre Plus advisers reported that they lacked knowledge about Work Programme provision.** They highlighted that they felt that a lack of direct communication with the providers did not improve their confidence in the programme (see Section 9.2.2). This perspective was supported by some team leaders, who reported that they felt less well informed at the time of interview, some nine to 12 months after implementation, than they did at the beginning of the programme. They reported information gaps relating to immediate concerns such as the specific provision offered by providers and the local provider's address, as well as longer-term factors such as the 'follow on' after two years of Work Programme participation.

Some Jobcentre Plus staff were surprised that the providers had not engaged more directly with Jobcentre Plus to liaise about the products and services they offered to participants. There were a few instances where Jobcentre Plus staff indicated they had received presentations/ pitches about provider services. These were seen as useful in helping the Jobcentre Plus staff 'market' the provision to claimants, prior to Work Programme referral.

3.2   Training for Work Programme implementation

Messages from Jobcentre Plus staff about their experience of pre-implementation training were varied. In some districts, **'master classes' on the Work Programme were held and a 'Work Programme champion'** was nominated in each office to answer queries. In these instances, the

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[22]   A separate evaluation has been commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) of the Jobcentre Plus Offer to claimants, since the advent of the Work Programme regime (Coulter *et al.,* 2012).

Work Programme was seen as being very similar to previous programmes. Staff reported that, following half a day of group training and as a result of the gradual increase in the number of participants, they came to an increased understanding of the technical aspects of the programme. These respondents reported feeling as prepared as they could be and that they had found the process straightforward.

In contrast, in other districts, **pre-implementation training was reported as having been limited**. Some team leaders noted that the information provided was insufficient, incomplete and at too high a level, and that this made it difficult for them to cascade training and information about the programme down the line to their advisers as they were expected to do. An example was the receipt of incorrect information about the timescales for claimants coming off the Flexible New Deal, which was reported to have caused confusion and frustration.

Some staff reported having received the terms and conditions for Work Programme participation ('the bare bones') and then relying on internal staff training and one-to-one sessions or observations to gain a fuller understanding of the requirements. In other cases, staff outlined that they felt 'left in the dark' about what the Work Programme would involve. Some signing staff reported that their training consisted of an information sheet that outlined the basic policy and process which they considered barely adequate. Others said they had only the latest information from the Labour Market System (LMS)[23] with no further in-house training.

Some Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) reported that they had attended workshops on referring Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants, but they still felt fairly unsure because the referral rules for ESA claimants to the Work Programme were quite complicated.

These views were mirrored by some Decision Makers[24] who claimed that their knowledge about the Work Programme was largely 'self-made'. Some had not felt well prepared but stated **they had gained more confidence through 'trial and error'**, although others reported having had no guidance whatsoever and, therefore, feeling extremely insecure:

> *'It stressed me out because you're stopping people's money, you're affecting people's lives and I wanted to make sure I was doing the job right. But there was no-one you could get to* [to check with].'

> (Decision Maker)

Some Decision Makers and team leaders had developed information sheets for their staff in order to provide them with some sort of overview of the Work Programme. However, it was reported that some of the uncertainties about when sanctions should be applied had been resolved only by more recent updates to the programme and process guidance[25].

Some advisers pointed out that, under a payment-by-results system, they felt less inclined to actively seek out information about providers and what they offered or to provide any additional service to claimants once they were referred to the Work Programme[26] because Jobcentre Plus did not receive any credit for it.

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[23]   An in-house computer network of DWP/Jobcentre Plus.

[24]   Jobcentre Plus staff responsible for decisions regarding the application of sanctions to claimants.

[25]   A major review of the sanctions process, and the associated guidance was undertaken centrally by DWP from late 2011 onwards.

[26]   It should be noted that policy does not intend that Jobcentre Plus continue to offer detailed support once individuals are referred to the Work Programme.

3.3   Early impressions of the Work Programme

It was apparent that many Jobcentre Plus advisers interviewed held negative views of the performance of the Work Programme providers. Overall, the research suggested that such views are widespread, although by no means universal. For example, **staff in one Jobcentre Plus office were quite positive about payment-by-results**. Their opinion was that participants appreciated the fact that the providers would be forced to be working for them now so they would make a profit:

> *'It's a target-driven environment and they do love that, the customers. The fact that they know they are really going to be working for them this time round. Regardless of the arguments, I'll come back to that one every time.'*

> (Personal adviser)

Elsewhere, however the views were far less supportive of the programme and this appeared to have arisen from several factors. In part it was caused by a lack of direct communication between, and co-operation among the parties locally. In addition, however, **negative perceptions among Jobcentre Plus staff of the outsourcing of a public service**, alongside a sense of competition which had developed between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers also contributed. Finally, negative feedback that Advisers, Assistant Advisers and Fortnightly Signing Staff had received from some participants also played a role.

Jobcentre Plus staff who implied that the Work Programme was a competitor service to their own, also reported feeling at a relative disadvantage because of newly introduced policies. In this context they referred, for example, to the wage incentive available through the Youth Contract[27] which providers could offer to employers, but which is not available to Jobcentre Plus in supporting jobseekers.

Other staff, whose key stated concern was the participants' experience, reported a view that there was reluctance among providers to invest in training for participants and that the money going into the Work Programme was, therefore, ineffectively spent.

The focus on profit-making and payment-by-results was seen as negative by some advisers because it led providers, in their view, to cherry pick participants they could readily place in employment, leaving those lacking qualifications behind (see Chapter 15). Other advisers claimed that that there was a frequent habit among Work Programme providers of parking difficult-to-help participants, and attributed this to the focus on targets and payment-by-results.

Some advisers reported that a focus on outcome targets does not reflect the economic climate and difficult labour market situation and is, therefore, unhelpful and not producing the expected results. As illustration of this, staff in one office reported that nearly 40 per cent of people currently signing on were Work Programme participants.

3.4   Summary

While it is clear that the perceptions of Jobcentre Plus staff about the Work Programme can be fairly negative and appear, in part, to be driven by concerns that their own work is under threat by private providers, it is also important to understand these views since these staff continue to play a critical part in the welfare-to-work system, of which the Work Programme is part.

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[27]   The Youth Contract, introduced in April 2012, provides young people with more intensive adviser support and work experience, as well as providing employers with wage incentives and apprenticeship grants to encourage them to recruit young people.

Their views indicate that there is still some way to go in accurately informing Jobcentre Plus staff about the details of how the Work Programme works; it is also clear that many remain unconvinced that it is a legitimate and worthwhile intervention which complements rather than undermines or competes with their own work[28].

These points matter because Jobcentre Plus staff lead contact with claimants before they enter the Work Programme, and continue contact to a lesser extent when participants join the programme. This means that they have knowledge and experience of the attitudes of claimants/participants towards the programme and therefore, on their potential to engage with it and benefit from the support on it. This is an issue which is further examined in Chapter 9.

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[28]   It is interesting to note that the findings presented here, suggested lack of knowledge and information among Jobcentre Plus advisers of the Work Programme and, in some cases, to negative views about the programme and poor relationships with Work Programme providers, are broadly consistent with those reported in the separate evaluation of the Jobcentre Plus Offer: see Coulter *et al.* (2012), Chapter 3.

4   Information sessions

Two forms of information session are considered in this chapter:

- the information or briefing that Jobcentre Plus staff provide to mandated claimants ahead of referral to an initial appointment with the Work Programme provider; and

- those led by Work Programme providers. These include sessions delivered to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants to help them decide whether to volunteer or not, as well as information sessions led by specialist providers to whom end-to-end providers refer participants for support.

The information sessions for ESA volunteers were implemented between October and November 2011 to help maximise the number of ESA claimants choosing to volunteer. Eligible claimants can be referred to a Work Programme information session to raise their awareness of what the programme might involve and to give them an opportunity to volunteer.

The table in Appendix A shows when ESA claimants are eligible to be referred. ESA claimants become eligible for referral from the moment their Work Capability Assessment[29] (WCA) outcome is known. The table demonstrates that ESA claimants in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) and Support Group are eligible. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) guidance is that eligible claimants should be referred. An exception should only be considered for claimants who are likely to come off benefits shortly, or who would benefit more from other programmes such as Work Choice or Residential Training for Adults with Disabilities.

Table B.1 also sets out whether attendance at an information session is voluntary or mandatory for the different categories of ESA claimants and demonstrates that ESA claimants in the WRAG may be mandated to attend an information session. Claimants in the Support Group cannot be mandated but can be encouraged to attend information sessions. Finally, the table shows that for some ESA claimants, participation once on the Work Programme can be mandatory. This affects two categories in the WRAG category (see Appendix B).

This chapter examines the provision of information to claimants about the Work Programme, through one-to-one meetings or group information sessions prior to any referral to the programme itself. It looks first at the perspectives among Jobcentre Plus respondents, and then the parallel perspectives and experiences of Work Programme provider staff. In both cases, the findings cover information for claimants in general, as well the specific information sessions required to be offered to voluntary participants in the Work Programme.

4.1   Jobcentre Plus perspective

This first section sets out how Jobcentre Plus staff introduced the Work Programme to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants ahead of their attachment. It then explores their perspectives and processes for referring ESA claimants to the information sessions.

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[29]   The Work Capability Assessment is a functional assessment which looks at an individual's capability for work, taking into account developments in healthcare and the modern workplace. The Work Capability Assessment assesses claimants against a list of activities covering physical as well as mental, intellectual and cognitive functions.

4.1.1   Information for claimants

Jobcentre Plus advisers reported that they would offer claimants **fairly general information about the purpose of the Work Programme** and the support available (e.g. help looking for work, support where necessary). Others also included general information about obligations (e.g. requirement to participate in activities, needing to sign on).

Some advisers indicated that they purposefully did not want to expand further on Work Programme provision so as not to make promises that could not be kept, or to raise expectations. This was backed up by some team leaders who indicated that advisers did not have enough information about the providers and their services and consequently were not in a position to answer any detailed questions.

Some offices reported that local providers had initially supplied leaflets about their provision, but subsequent request for further copies of these had not been met.

> *'So you are really just doing the best that you can and telling folk that they can go and read about them on the internet as well if they want to.'*

> (Jobcentre Plus adviser)

4.1.2   Information for voluntary participants

Jobcentre Plus **staff understood that the option to refer ESA claimants to a voluntary information** session exists, after which claimants could chose to participate in the Work Programme or not. Some team leaders indicated that this would usually be brought up in an informal way with eligible claimants when advisers thought the Work Programme might be appropriate for the individual.

Some DEAs commented that they had been told by managers that they must refer voluntary ESA claimants to the Work Programme information sessions despite their conviction that Work Choice[30] would be a better option.

However, there appeared to be a wider lack of knowledge among Jobcentre Plus staff about the information sessions for voluntary claimants. **Some advisers indicated they would probably sell the programme more to voluntary claimants if they had more information about the provision,** including, for example, the criteria in operation under the Work Programme for funding training courses. This suggests the consequence of the lack of understanding of the Work Programme provision among Jobcentre Plus staff (see Section 3.1) since advisers' expectations of provision appear somewhat at odds with actual delivery in providers (see Chapter 7).

Other staff indicated they did not want to get involved in 'pitching' the provision because their role was Jobcentre Plus-related and they did not see themselves as operating on behalf of the Work Programme provider.

Feedback from the Jobcentre Plus advisers on the information sessions run by Work Programme providers was mixed[31]. Some advisers reported that claimants they referred to an information session found it useful, while others did not.

The Jobcentre Plus interviews suggested that actual **take-up of the Work Programme by voluntary groups after attending an information session varied** considerably between localities. Some districts indicated they had excellent take-up of the Work Programme among the few claimants who attended information sessions, while others said that they did not.

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[30]   Work Choice is a voluntary DWP programme providing specialist employment services for people with disabilities or long-term limiting illness.

[31]   Note: these information sessions were not included in the observations of adviser-participant interactions undertaken in the research reported here.

4.2   Provider perspective

The evidence from providers focuses on information sessions that they provide to claimants about the Work Programme. Their views cover information sessions given by specialist providers to participants who expressed an interest in these focused areas of provision, as well as information sessions delivered for voluntary ESA claimants.

4.2.1   Information for participants about specialist support

Staff in provider organisations reported that **mandated participants were able to attend information sessions in relation to specialist provision**, such as self-employment advice or, for example, provision for individuals who are visually impaired. In these circumstances end-to-end providers raised participants' awareness of the provision and arranged for them to attend the information session.

A range of practices in delivering these sessions existed: some were conducted individually, in groups or by telephone. The **sessions offered an overview of the provision, how they would support participants to move towards employment, and participants' obligations** should they choose to take it up. However, the random allocation within the referral process could undermine the benefits of information sessions. For example, a specialist end-to-end provider stated that, although the participant might be interested in working with them after attending an information session random allocation meant that the participant could be assigned to a different end-to-end provider. This made the information session a waste of time and resource, at least from the perspective of this provider.

4.2.2   Information for voluntary participants

Several provider organisations reported that they held **information sessions for potential volunteers and the format of these was typically flexible**: sessions might be held in a group, as one-to-ones, or conducted by telephone. Some providers offered group sessions as standard but were willing to accommodate claimants who wanted an individual appointment. The sessions typically provided an overview of the programme, the provider organisation and the support available.

Providers reported that, for the most part, they received positive feedback about these sessions from claimants. They also noted that those who were most keen to work had higher levels of engagement with the information sessions. Providers reported that, for these individuals, the information sessions were an important way of detailing the support available. They also said that there could be a need to manage expectations as the level of support on offer did not always match claimants' prior expectations.

Some providers indicated that some ESA claimants were 'ticking a box' in attending the sessions, since they had been mandated to attend. One provider felt that approximately 50 per cent of those mandated to attend the session decided to join the programme. However, other providers felt that though claimants may have been engaged during the session, this did not necessarily result in many starts. It was also reported that other claimants wanted to satisfy their Jobcentre Plus advisers through attending or felt pressurised to attend but did not have any real intention of joining the programme.

The **sessions did not always result in high levels of attendance by potential volunteers**. Providers who were able to give figures estimated that subsequent participation in the programme ranged from ten to 50 per cent of those who attended the information sessions.

Some providers indicated that claimants attending the sessions were apprehensive about the implications of agreeing to participate in the programme. Their concerns were reported to relate to not meeting programme requirements due to health reasons and then being sanctioned as a

result, with some claimants believing that once they volunteered to attend the sessions, they would then be mandated to participate in the programme. Providers also reported that claimants seemed concerned that participating in the programme would imply an acceptance on their part that they did not have barriers to work. This was discussed in relation to ESA claimants with health conditions, both those who did and did not have an appeal in place.

Some providers mentioned that they did not market the Work Programme strongly to ESA claimants (both those mandated to information sessions and those attending voluntarily), because these claimants should not participate until they felt ready to move towards work. This view was not shared by others: some argued that those ESA claimants who responded well to sessions should be encouraged to take up the programme by Jobcentre Plus. Another provider noted that some voluntary ESA claimants exhibited fewer barriers to work than some of the mandatory JSA claimants and that their participation should, therefore, be compulsory.

A final point raised about the information sessions was a suggestion to improve the procedure: a provider suggested that the sessions should be delivered in Jobcentre Plus offices as this would provide a 'warm handover' which would increase the likelihood of early engagement with participants. This provider was in the process of negotiating this access with their local Jobcentre Plus office.

4.3   Summary

Feedback from Jobcentre Plus staff suggested variable approaches to informing and briefing claimants about the Work Programme. Most offered fairly broad brush information, often constrained by the limited information they had about provision under the programme and, in some cases, a disinclination to promote the services of Work Programme providers.

As expected by policy, providers offered information sessions for voluntary ESA claimants. These were made available in a range of formats, including one-to-one, group or telephone contact. Providers tried to be sensitive to the needs of claimants and offer them the format they preferred. The sessions were geared towards information provision rather than marketing the programme, with some providers taking the view that claimants should not participate until they felt able to, though it was also noted that some voluntary particpants had fewer barriers to work than a number of the mandated participants.

Jobcentre Plus staff reported limited knowledge about the content of provider information sessions for voluntary participants, while some noted mixed feedback from participants about the value of the sessions. These staff also reported that the rate of take-up of the programme after the sessions was also highly variable.

Some specialist providers, particularly those providing support for participants with health conditions and those offering self-employment support, also supplied information sessions. In the latter case these were often used to screen out unsuitable participants.

5   Referral and handover

A claimant who becomes eligible[32] to enter the Work Programme is referred by Jobcentre Plus to the programme, and is randomly allocated to one of the two or three primes operating in the local area.

All Work Programme participants should be referred to a prime provider by Jobcentre Plus. The process should include a referral interview – an opportunity to inform participants about what to expect, what the provider might be able to offer, and the conditionality and sanctions that are part of the Work Programme arrangements.

As noted in Chapter 2, most contracts between the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and primes for Work Programme provision state an aspiration to 'warm handovers', which might typically involve a three-way meeting between Jobcentre Plus, the provider and the new participant. This chapter explores what is happening on the ground, starting with the perspectives of Jobcentre Plus staff, then turning to providers' views and concluding with the experience of participants.

5.1   Jobcentre Plus perspective

The Jobcentre Plus interviews explored the process for referring eligible claimants to the Work Programme. The section starts with their views of claimants' responses to their referral.

5.1.1   Response to referral

Jobcentre Plus advisers reported that **many claimants were content with the referral to the Work Programme**, because they had been told about it from a fairly early stage in their claim, and because a general awareness that they would be referred to the programme had been built through media coverage.

However, **not all claimants took a positive or neutral view** of their referral, and it was reported that some would prefer not to be referred because they felt they would be forced into jobs they did not want or were overqualified for. Additionally, some claimants were reported to be surprised about the two-year duration of the Work Programme.

Many Jobcentre Plus staff reported that the mandatory nature of the referral often increased resistance to participate and that sometimes only the indirect threat of the sanctions regime could persuade a claimant to comply with the referral. Advisers outlined that some claimants, particularly those with multiple barriers to work, found it difficult to understand why they were mandated to participate in the Work Programme. Similarly, they reported that claimants who had extremely long unemployment histories were often reluctant to agree to referral, because, according to advisers, their perception was that it was *'just another government programme to get them to work for nothing'*. Advisers attributed this, in part, to the often negative coverage of the Work Programme and wider controversies about mandatory work experience in the media and pointed out that, to counter this, they frequently highlighted the positive aspects of the programme to reluctant claimants.

In the eyes of many jobcentre staff, the main **difficulties with the referral process** arose from the sometimes lack of prompt contact with claimants by the providers, and because some providers failed to engage them after the referral (reflecting, in some cases, the larger than expected volume of referrals). There was no clear evidence from staff that warm handovers between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers were commonplace across the areas examined.

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[32]   The eligibility categories are shown in Table 1.1.

Some Jobcentre Plus advisers and managers voiced concerns that a perception had been established among some claimants that participation in the Work Programme would involve infrequent contact with the provider and a low level of support, and that this in turn fed back to attitudes and expectations of claimants at the point of referral. It was suggested that family and friends who had already been referred to the programme were often the source of information in these instances.

> *'Word is getting round that a referral to the Work Programme is a very easy option [...] contact can be very loose, very infrequent. If you show an interest in work, you will be helped. If you go along and you've got a drug and alcohol problem, of which we have many, they do not appear to be getting the minimum level of contact.'*

(Advisory Team Manager)

5.1.2   Random allocation

Work Programme participants are randomly allocated to one of the two or three prime providers operating in their area. They cannot choose the provider to which they are referred.

Opinions among jobcentre staff about random allocation were mixed. Some argued that it was a positive step to pre-empt selection by the personal adviser and the claimant. Others were of the view that their being able to select a provider would improve the fit with claimants' needs.

Advisers working with people with disabilities or mental health conditions were more likely to report concerns about random allocation because they were not assured that providers had the specific skills to engage with the target group or that facilities were easily accessible for people with mobility difficulties. However, some of these noted that there was an option of manually overriding the random allocation system in these cases[33]. Concerns about accessibility were, in part, location-dependent, with Jobcentre Plus advisers in urban areas expressing less concern on this point than their rural counterparts. Overwhelmingly, **advisers would prefer to have random allocation waived in the case of voluntary participants**, particularly those who might volunteer but subsequently be mandated to participate, because of concerns of this kind.

Some advisers reported that an effect of random allocation was that some claimants were referred to a provider without a local presence, even when another provider had local offices, and that this was often a source of dissatisfaction for the claimant.

A further issue raised by Jobcentre Plus staff was that some claimants had participated in previous employment programmes (e.g. the Flexible New Deal) led by providers now delivering the Work Programme. They noted that, if assigned to the same provider for the Work Programme, their previous experience coloured their view of the support they thought they would receive.

Some advisers reported trying to put a positive spin on the Work Programme in discussions with claimants despite their stated reservations, although their ability to do this depended on the information they had about the provision.

> *'It's a fresh start, the WP* [Work Programme] *is entirely new. There are different advisers, different perspectives, different things to offer. So their experience, if they didn't enjoy it first time round, should be different and more satisfying.'*

(Jobcentre Plus adviser)

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[33]   This reflects a manual workaround in place for the first six to seven months after go-live. From January 2012, release 34 of the Labour Market System (Jobcentre Plus customer management computer system) made random allocation a fully automated process.

5.1.3 Referral of voluntary participants

The interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff suggested that **referral of voluntary participants to the programme can be problematic**. Many Jobcentre Plus offices had referred very few voluntary particpants to the Work Programme and staff said that they were reluctant to do so.

Some disability advisers went as far as saying that they would never suggest voluntary participation in the Work Programme because they believed that Jobcentre Plus had a much better network of specialists available to support specific claimant needs than did the Work Programme providers. Additionally they highlighted Work Choice[34] as an alternative option available to individuals.

Some team leaders indicated that they had received instructions to refer a larger number of volunteers, and particularly ESA claimants, to the Work Programme. However, they reported that staff were reluctant to do this because of their doubts over the suitability of provision or facilities, and/or concerns about the impact on the reputation of DEAs. Advisers and managers also raised concerns about the lack of access to Jobcentre Plus resources such as travel support, clothing allowance, training courses, etc., once claimants are referred and, therefore, referral of voluntary participants was seen as disadvantageous to them (see also Section 16.2).

However, in some districts and **for some specific groups (e.g. ex-offenders and claimants with a history of substance misuse) the provision of the Work Programme was seen far more positively** and as building upon that available through Jobcentre Plus. In these situations and districts, advisers actively promote voluntary participation[35].

> *'It is actually quite easy to sell early entry in this area* [substance abuse issues] *to customers who genuinely want help.'*
>
> (Personal adviser)

In some districts, advisers reported that Work Programme providers had been helpful and accommodating to people with particular barriers to work, such as mental health problems, which prevented attendance at group sessions; in these instances, alternative arrangements were made for claimants. However, other advisers reported a perception that Work Programme providers prioritised their business which meant, in their view, that they did not always put the well-being and support of voluntary claimants at the heart of their actions.

5.2 Provider perspectives

Once Jobcentre Plus staff trigger the random allocation of claimants, a Work Programme prime provider picks up their case. Typically, this in turn triggers a letter or telephone call to the individual to invite them to an initial meeting with a specified end-to-end provider (this may be the prime or a subcontractor in the prime's supply chain). The providers' experience of the process of referral and handover is explored in this section.

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[34] The specialist employment programme for disabled people.

[35] In this context, and suggesting some potential tension with this finding, it is worth noting that the research also suggested that the least job-ready participants, with particular specialist needs often received little or no specialist support in practice from the programme (see the discussion of 'creaming' and 'parking' in Chapter 15).

5.2.1   Handover

Prime providers did not specifically refer to situations where the handover was successful between themselves and Jobcentre Plus. They did, however, highlight **circumstances where handover was inadequate**. They discussed situations where participants did not know who they had been referred to or had very little information about, or understanding of, why they had been referred to the programme[36]. In some cases participants had not realised that the providers were a separate entity to Jobcentre Plus. Furthermore, many participants appeared to hold initially negative views of the programme and providers, which was attributed to negative press coverage (this was particularly noted by staff in providers located in Scotland), but also to the insufficient information given by Jobcentre Plus staff.

There was some **local variation in arrangements for processing of referrals**. In some cases, the primes received referrals from Jobcentre Plus directly to their local office; in others, referrals were made to a central service which then allocated the claimants to local offices. Whichever process was followed, the result was that participants received an appointment for an initial meeting with an adviser. For some primes initial participant contact could be made by the central office, which would try to ascertain some personal details, although this, invariably, needed to be followed up in the first adviser appointment either due to refusal or because the information was not sufficiently comprehensive.

Again there was very little evidence to suggest that 'warm handovers', with genuine three-way contact between the Jobcentre Plus adviser, the provider adviser and the claimant, were commonplace. There was a suggestion from some advisers that the information sessions that they arranged for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants acted as a warm handover between the jobcentre and themselves, although these sessions are offered only to a small part of the eligible claimant population for the Work Programme.

5.2.2   Referral information

A number of primes outlined the information they received from the Provider Referrals and Payment system (PRaP). **Standard details available from PRaP** were: name, date of birth, address, claimant group, and whether the claimant is voluntary or mandatory. Primes also mentioned receiving a range of additional information, such as ethnic group, qualifications, claimants' contact with Jobcentre Plus, and Jobcentre Plus action plans. These latter details were reported to have come from PRaP or Jobcentre Plus.

End-to-end subcontractors received information from either Jobcentre Plus or the primes depending on local protocols and whether the end-to-end provider was also the prime. The quality and depth of information was reported to vary. One provider discussed the advantage of being able to access both PRaP and the prime's systems which, it was reported, enabled the organisation to avoid a good deal of the administration present in previous programmes. Another provider, an end-to-end specialist, had a presence in numerous offices of its prime provider in one Contract Package Area (CPA). This was reported as advantageous for obtaining referrals as it kept awareness of the organisation in the advisers' minds. At the other extreme, an end-to-end subcontractor stated that it received only claimants' names and no further details, reflecting difficulties with the onward transmission of personal data within the supply chain rather than the completeness of information supplied by Jobcentre Plus.

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[36]   This may also be exacerbated, in some cases, by the difficulties some individuals may have in retaining or understanding advice or information of this kind, even when it has been provided (evidence from the evaluation of the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) demonstration, suggests that this is not uncommon: see Dorsett *et al.*, 2007, Chapter 4).

Views varied on the helpfulness of the information received from Jobcentre Plus. A number of providers stated that the quality of information provided varied between Jobcentre Plus advisers, with some providing much more valuable information than others.

One manager felt that overall referral data, though sometimes unreliable, provided an important source of information on participants and could be used more extensively by his advisers. This was confirmed by several providers who found the information useful, some stating that it was good contextual information that could be used as a starting point for discussions and for eliciting further details from participants. Others stated that the information, at its best, provided valuable evidence of work history, aspirations and barriers. Another said that it was a useful check when participants were refusing jobs or saying they had particular barriers to work.

Of those that reported finding referral information of little use, the reasons given were typically that it was out-of-date and not sufficiently detailed (see section 5.3.3 which reports the observational data about how information was used). A specialist end-to-end subcontractor that also offered training programmes for 16-17 year olds noted that the quality of information it received for Work Programme referrals was much poorer than the data it received under its programme for claimants aged under 18, which was consistently good.

A few provider staff were sympathetic to the difficulties faced by Jobcentre Plus staff in providing more wide-ranging information, saying that they understood the time constraints and possible data protection restrictions that may have to be adhered to.

Providers typically thought of **referral information as the starting point** of what they needed to know about claimants. There was always a need to verify the information and to consolidate this with more detailed evidence from claimants to develop a better understanding of the individual.

> *'You get a rough idea, but not a big picture, it's only when you actually speak to them that you really get the full picture of what their needs are.'*
>
> (Personal adviser)

It may be salient to note that the observations of initial meetings with participants suggested very limited use of the information supplied by Jobcentre Plus (see Section 5.3.1).

5.2.3   Problems with referrals and handover

Some errors and omissions in the referral information were noted as particularly problematic by a number of providers. These were incorrect contact details and details of criminal records and previous violent behaviour.

Incorrect contact details were a hindrance to engaging with participants and could also lead to unwarranted sanctions. Providers reported that Jobcentre Plus was often slow in updating changes of circumstances and that the process of checking and confirming details with Jobcentre Plus was excessively time-consuming. In contrast, in discussions of the sanctioning process many Jobcentre Plus staff reported that it is the Work Programme providers who are slow to notify them of changes in status or contact details.

A lack of information about past violent behaviour was seen as potentially more serious, as having this would allow providers to be prepared, and if necessary give them the opportunity to allocate the participant to particular advisers. In relation to ex-offenders, one provider stated that a Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA[37]) claimant was referred to it as an ordinary JSA claimant. It only discovered the individual's status once a relationship had been established and the participant

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[37]   MAPPA is the name given to arrangements in England and Wales for the 'responsible authorities' tasked with the management of registered sex offenders, violent and other types of sexual offenders, and offenders who pose a serious risk of harm to the public.

volunteered his history. As special conditions have to be in place when dealing with MAPPA participants, including not recording the participant case on the computer systems and restrictions on the types of workplaces available to them, this omission had potentially serious consequences.

Another issue raised was **inappropriate referrals**. This was discussed mostly in relation to individuals with health conditions. Providers reported that a minority of referred claimants had mental or physical health conditions that in their view made the programme inappropriate for them. An adviser stated that having a two-week time limit[38] to query these referrals could be insufficient because, in some cases, it might take all of this time to establish contact with the individual.

Providers also discussed the difficulties involved in dealing with ex-offenders who had been referred direct from custody. Some providers suggested that the chaotic lifestyles of many in this group, not having a fixed address upon release and other barriers to work, meant that they should be explicitly acknowledged as more difficult to place in employment, rather than being noted simply as Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants. In addition, some believed that ex-offenders should have some prior involvement with Jobcentre Plus provision before referral to the Work Programme.

Echoing some of the concerns raised by Jobcentre Plus respondents, it was clear that, for the providers interviewed, the most important issue at the referral/handover phase is the **relationship between Work Programme providers and Jobcentre Plus staff**. A number of providers said that it would be easier if they could contact Jobcentre Plus directly or that having a telephone contact at Jobcentre Plus would speed up procedures. Some providers already had this working relationship which they found beneficial.

This, however, was not always the case; one manager reported that there was a lot of miscommunication coming from the local Jobcentre Plus offices. This manager took the view that there has always been a level of the hostility from Jobcentre Plus staff towards private providers but believed that, in relation to the Work Programme, miscommunication was largely due to Jobcentre Plus staff not having been supplied with the correct information. Another manager pointed out that a good relationship would enhance the 'warmth' of handovers, and greatly increase engagement with participants.

> *'Our attendance at initial appointments is about 65 per cent in this office; we could easily get that to 90 to 95 per cent if a customer was gently allowed to be introduced to us. So, if they were to come in here for their final sign and then they were to meet their employment adviser we would be able to get this going much better, more quickly. I think that would be really good but that comes down to the jobcentre kind of partnership working.'*

(Operations Manager)

5.3   The participant experience

The evaluation is attempting to identify what constitutes a good handover, and how important this is. With this aim in mind, the sample of Stage 1 (new entrant) participants were questioned about their views and experiences so far on this topic, and the follow-up interviews in autumn 2012 and spring 2013 will explore the longer-term importance of the handover.

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[38]   It should be noted that this time limit relates to the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), used to assess entitlement to ESA, and is not directly related to the Work Programme itself.

5.3.1 Information received

The Stage 1 sample[39] was asked about how they had been told about the Work Programme by Jobcentre Plus staff, how much information they had received at this stage, and how first appointments with the provider were made.

There were several examples where participants recalled that **handovers were informative and helpful** and examples of people feeling confident about what to expect from the Work Programme particularly where they had previous experience of the provider and were aware of the range of support offered.

Not surprisingly, given the dominance of JSA claimants in the sample, most people said they had been told they were now being transferred to the Work Programme when they went to sign on, or when they kept routine appointments with Jobcentre Plus advisers. Explanations received about reasons for transfer were of two main kinds – being told that they had now been claiming benefits for some time and it was time to try something new, and being told what the new programme offered. People who remembered explanations related to the duration of their benefits claim thought, variously, that periods of six, 12 and 18 months had been mentioned. Some remembered Jobcentre Plus staff telling them that under the rules, people who had been claiming benefits for this time had to move to the Work Programme. Participants who remembered explanations that the Work Programme could offer a range of different kinds of help mentioned training courses, help with CVs and jobsearch. Some said they received a booklet about the provider, but others were certain they had received no printed information from Jobcentre Plus before referral.

In one fieldwork location, nearly everybody interviewed remembered being told they would be taking part in a two-year programme, or until they got a job, and one of these believed that there would be a guaranteed job at the end.

Only one participant, who was disabled, remembered being offered a choice of providers, and chose the one where their partner was already registered. One other person specifically asked to receive services from the same provider as their partner, but was told this was not possible[40].

Overall, there were **mixed views as to whether participants had received sufficient or good information about the provider from Jobcentre Plus staff**. It is not known precisely what information was offered, although earlier sections in this chapter give some indication of likely coverage.

5.3.2 Feelings and experiences of handover

There were sharp contrasts in the feelings remembered about the experience of referral, between people who felt as if a range of new opportunities would be opening up and people who felt they were being 'shuffled over'.

For some, **being transferred to the Work Programme meant changes to arrangements** for signing on, because activities arranged by their provider clashed with regular 'signing on days'. For two people this led to misunderstanding and confusion which resulted in temporary loss of benefit.

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[39] Participant data on the handover were drawn from the interviews with participants from the Stage 1 (new entrant) sample and from the observations of meetings between participants and providers. It should be remembered that the Stage 1 sample of 33 new entrants comprised mostly JSA claimants (29) in the 25-49 age category (21). There are, therefore, only limited insights on the handover process from people on ESA (or with health problems).

[40] Where partners are joint claimants they should be referred to the same Work Programme provider.

In the sample of 33, three described experiences that were atypical. One person was already taking part in an employment programme with another provider, but this closed down and Jobcentre Plus staff told him he was being transferred to the Work Programme. Another was told by a lone parent adviser that in four months time she would be transferred to the Work Programme. In continuing regular appointments at Jobcentre Plus there were opportunities to discuss the coming transfer, and then the adviser gave an extra appointment specifically to go through the transfer again, give a map of the venue and make an appointment with the provider. A third person, who had not been in touch directly with Jobcentre Plus since 2001, remembered getting a letter asking her to make an appointment with the provider, see what was offered there , and choose whether to take part in the Work Programme or return to Jobcentre Plus for employment support.

Participants who had heard a lot about the Work Programme from partners or friends who were taking part themselves generally said they were **looking forward to possible new opportunities**. Expectations of a punitive regime were generally linked to having seen negative coverage in newspapers or on television.

Most people believed they had to keep their first appointment with the provider. Some assumed it was compulsory, and others remembered strong advice about this from Jobcentre Plus staff.

In contrast to those who talked positively about their handover, **some people felt they knew little about what to expect from the Work Programme** before attending their first appointment. Included here were people who felt Jobcentre Plus had told them little about the programme and people who recalled Jobcentre Plus personnel talking about the kinds of support offered.

5.3.3   The observational data

This contrast of positive and negative experiences is reinforced by evidence from the observations of initial meetings between providers and participants. These showed that some participants appeared to have been well prepared about what to expect, some had been given an outline indication of what to expect, whereas others appeared to lack any preparation and in some cases had not understood they were being referred to the Work Programme for the next two years. It seemed that there was often a lack of simple, written information for participants. They could feel overwhelmed by extensive verbal information with no material to refer to subsequently. The brief follow-up interviews with participants after observing their initial Work Programme meetings also suggested that information was often poorly understood or not retained.

Frequently in initial meetings, **participants were asked about their understanding of the programme** and what it entailed. This was a means to check the nature of the handover by Jobcentre Plus, and whether participants required more information. The data suggested varying levels of understanding and preparedness among participants for what would follow. Often, participants had not understood that their case was being transferred to the Work Programme for the next two years; rather, they assumed they had been referred to short-term provision or in some cases their lack of knowledge arose from personal characteristics (e.g. language barriers) for which no provision had been made.

At the other end of the spectrum, some individuals appeared better informed and were looking forward to working with a new provider who would assist them into work. More frequently, participants already knew a little about the programme and benefited from the longer explanation offered by Work Programme advisers. This tended to focus on the key principles of attendance, jobsearch, etc., although some advisers offered a deeper level of insight covering, for example, the payment by results model and how this meant that the WP provider had a compelling reason to support participants into sustainable work.

The observations data suggested **little reliance on Jobcentre Plus information** about participants' circumstances: a point which stands in contrast to the apparent value placed on this information by prime providers (reported earlier). One Work Programme adviser noted in a follow-up interview that the reason for this was that they wanted participants to start from a clean slate, not influenced by the Jobcentre Plus adviser's assessment.

In two areas, the initial meetings took the form of **group sessions followed by one-to-ones** with advisers. The group element mainly focused on information giving elements, although personal information could also be required of participants. This raised concerns about privacy, particularly where participants were encouraged to reveal sensitive personal information, e.g. spent criminal convictions or health conditions. More frequently, one-to-one meetings were used to gather this sensitive information, although these did not always provide any greater privacy since they might be held in open plan offices. Follow-up interviews with participants revealed that not all had shared full information about their personal circumstances and/or barriers, and some who had done so felt there had been little choice about disclosing this information in group meetings.

Initial meetings followed a **relatively standardised format** that involved an introduction and overview of the Work Programme (this might be part of the group meetings), how travel expenses could be claimed, what participation would entail, expectations of participants, and duration of support including the availability of in-work support. Another crucial aspect of the meetings was to set out the support that could be made available. In one instance, the provider had developed extensive in-house work experience opportunities including 'mock' work environments such as a café, office/administration, a retailing space, and a warehousing section where participants could develop sector relevant skills and experience. Local employers also used these facilities for staff training. As part of the initial meetings, participants at this provider were encouraged to take a tour of the facilities and often were impressed by the work experience offer.

5.4   Summary

Previous studies of employment programmes have noted the importance of clients engaging with the relevant programme and with provider staff[41]. The handover from Jobcentre Plus to a Work Programme provider can, therefore, be seen as an opportunity for promoting positive engagement as early as possible.

The different strands of work on this topic in the present evaluation suggest that good working relations and quick, easy communication between providers and Jobcentre Plus are believed by all parties to be essential to ensure that handover and referrals work effectively. This in turn is vital for early and successful engagement of participants, including voluntary referrals to information sessions. In practice these requirements were not always met. Jobcentre Plus respondents raised some concerns about the length of time that sometimes occurs between the referral and the point at which the provider actively engages with the participant.

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[41]   Weston (2012) provides a summary of research on this point.

Providers often expressed the need for an enhanced handover process, with better contact and communication between Jobcentre Plus and the provider, to aid early engagement with participants. In their view, not only would it be helpful for attendance at first appointments but it would also minimise the need to dispel any negative views held by participants, particularly as providers believed that some of these views originated from information given by Jobcentre Plus staff. In parallel with this, many Jobcentre Plus staff reported being under-informed about the programme, and the provision on offer with providers, which inhibited their ability to prepare participants appropriately.

Referral information was reported by providers as being too varied in quality and often out-of-date. Outdated contact details had a direct negative impact on their ability to engage claimants as did the time consuming process of checking and updating these details with Jobcentre Plus staff. Providers were also concerned about missing referral information in relation to violent behaviour and criminal records. Lack of knowledge of these details prevented providers from being able to prepare for any difficulties that may arise and also to ensure that provision could address these.[42]

The other side of this coin was that, in those cases where referral information was of high quality, advisers within provider organisations found it extremely useful in developing an understanding of the type of person they would be working with and cross-checking the details supplied by the claimant.

The participant interviews conducted to date[43] provide no evidence of 'good' or 'bad' handovers having any systematic effects (such as on the feelings of control amongst participants). Interview data were mainly descriptive about procedure, rather than providing views. From the mixed accounts so far however, it appears that people can be expected to retain only a part of the information given them in the handover from Jobcentre Plus. When a lot of information is given verbally, it is likely that much will be forgotten. It was rare for anyone to say they had received any written information.

There may be some merit, therefore, in considering whether more guidance on the handover would be beneficial so that claimants are given some core information but not a great deal of detail. It is difficult at this stage, however, to suggest what this core information might comprise as there is variation in people's existing knowledge and previous experience. The aim should be to ensure that the claimant goes into the first encounter with the Work Programme with some degree of confidence about what to expect. This will vary according the individual claimant. The danger in not doing this is that the initial meetings with the provider will be taken up reducing anxiety, managing expectations and correcting misunderstandings about what the programme might involve.

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[42]   It should be noted that Jobcentre Plus are not always permitted to provide this information through PRaP. In other cases, claimants can choose not to have sensitive information included with their referral to the provider.

[43]   Interviews with a second panel of new entrants in autumn 2012 will further enrich these data.

6 Assessment

A critical part of helping individuals towards work is understanding the factors that may be preventing them from gaining work. As set out in Chapter 2, all prime providers have expectations that an assessment will be conducted as an initial stage of Work Programme entry.

This assessment can lead to the categorisation of participants in terms of their 'job-readiness'. It would also typically reveal the type, nature and extent of barriers. This information would be expected to feed into an action plan to guide and monitor the participant's progress.

This brief chapter explores the processes for undertaking assessments that were reported by providers. The analysis covers the structure of assessments, the role of assessment in personalisation, tools used to conduct assessment and how assessments feed into action plans.

6.1 Assessment structure

End-to-end providers used a **mix of relatively brief initial evaluations, more comprehensive assessment tools and ongoing discussions** to determine the support given to participants. Initial information-finding could take a variety of forms, such as a set of questions being asked during the first telephone call, a structured discussion or a questionnaire. Several providers mentioned that as part of their early assessments participants were categorised according to how close they were to the labour market (see, for example, Table 2.3). This classification is a key consideration in the support provided, but could change as advisers developed a better understanding of the participants. Some providers recorded these classifications according to a 'RAG-rating system' – red (multiple barriers), amber (some barriers) and green (work ready)[44].

Providers stated that **initial assessments were only the first part of the decision-making process** and further discussions which enabled advisers to gain a better understanding of the participants were, in fact, key to the procedure. One provider had an extensive four-week 'insight' stage in their model, part of which entailed assessing claimants' participation and interaction in a series of workshops. It was only after this that final decisions were made on how work-ready participants were and hence, to which stream they were allocated. This ongoing dialogue also gave participants the opportunity to put forward their own goals and career aspirations. Several of the providers stated that participant input was vital to the process.

> '*So we would be expect the customer to be giving as much input into that as the employment adviser.*'

> (Operations Manager)

However, providers also mentioned that as part of assessments they had to manage participants' expectations, which were not always realistic.

> '*It's a case of just sort of trying to be as realistic as possible with the customers, because sometimes they will specify that they want to do a particular kind of work, but market forces sort of dictate that they might not have the experience to do that kind of work.*'

> (Personal adviser)

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[44] See also the discussion of creaming and parking in Chapter 15.

Many end-to-end providers have a standard model in place that forms the basis of the participant's movement into work. For example, in one the model involves dealing with barriers and 'pipelining' the participants along the job-readiness categories to assist them towards work. Consequently, for participants with multiple barriers, initial discussions with advisers would be focused on addressing these barriers rather than looking at more job-related tasks.

6.2   Assessment tools

The **prime providers' main assessment tools** were reported to comprise of a fairly comprehensive series of questions that attempted to give advisers a broad picture of individuals. One prime's tool consisted of five sections titled 'Access, Outlook, Skills, Capacity and Resilience'.

Examples of items covered by '**Access**' included:

• jobsearch resources;

• curricula vitae;

• email addresses; and

• bank accounts.

'**Outlook**' examined:

• participants' confidence in relation to finding work;

• their willingness to travel; and

• the hours they would like to work.

'**Skills**' ascertained:

• skills;

• qualifications; and

• transferable skills.

'**Capacity**' assessed:

• health;

• fitness; and

• the stability of their living situation.

'**Resilience**' examined their ability to successfully transfer from unemployment to the labour market.

Another prime stated that its assessment covered skills, experience and barriers.

In general, the assessment tools attempted to gain information on participants' background, employment history and any barriers they may have to gaining employment, and were the basis for allocating participants into different categories of job-readiness.

Assessments were usually computer-based although paper-based assessments might be used as a back-up if computer systems were down. Some providers reported that they used paper-based assessments as standard, which they kept for records, but also entered onto their databases the information gathered. Some advisers supported Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) participants, in which case no information could be kept on the system, necessitating everything to be stored as a paper record.

Some end-to-end subcontractors augmented the prime's assessment tools with further evaluation of the participant. One believed that its own assessment tool was better at determining job-readiness than that of the prime since it was conducted face-to-face and was more flexible. In contrast, this respondent reported that the prime's assessment was carried out by telephone at initial contact and noted that the questions asked could be answered in such a way that led to individuals who were homeless or who had substance misuse issues being allocated to the most job-ready group and thereby being incorrectly classified.

Specialist providers could have very specific, detailed assessments or discussions with participants. This was more common for those that worked to support participants who had health conditions and, to a lesser extent, with self-employment provision. Training providers tended to carry out literacy and numeracy assessments to determine whether individuals could successfully participate on the chosen course, presumably as the referring provider had ascertained that the course was appropriate for the participant. In this context, however, one tutor said that she received the results from the assessment only on the day she met the participants and therefore, did not have time to adapt the course according to their abilities.

6.3   Summary

Assessment of Work Programme participants on entry to the programme generally entailed a number of stages, starting with initial information gathering, the use of more comprehensive assessment tools and dialogue with participants.

The main aims of the assessments were to elicit information on work history, jobsearch methods and tools, such as curriculum vitae and covering letters, aspirations and barriers. It was widespread practice that the results from assessments were used to classify individuals according to how job-ready they were. Providers made use of classification systems of varying degrees of complexity in doing this. There was, however, a degree of flexibility across these classifications, with one prime actively trying to move participants into the more job-ready groups, and another stating that the assessment was only the starting point and that participants could have their classification amended once the adviser knew them better.

This classification, in turn, strongly influenced the type of provision that participants received, notably the frequency of contact with their advisers. The extent to which individual support was further personalised, over and above the level of provision implied by the assessment classification, varied considerably between providers; while there was a common aspiration to personalisation, factors such as the size of caseloads and the cost implications of additional support played an important role in determining the extent to which it took place.

7   Provision: pre-employment support

This chapter examines the pre-employment support offered by providers to Work Programme participants. It looks at the advisory support typically offered to participants: its type and frequency, the freedom which advisers have in delivering this support and the extent to which support is seen as meeting the needs of participants. It also examines the types of specialist provision available to participants and provides an overview of providers' use of subcontractors and referrals to other organisations for specialist support.

7.1   The role of advisers in pre-employment support

Providers were asked whether they assigned a personal adviser to Work Programme participants and, if so, whether the provider aimed for participants to have the same adviser throughout their time on the programme. They were also asked to identify the benefits of the personal adviser approach as well as any problems they had encountered.

7.1.1   Ambition to provide one adviser throughout

The findings show that **end-to-end providers typically assigned a personal adviser to each participant to act as the main source of support** to participants. Many providers tried to ensure that participants remained with the same personal adviser until they found work, although some indicated that there were circumstances in which this was not always possible. This included high staff turnover, sickness absence amongst staff and staff holidays.

Some of the specialist and spot providers also used a named personal adviser approach. However, in a few cases, providers indicated that participants would see different advisers depending on who was available. These organisations often had small staff teams, whose roles were generic rather than specialised, and indicated that this approach meant that advisers effectively 'shared' participants. The approach was reported to work well: a provider explained that it mirrors the world of work, with individuals having to deal with more than one person on a regular basis. In contrast, another provider noted that despite its very small team of advisers, it had found that participants tended to prefer speaking to the person who had done their initial assessment.

Those end-to-end, specialist and spot providers who assigned a named personal adviser did so to try and ensure continuity. **Continuity was seen by many providers as 'vital'** to ensuring that trust and a good rapport was established between the participant and their adviser. Some providers emphasised that it could take several weeks for advisers to really get to know their participants and that continuity was, therefore, important. Another benefit noted was that this approach removed the need for participants to repeat their story to different members of staff. Nevertheless, some providers felt that it was important to retain some flexibility, noting that, on occasion, circumstances could arise where it was appropriate for an individual to be assigned to a new adviser. These situations included cases of personality clashes between the participant and their adviser or where participants had been assessed incorrectly and assigned to an adviser who dealt with, for example, more job-ready participants than the individual in question. One provider noted that it deployed flexibility within the system to ensure, for example, that male sex offenders were not assigned to a female personal adviser.

7.1.2 A change of adviser at each stage of the journey

Other (prime) end-to-end providers indicated that **participants routinely changed advisers as they progressed through different stages of the programme**. For example, an end-to-end provider described how participants stayed with the same adviser for an initial assessment period and would subsequently change adviser depending on how job-ready they were and which stream they had been allocated to. At the point of job entry, some participants remained with their original adviser while others were assigned a new point of contact from the in-work support team or from a customer contact centre. End-to-end providers in two geographical areas reported that once participants were job-ready they were passed from the adviser to a job broker in an attempt to move them into work quickly.

Those end-to-end providers who allocated participants to new advisers reported that this approach worked well. The noted benefits of the system included: **a 'fresh pair of eyes'** on the participant's case, exposing participants to new ideas, increased levels of participant motivation and ensuring that participants did not get too 'comfortable' with their advisers and reduce their engagement with the programme. One provider indicated that it had seen an increase in job outcomes at the points immediately before individuals were due to transfer from one adviser to the next. It attributed this to participants not wanting to change advisers. For this reason, providers noted that they had to be careful about moving participants around and spoiling effective relationships.

7.1.3 Personal advisers are not appropriate for all types of provision

Some other specialist and spot providers did not use the personal adviser approach, and this typically reflected the nature of their service. For example, a spot provider delivering art therapy and life coaching indicated that it did not assign personal advisers to participants. Instead, two facilitators ran a month-long course which participants were expected to attend. The facilitators ensured that individuals completed the programme activities and assisted individuals with action plans. Similarly, another spot provider delivering career coaching did not assign personal advisers to individuals because it usually saw participants only once, unless the participant specifically requested a follow-up appointment. Equally, other spot providers used trainers who delivered group training rather than one-to-one advice and support.

It is worth stressing that **approaches towards the allocation and continuity of adviser support were evolving** in some providers, as the Work Programme bedded in. For example, some end-to-end providers reported that although participants were currently allocated to a single adviser for the duration of the programme, they were considering a change to the system so that individuals would have to move onto a new adviser at some stage. This was being considered because of concerns that individuals were becoming complacent with their current advisers and their jobsearching efforts were becoming too routine.

7.2 Pattern and type of contact with participants

Personal advisers were asked about their role in delivering provision and particularly about the pattern, type and purpose of their contact with participants once initial decisions about provision had been made. Questions focused principally on the contact that advisers had with participants. However, it is important to note that this adviser-participant contact may not be the only support offered by the provider, since participants, for example, visit providers' offices to use computers and other facilities, or to attend training and workshops.

7.2.1   End-to-end providers

Frequency of meetings

End-to-end providers reported that personal advisers were expected, at a minimum, to have **fortnightly contact** with all participants on their caseloads[45]. The purpose of this fortnightly contact was to find out how participants were getting on and check if they needed any additional support. This contact could be by telephone or in person. In some instances, all contact should have been face-to-face, but high caseloads led to advisers having fortnightly telephone contact with participants. Overall, high caseloads were problematic in maintaining a minimum service level. For example, an adviser reported that he achieved fortnightly contact by telephone and a monthly meeting with a majority of his participants because of his high caseload. Other advisers indicated that they were able to maintain only monthly contact with participants rather than the intended fortnightly contact.

Beyond this minimum service level (which was not always maintained), many providers indicated that the frequency of contact with participants depended on how job-ready the individual was. Advisers reported **seeing their job-ready participants more frequently**; this is consistent with support levels described in Chapter 2 and also features in the analysis later in this report (see, for example, Chapter 15). For example, some said they saw their more job-ready participants once or twice a week, or even up to three or four times a week (although this might not constitute a formal meeting), and saw their less job-ready participants once every fortnight. For others, the difference in frequency of contact was even greater: some advisers indicated that they saw their more job-ready participants once a week and their less job-ready participants once every six weeks, or even, once every three months.

A few providers noted that frequency of contact varied according to Work Programme payment groups. For example, an adviser explained they saw JSA participants every two to three weeks and ESA participants approximately every six weeks.

Some advisers reported the same pattern of contact with all participants, regardless of their job-readiness. In an example of this, an adviser described how the provider had initially prioritised its more job-ready participants for more frequent meetings, but that over time it assessed that other groups were as capable of gaining work and, therefore, increased the frequency of support offered to them. It is unclear whether its assessment system was ineffective or whether the participants it worked with were less likely to have multiple or high barriers to employment.

Other factors influence pattern and frequency of contact between providers and participants. For example, an adviser noted that when participants moved into a confidence-building course, they would attend it over four or five weeks and would not have adviser appointments during this time. This was intended to ensure participants did not feel overloaded. However, the adviser would make telephone contact once a fortnight to find out how the participant was getting on. Other advisers noted that frequency of contact could increase if participants were not engaging with the programme as expected, or if there were concerns that individuals might be working and claiming benefits. In both of these situations, participants would be mandated to attend more frequently.

In most cases, the reported patterns of provider-participant contact in the pre-employment stage remained in place until the point at which the individual found work. At this point, some advisers would hand their participants over to the in-work support team. This is explored further in Chapter 10.

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[45]   It should be noted that very few of the primes' minimum service delivery standards specified how frequently advisers should have contact with participants. In those cases where frequency of contact was specified, this tended to be either fortnightly or monthly.

Coverage of meetings

The coverage of the regular meetings (and less formal contact with advisers in some cases) was related to the individuals' assessed job-readiness. Meetings with more job-ready participants typically included advice, support and practice in activities such as: 'cold-calling' potential employers, the drafting of speculative letters and job applications, interview skills and preparation, the drafting of CVs and cover letters. As described in Chapter 8.1.3 action plans were also used to monitor participants' progress and acted as a reminder of agreed activities.

For those participants who were assessed as further away from the labour market, meetings focused on: confidence-building, signposting to relevant support organisations and referring them to training.

Format of meetings

Not all of these interactions with the provider involved one-to-one contact with advisers, and some providers indicated that they saw participants in group sessions, or simply when the participant came into the provider's premises to use jobsearching facilities.

7.2.2   Meetings with specialist and spot providers

More varied than with end-to-end providers

The frequency, type and purpose of contact that specialist and spot providers had with participants varied depending on the type of service being provided. Specialist and spot providers often noted that there were **no set patterns for contact**. For example, a specialist health organisation noted that its basic service involved telephone contact every two to three weeks to provide health-related advice and support and to signpost participants to relevant services. Participants who were additionally referred for other services such as physiotherapy and counselling would be telephoned two weeks after beginning treatment to see how they were getting on. The subsequent pattern of contact then depended on the individual's health needs and preferences for support.

As with end-to end providers, some spot providers reported that **high caseloads limited the frequency** with which they were able to meet with their participants. Indeed, some indicated that they were expected to meet with their participants weekly but were often only able to do this fortnightly. Others noted that frequency of contact depended on the job-readiness of the participant: one saw the more job-ready participants once a week and the less job-ready once a month.

Other factors also came into play including **participants' motivation and the levels of support they required**, although there were no set patterns here either. For example, an adviser reported setting more frequent meetings with participants who were not fully engaging with the provision, while another reported spending more time with participants who were keen to participate, usually on an ad hoc, informal basis.

The focus of the **meetings varied but frequently involved a review of participants' progress** within the specialist support or training activities in order to assess whether additional support was needed.

7.3   Adviser autonomy in delivery of provision

Most advisers in **end-to-end providers spoke of having relative autonomy** in managing their caseloads, controlling their diaries and deciding on the levels of support that would be provided to participants. The main constraint in delivery was financial (e.g. in commissioning additional external support). Many advisers noted that if the support proposed for an individual involved a financial cost, then this had to be agreed with a manager. An adviser added that, as a result, only job-outcome-focused short courses would be commissioned. Other advisers reported that the cost of certain courses, such as for a security training badge, were seen as prohibitively high and their managers would not agree to fund this cost. In response to this situation, advisers described exploring with participants whether it was possible for them to fund the costs of training from their own resources or would suggest that the individuals fund the costs of training once they had found jobs.

Some examples were noted where advisers brought about a change to the provision offered by their organisation. It should be noted that adapting in-house services avoids the costs associated with referral to other organisations. An example was a provider in which job clubs for specific participant groups had been successfully introduced in response to an adviser's suggestion.

Advisers in **specialist and spot providers appeared less autonomous** in their roles than advisers in end-to-end providers, because of the fixed nature of the service being delivered, although there were also examples of spot providers adapting set training courses to participants' needs as required.

7.3.1   Advisers' perceptions on appropriateness of provision

Personal advisers were asked for their views on how well their provision met the needs of their participants. **Among end-to-end providers there were considerable variations** in responses to these questions. Some staff did not believe that provision was meeting participants' needs sufficiently well, and attributed this to the time, finance and target-related constraints highlighted earlier in this chapter (see Section 7.2.1). Some staff felt that smaller caseloads would enable them to provide more equitable support to their participants and not simply focus on those who were job-ready. Others, however, suggested that the extent to which participants benefited from their support depended on the individuals and their willingness to engage. These staff did not cite particular problems with current provision.

Some advisers reported that the **quality and adequacy of provision varied between participant types**. For example, a few advisers noted that the training and support offered was most relevant to lower-skilled participants and that they were less able to assist those with higher-level skills. Some reported that they were unable to fully assist individuals with severe health barriers to employment and extremely complex needs, expressing a view that these participants had been incorrectly referred to the programme and doubted that they would be able to support them into work.

The responses of advisers from **specialist and spot providers were similarly variable**. Some advisers simply reported receiving positive feedback from participants attending their training or workshops, as an indicator of quality and appropriateness. Other providers offering a training package delivered over a period of time which had been agreed with the end-to-end and/or prime provider, believed that insufficient time had been allowed to adequately meet participants' needs.

A few advisers from voluntary organisations noted that their more informal approach and the greater choice of training they offered their participants had proved to be highly successful[46], and contrasted participants' experience with their experiences prior to the Work Programme, noting that some had reported feeling 'forced' into certain activities at their local Jobcentre Plus.

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[46]   Some of these collected participant feedback using evaluation forms while others based this assessment on their own perceptions and verbal feedback they received from participants.

7.4   The use of subcontractors and referrals to other organisations

Providers were asked about their use of subcontractors within the Work Programme supply chains, as well as the referrals they made to other organisations outside the Work Programme, for specialist training and support.

7.4.1   The support providers seek from subcontractors

The interviews suggested that **end-to-end providers varied in their use of subcontractors**. Some staff reported that their organisation did not use any, or did so only occasionally, for reasons of funding. These organisations instead relied on in-house provision. Other providers were reported to regularly use subcontractors for a variety of purposes including employability training, sector-specific training, health management, work placement and job vacancy searching. In addition, they commissioned specialist services for participants with specific barriers to work such as drug and alcohol addiction.

A wide range of participants were referred to subcontractors by the end-to-end providers, including more and less job-ready participants, those with training needs such as ESOL and those with barriers such as mental health conditions. Some used subcontractors for specific stages of their participant journey or for all of their provision. In these cases, the participants referred were reported to be those who were less job-ready whom the provider had been unable to move into work, as well as those with specialist training needs. Other providers reported they referred their job-ready participants, for example, to recruitment agencies.

Specialist and spot providers' use of subcontractors varied according to the type of service they offered. For example, spot training providers delivered much or all of the training in-house and had no funds to subcontract any of their work. For others, subcontracting was integral to the service being provided; thus, a specialist health provider used subcontractors to provide counselling and physiotherapy services to their participants. The use of subcontractors and specialist support will be tracked by the evaluation.

7.4.2   Approaches to transferring participants between providers

A **variety of handover processes** to subcontractors was evident. In some end-to-end providers, the process was reported to depend on the referral system operated by the subcontractor receiving the participant. It might entail the adviser sending a paper or telephone referral, or making an initial appointment on behalf of the participant, and passing this information on to the participant. In other examples, advisers met their participants to discuss the different subcontractors and the services they provided and then arrange a first appointment with the selected organisation. In these instances, referrals were often made electronically, with the subcontractor having access to an end-to-end provider's system and being able to view participants' action plans, basic personal information and a summary of their progress in order to try and achieve a 'seamless' handover.

Similarly there were **varied processes for obtaining feedback** from subcontractors about participants. In some instances, no feedback was sought or received, but participants received certification for completion of a training course. In other cases, particularly where subcontractors were offering support for specific barriers, they sent regular updates about the participants to the end-to-end provider.

7.4.3   What was working well and less well in referrals to subcontractors

Some end-to-end providers, and specialist and spot providers using subcontractors in their delivery, reported that the process was generally working well and described how a **good relationship had been established with their subcontractors**. Some noted that they referred to subcontractors only if the participant was motivated to attend and this meant that participants enjoyed and engaged with the provision. In contrast, it was reported that where participants were not enthusiastic to move to a subcontractor it could mean they would seek an alternative: it could jolt them into finding work to avoid the referral.

One end-to-end provider mentioned that subcontracting had worked particularly well for specific participant groups such as mothers who were returning to work after a career break, and that the training was a good addition to their CVs, helping to build their confidence about returning to work.

Some providers reported **difficulties encountered and solutions reached** when using subcontractors. One end-to-end provider noted a disagreement over the cost of a subcontractor's services; this led it to stop using the subcontractor. Another said that its subcontractors had given misleading information about their capacity to deliver some types of training; as a consequence this end-to-end provider now employed an experienced tutor to evaluate a subcontractor's provision and capacity before contracts were signed. Some advisers reported uncertainty about whether participants were receiving the same level of support and training from subcontracts as they would from the end-to-end provider and for this reason had introduced participant feedback forms in order to monitor delivery and quality.

7.5   Summary

Pre-employment support available in end-to-end providers typically takes the form of one-to-one support from personal advisers. Some spot and specialist providers also use the personal adviser approach; however it is not appropriate for all types of services offered. For those providers using the personal adviser approach, the pattern of contact which advisers have with participants varies and there is some evidence to suggest that large caseloads make it difficult for some advisers to maintain the mandated fortnightly contact. A combination of large caseloads and pressure to meet job outcome targets also results in some advisers prioritising their more job-ready participants.

Advisers report that they had relative autonomy in managing their caseloads and in deciding on the type of support participants receive. Their main constraint surrounds funding – many advisers noted that referrals to support that the provider would have to fund, had to be discussed with a manager. Concerns over finance as well as time and target-related constraints were also reported to limit the extent to which advisers could meet participants' needs. Overall, staff reported that the effectiveness of the Work Programme depended, to a significant degree, on the motivation of participants to engage with it.

Only some providers use subcontractors as the standard element of their pre-employment support. Financial constraints were again noted by some and these mean that providers seek assurance that value would be added by subcontractors to the support already offered in-house. Others, however, regularly use subcontractors for a wide range of training and support needs for different types of participants.

The use of subcontractors and referral processes in general appears to work well and is thought to enable participants to access more specialist support than the referring provider was able to offer.

8   Action planning

The focus on a more personalised approach in advisory services for the unemployed has led to a growing use of action plans. These normally refer to written documents listing the steps a participant should be taking to move towards employment. Action plans have been employed in numerous UK employment initiatives.

For example, the evaluation of the Flexible New Deal (Vegeris *et al.,* 2011) highlighted extensive use of action plans as *'a tool for "constant evaluation"'*. It was reported that initial diagnostics had to be highly sensitised to customers' needs in order that actions were appropriately set. Ongoing reviews and monitoring were needed to maintain customer momentum. Hasluck and Green (2007) discuss the use of action planning in the progress2work pilots, which aimed to help some of the hardest-to-help customers (those with drug or alcohol dependency) to move towards employment. The action plans were a prominent feature of support, with advisers leading an initial assessment of a customer's employment and personal history to devise an individualised plan which constituted incremental and achievable steps towards employment. Finally, Thomas and Jones (2006) noted the value of action plans in supporting progression between participant-adviser meetings and supporting advisers to build on previous meetings and services delivered.

The analysis of prime providers' contracts and the interviews with primes reported in Chapter 2 suggests that there is wide use of action planning in Work Programme provision. This chapter explores the extent and nature of action planning from the perspectives of Work Programme providers and participants.

8.1   The provider perspective

Providers were asked if they used action planning as a matter of course in their interactions with participants and if so, what the process entailed, including factors that they took into consideration when developing action plans. The value derived from action planning was also examined.

8.1.1   The action planning process

End-to-end providers indicated that **action plans were drawn up for each participant as a standard part of delivery**. Plans were typically developed during one-to-one appointments with personal advisers. Not all of the providers used the term action plan; some talked about employment plans or monthly planners and a self-employment specialist end-to-end provider referred to business plans developed with participants. While different terminologies existed, the purpose of the plans was consistent.

It was reported that typically, **action plans were developed following initial assessment** with the participant (see Chapter 6) either during a first or second appointment with a personal adviser. Advisers drew on the results of the assessment, which focused on barriers to employment and job goals, and used the results to formulate an initial action plan. Some advisers also noted that they asked participants about the types of actions that they thought would help them to progress towards employment.

Participants' role in the creation of action plans appeared to vary. Some advisers specifically mentioned that they negotiated and agreed actions with participants. This could involve the use of directive questioning techniques rather than telling participants the actions that would be added to the plan. Other advisers noted that action plans resulted from agreements made by themselves and

participants in discussion. However, for the most part, advisers did not specifically mention the role of the participant and the actions appeared to be set by the adviser. This is a critical point that may explain some of the participant findings reported later in this chapter (see Section 8.2).

8.1.2   Format and storage of action plans

Some providers used **action plan templates** while in others, action plans were generated automatically by the provider's computer system following the initial assessment (see Chapter 6). In this latter approach, default or standard actions which all participants were expected to complete could be set; an example given was having an up-to-date CV. Other actions might then be tailored to the individual.

The evidence suggests that in most providers **action plans were stored electronically** although where providers used paper-based action plans and did not enter the data onto computer systems, the information was held as physical files. Some advisers spoke about printing copies of the agreed action plans for participants to sign and take away and others made no reference to this. One provider noted that participants were able to access their action plan from home by logging into a system although this did not appear to be common practice.

8.1.3   The uses made of action plans

Advisers reported using the action plans in two ways:

* to **monitor participants' progress**, using them in every meeting as a reminder of agreed activities (including actions advisers had agreed to in some cases); and

* as **an active aid to move participants closer to work**. Here, the action plan was revised periodically and actions ticked off (some advisers required evidence of a task being completed before this could be done) or new dates set for achievement dependent on progress. New actions would also be added as required.

8.1.4   Frequency of review

The use made of action plans, and policy within some providers, determined the frequency of action plan reviews. Some advisers indicated that they were expected to review and update plans fortnightly or monthly, while others stated that their minimum requirement was to update plans every six months or before a participant moved onto another stream of activity.

High caseloads could impact on the regularity of action plan reviews. For example, an adviser stated that they were supposed to review plans fortnightly, in reality due to their large caseload, they were able to review them only monthly. The adviser added that they reviewed the plans of their less job-ready participants even less frequently than those of more job-ready participants. This approach was confirmed by advisers in other providers. While this may be indicative of the prioritisation of some participants, it could also arise from concern for participants' experience. One adviser explained that the action plans of participants with complex needs were reviewed infrequently, as part of planned meetings, in order to ensure that the participant did not feel overwhelmed.

In general the evidence suggests that typically, **action plans are not shared** with other organisations. The only exception was seen in cases where spot providers regularly provided training to participants as part of the prime's model. Beyond this, one other provider noted that participants who encountered difficulties with the jobcentre were encouraged to show their action plans to Jobcentre Plus staff in order to demonstrate their progress on the Work Programme.

8.1.5   Benefits and effectiveness of action planning

Advisers' views about the relative benefits and effectiveness of the action plan were mixed. Some advisers believed that **action plans were useful because they helped participants to remain focused** and understand their progress, understand how they were being supported by the provider, and feel in control of their progress and more 'empowered'. Some of the advisers making this point were from areas where it seemed that participants had greater input into action plans than was typically the case. In addition to benefits for participants, some advisers, particularly those with large caseloads noted that they found action plans useful because they acted as a reminder of an individual's progress.

Other advisers were **more negative about action plans** and cited a range of problems with them. In one example, an end-to-end specialist provider stated that individual action plans did not fit well with its approach which centred on group work. This provider drew up action plans only because it was part of its contract with the prime provider. Another adviser noted that action plans were extremely time-consuming and that this time was often wasted because participants regularly changed their minds about job goals. Other advisers' concerns were focused on the automated action plan systems, which were reported to generate inappropriate actions. For example, an adviser noted that they were only able to select options from a drop-down menu within the action plan template. Another said while they were able to adjust the actions suggested by the system, it was frequently necessary to do this because actions were not particularly useful or relevant to the individual.

8.1.6   Specialist and spot providers' use of action plans varies

As might be expected, the **use of action plans by specialist and spot providers varied** depending on the type of service provided. For example, spot providers delivering training as part of the prime's model were able to access the participant's action plan on the prime's system and amended or revised this as they saw fit.

Some specialist and spot providers drew up action plans for participants while others said they did not use action plans but embedded a process that was suggestive of action planning. For example, a specialist health adviser noted that they wrote a report about each individual referred to them which included recommendations on how the individual should proceed, but did not call this an action plan. A spot provider offering NVQ training described how action plans followed the NVQ requirements and were used as a work pack where individuals could tick off requirements as they progressed on the course.

Providers delivering employability training used action plans in a similar way to end-to-end providers. Plans focused on individuals' barriers to employment, captured their job goals and set objectives in relation to these. In some of these cases, providers noted that participants played a role in deciding on the actions.

The extent to which these providers conducted **reviews of action plans depended on the service they delivered**. Action plans created as part of single session training provision were not reviewed, although providers asked participants to show their plans to the adviser in the organisation that had referred them. Other training providers indicated that they reviewed action plans periodically during or at the end of the training programme before the individual returned to the referring provider.

8.2   The participant experience

People in the Stage 1 (new entrant) and Stage 2 (on the programme for three to four months) participant samples were asked about their experiences and views on the use of action plans by Work Programme providers.

Many respondents in both samples had **no recollection of an action plan**. Some thought that a plan might have been mentioned but they were uncertain. Others were more certain that an action plan had not been talked about, though one respondent said that he would have liked one, and another said he had designed his own.

Respondents who did recall an action plan tended to be concentrated in two fieldwork sites[47]. In one of these, the respondents who gave the most details about their action plan were in the engaged participant group. However, in contrast the Stage 1 participants with the same provider said they had not received a plan. This may reflect the practice in some providers, noted earlier in this chapter, of developing action plans in the first or second meeting following an assessment.

Participants' detailed knowledge of their action plans

Among those who had a clear, or at least some, recollection of an action plan there was a range of experiences and views. Some were certain that a plan had been drawn up but they did not have a copy and could not describe its contents. Others talked about some form of record being kept by their adviser of what their next steps were expected to be but this was usually only entered onto a computer in their presence. They said they were not given a copy.

The most **positive views about action plans** came from the group of engaged participants in one area noted above. One participant spoke about their plan containing initial steps to build confidence linked to their job goals. For another participant the plan centred on improving reading skills. A third respondent saw his plan as reasonable and 'fluid' but possibly unnecessary as he felt it was just 'common sense'.

8.2.1   The process of action planning

The **observations of adviser-participant meetings suggested that all participants were involved in action planning** although the approach to this, whether the document created (online) was identified as an action plan and/or shared with the participant, and the extent of detail varied considerably which is consistent with findings elsewhere in this chapter. The actions frequently surrounded a commitment to applying for a specified number of jobs and attending the provider's office for jobsearch. There were few examples of participants being offered a copy of their action plan.

Some actions agreed on the spot

Where a particular cost to the provider would not be involved, **actions could be agreed immediately as part of meetings**. This included the frequency with which participants would attend the office to jobsearch, and/or to meet with their advisers. Other actions that could be agreed on the spot were those which related to recruitment processes led by the provider for a local employer. This involved the participant agreeing, for instance, to their CV being forwarded to the employer and in some cases, being referred to work placements to prepare them for available jobs.

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[47]   This suggests some alignment with provider evidence noted earlier in the chapter which showed that participants were more systematically involved in action planning in some local areas than others.

A staged approach to referrals

The observations suggested that advisers took **a staged approach to agreeing referrals within action plans**. In response to particular barriers or skills needs, advisers would raise the prospect of a referral to specialist support or training to test the participant's interest. Observations of later, review meetings suggested that these recommended referrals would be discussed further, to test participants' motivation and commitment. Where the adviser was satisfied that participants were motivated, the referral could be added to the action plan. In discussions following the observations, some advisers noted that 'fail to attend' rates for referrals were problematic and costly. This in part underpinned the two-stage (or more) process for making referrals. However, a staged process allowed participants time to consider the potential value of the referral and whether they felt it would be suitable for their needs, which could lead to greater commitment to it.

8.3 Summary

Wide variations were observed in approach and practice in relation to the use of action plans. This is to be expected, given the flexible, 'black box' service specification.

Evidence from end-to-end providers indicates the widespread use of action plans with the main purposes being to monitor participants' progress and actively move participants closer to achieving their job goals. Some specialist and spot providers also used action plans. Advisers drew on the findings from participants' initial assessments to identify job goals and barriers to employment. Beyond this, the approach varied in respect of whether advisers felt that further discussion was required before actions were set; and in respect of participants' involvement in determining actions.

Evidence from participants suggests that many were unaware of their action plan; although where they knew about their plan they usually valued it. An increase in participants' role in drawing up action plans could conceivably generate greater participant interest in the action plan, thereby increasing the effectiveness of action planning.

The regularity with which action plans were reviewed also varied. There is some indication that large caseloads resulted in less frequent reviews and some prioritisation of participants who were more job-ready.

Advisers' views on the benefits and effectiveness of action plans were mixed. Some saw them as a way to keep participants focused and to understand their own role in making progress towards work. However, others thought that creating action plans was time-consuming. Where automated systems were used, these could generate actions that were deemed inappropriate.

The participant evidence that some participants value action plans more than others suggests that their blanket use might not be appropriate. However, the more extensive use of action plans in two local areas and the generally positive response to them might also suggest a case for greater use of (appropriate) action plans with participants.

The panel data that will be collected in later stages of fieldwork will show whether action plans are used more (or introduced for the first time) as levels of engagement increase, and whether they have a bearing on people's likelihood of moving towards and into work.

9   Ongoing communications and contact

This chapter explores two key aspects of communication and contact operating within the Work Programme, drawing on the perspectives of providers and Jobcentre Plus staff.

First, it looks at views on the effectiveness of the communications that have been established between these two key agents in Work Programme delivery. Additionally, it examines the ongoing relationship that Jobcentre Plus has with participants once they are attached to the Work Programme.

9.1   Provider perspectives

Many provider managers and advisers reported that **communication with Jobcentre Plus staff is crucial**, and that limited or lack of interaction is seen as a hindrance to the effective running of the programme.

There were two main areas in which providers believed that better dialogue with Jobcentre Plus would enhance the service: in the handover and referral stage and as part of the sanctioning process.

Providers often took the view that **Jobcentre Plus staff had limited knowledge of the mechanics of the programme or the provision offered**, leading to claimants being ill-informed or having negative views before first contact had taken place (see also the reports of Jobcentre Plus staff in Chapter 3). Some providers believed that Jobcentre Plus staff were hostile towards private providers, others thought that they lacked sufficient knowledge to properly inform participants. Providers believed that clear, accurate information was important to ensure engagement, as was a 'warm handover' between Jobcentre Plus and providers – although as noted earlier (Chapter 5) there is little evidence of warm handovers to date.

Some provider staff said that they would like to be present during handover at Jobcentre Plus since this would greatly increase initial engagement. This might also encourage the sharing of information which could help overcome the unpredictability of referral numbers in their view.

> *'We don't know from one day to the next how many customers we're getting from the jobcentre. That would be nice. We're expecting a certain number then we get a load more and maybe we're expecting a large number then we get less. It's hard to forecast.'*

> (Provider manager)

In addition, many **providers would like better communication of referral information.** Their main concerns were out-of-date contact details and participants' personal history, specifically any history of aggressive or violent behaviour (see Chapter 5). Some advisers were frustrated by the length of time it took for Jobcentre Plus offices to inform providers of change of circumstances which could lead to referring participants to sanctioning unnecessarily and time wasted sending correspondence to incorrect addresses.

Communication related to sanctions was also a source of significant dissatisfaction (see also Chapter 11). Providers wanted better communication on whether sanctions had been applied and the reasons why some sanctions were disallowed, since if participants' had extenuating circumstances that meant they should not be sanctioned, this might also indicate support needs.

Contact with the providers and Jobcentre Plus was nearly always through standardised forms: WP07 for change of circumstances, WP08 for failure to participate in the programme and WP10 for entitlement doubt. However, this process was identified as a contributory factor to delays in processing, and **providers wanted direct communication with Jobcentre Plus staff to improve efficiency**.

> '*Everything has to be done through paperwork which is taking a long process so you're sending out a change of circumstances, a letter to ask … could you tell me if the information about this client is true, to get a letter back to say yes or no. So everything's slowed down.*'

> (Personal adviser)

However, some advisers were unsure if communication with jobcentre staff was prohibited by DWP or their prime provider. Potential problems of sharing sensitive information on the telephone were pointed out but it was also suggested that an established relationship between known contacts should overcome this issue.

Some staff in providers were in direct contact with Jobcentre Plus. However, reports of interactions between providers and Jobcentre Plus staff indicated that tensions could exist. For example, a manager talked about the difficulties she had in establishing relationships with local Jobcentre Plus offices even though she had spent considerable time visiting them and trying to establish a rapport. In another example, the nature of communication was so poor that the manager had to refer the matter to the prime provider.

There are, as well, **examples of good working relationships**. One provider discussed how a Jobcentre Plus office had set up a sanctions team to work directly with Work Programme providers. Another two indicated effective relationships with Decision Makers, with one of those noting that they would be holding a 'DMA master class' to resolve issues and improve communications. One provider reported that they regularly liaised with advisers in one Jobcentre Plus office and got information on how to deal with sanctioning paperwork, though their relationship with another local office was more problematic.

9.2   Jobcentre Plus perspectives

The issue of ongoing contact and communication was also discussed with Jobcentre Plus staff. However, in addition to their communication with providers the discussion also examined their ongoing contact with participants after referral to the Work Programme.

9.2.1   Contact with participants

Jobcentre Plus staff maintain **limited formal contact with participants** once they are attached to the Work Programme. However, since participants are still required to attend Jobcentre Plus offices to sign on and confirm their job-seeking activities, there are **frequent opportunities for informal discussions**. The contact is seen as light-touch, and overall this model of communications and contact appeared a contentious issue for some Jobcentre Plus staff who continued to feel a sense of investment and involvement in people who had previously been on their caseloads.

The different levels of local office-based Jobcentre Plus staff experience different extents and nature of contact with participants. The ATMs reported the feedback of their Advisers and Fortnightly Jobsearch Review (FJR) staff. Advisers tend to have only informal contact such as chance encounters with participants while they are in the jobcentre. In these instances and if time allowed, advisers would typically make an informal approach to find out how participants were getting on and through this, gather feedback about the Work Programme.

The FJR staff had light-touch formal contact with participants to confirm compliance with the Jobseeker's Agreements in order to trigger benefits payments. It was as part of this contact that participants shared views of their experiences.

Signing process affects the nature of contact

In all cases, the **signing-on process was led by FJR staff** and, at least initially, in all offices this involved a cut-down version of the process used for claimants before referral to the Work Programme.

In around a quarter of local offices visited, **self-managed signing-on** had been introduced which (further) limited the extent of contact. The self-managed process involved participants submitting 'coupons' which detailed their job-seeking activities. If FJR staff had queries they contacted participants or Work Programme providers to confirm that sufficient activity was taking place. The benefit of the self-managed process was that it freed up time for the jobcentre's core activity of helping claimants ahead of referral to the Work Programme.

However, staff expressed some concerns that the shortened appointment for signing-on (whether self-managed or FJR-led) meant that they did not have time to determine whether participants were genuinely involved in job-seeking activities. Furthermore, they did not have time to supplement support for subcontracting offered by the Work Programme, which many reported as necessary in light of infrequent adviser meetings once attached to the programme.

For these reasons, and despite being given guidance that participants should not receive additional support during the signing-on process, it was apparent that many FJR staff and advisers found it **hard to resist helping participants along in their jobsearch process**. As part of the short signing sessions, staff would highlight any relevant vacancies to individuals to ensure they had a chance to apply for them.

However this view was balanced by an understanding that providers had the main responsibility and funding to provide the support that participants need, and that it is appropriate that Jobcentre Plus support should reduce. The sense of 'us and them' and relationship tension between Jobcentre Plus and providers (see section 9.2.2) that permeated many of the discussions with Jobcentre Plus staff led one manager to suggest that policy went further:

> *'The business of us signing them is really irrelevant in my opinion because I think you can't take half the job and not take all the job … If conditionality is their responsibility, that they're supposed to be seeking them every fortnight and all the rest of it, then that's part and parcel.'*

> (Adviser Team Manager)

Light-touch contact means Jobcentre Plus hears only the bad news

A consequence of the limited time that Jobcentre Plus staff had with participants was that they did not have time to explore the experiences of all participants. Instead, **participants who were most unhappy about their experiences would volunteer their views** during their encounters with staff at the jobcentre. Accordingly, Jobcentre Plus reported that they frequently heard complaints and criticism of the Work Programme rather than anything that participants appreciated about it. This was linked in some cases to reported referrals to sanctioning (see Chapter 11), infrequent meetings between participants and providers, and in some cases a perceived lack of support (see also Chapter 15). This situation was unlikely to help alleviate the tensions, suggested by discussions, between jobcentres and providers.

In some instances, FJR staff and advisers attempted contact with providers to report issues raised by participants and to seek resolution. For example, in one area, an additional complaint surrounded the location of provision. In light of random allocation, people might be referred to a provider in the local town whereas others would be assigned further afield to a nearby city. While the travel distance was not unreasonable, Jobcentre Plus staff found themselves the sounding board for gripes on this issue. Staff had approached the provider concerned to understand the reasons for referral to city premises; the provider justified this by the very high quality facilities located there.

More frequently, they encouraged participants to take a pro-active approach and request support from their provider.

Supporting participants prioritised over avoiding duplication of effort

In a small number of the Jobcentre offices visited, the **format of signing-on meetings had been changed in order to increase support** to participants. This was partly a response to the informal feedback from participants who were meeting Work Programme advisers only infrequently (for example, every couple of months or so)[48] and partly so that staff could feel confident that the conditions of Jobseeker's Agreements were being met.

In these offices, the signing on process had reverted to something similar to that delivered to pre-Work Programme claimants. Participants could be referred to adviser appointments for job-search and other support. This change meant that Jobcentre Plus staff gained greater insight into job-seeking activities while also ensuring that job search support needs were being met. Generally, views were positive about having made this change.

Customer satisfaction surveys reveal spectrum of experiences

Another form of contact with participants noted by ATMs in a couple of Jobcentre Plus offices was the use of claimant satisfaction surveys. In both cases, these had revealed a spectrum of participant experiences from very good to very poor.

An ATM reported that it meant the jobcentre was able to identify weak points in the process from referral to Work Programme and into attachment, which provided a basis for giving feedback to providers in order that processes could be improved. It was also believed to deliver greater insight into the participant experience, since the survey covered frequency of meetings along with any referrals to training or support services.

9.2.2 Communications between Jobcentre Plus and providers

As the previous section highlights, Jobcentre Plus staff report that they lack knowledge of Work Programme provision and providers, and their perceptions are heavily influenced by negative feedback that they receive from participants during signing on sessions and as part of informal contact. Overall, and across the areas visited, it appears that there is only **limited contact between Jobcentre Plus staff and providers**. Where there was some difference between offices it centred on the extent to which it mattered to Jobcentre Plus staff that there was little contact between themselves and the Work Programme.

In all instances, there had been some degree of contact in the early implementation phases of the Work Programme (see Chapter 3). This tended to involve provider staff attending Jobcentre Plus offices to talk through what they would offer to participants, with an aim that Jobcentre Plus staff could use this information to start setting claimants' expectations ahead of referral.

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[48] Changes involving additional support provided by Jobcentre Plus, while not widespread in the research sites, are contrary to the overall policy intention of the Work Programme.

Beyond these early meetings, ongoing contact was limited. In a couple of the offices visited, **some staff mentioned there had been an opportunity to visit a provider's premises to understand more about their programme**. However, this had been a one-off offered to a small number of staff (since it would be difficult for jobcentres to release large numbers of staff for a group visit), and while beneficial, more staff wanted the opportunity to gain this insight. In addition, they stressed that regular updates would be appreciated. In one of these offices, a provider had shown a willingness to host more jobcentre staff visits; however, no dates had been supplied for this. This led to a manager questioning why providers were not proactive in contacting the jobcentre, although other staff attributed this to the high volumes of claimants being referred to the programme.

The consequence of a lack of communication was that the only feedback most Jobcentre Plus staff received was from disgruntled participants. This meant that their views of the provision and support available through the Work Programme were skewed to the negative.

However, there were some exceptions to this pattern. **Some Employment Disability Advisers described receiving information directly from the local Work Programme provider, about how participants are engaging with the programme**. An adviser described a meeting with a provider manager who attended a meeting to discuss the low referral and take-up rate of voluntary Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants, thus triggering some direct information exchange between the provider and the local Jobcentre Plus office.

Communication protocols limit contact

There were suggestions that locally established communication protocols determined the extent of contact between Jobcentre Plus and providers. In some offices, jobcentre staff noted that district-level staff led communications with the providers and acted as an intermediary between the providers and local Jobcentre Plus office staff. While this provided a simple channel for the provider, it introduced time lags in local offices receiving issues/queries and being able to respond. A key outcome of this was delays in communicating change of status information related to participants. This was a problem for all Jobcentre Plus offices, which may suggest that its source extends beyond local communication protocols[49].

A second example of local protocol interfering with communications was on the provider side. In this case, where a provider was a subcontractor to the prime provider, its first line of communication was with the prime, which then contacted the jobcentre on its behalf (whether district or local). Again, this provides a simplification in that it limits the number of providers in contact with Jobcentre Plus offices although, as before, it also introduces time lags in the communication of critical information.

There was some evidence that it was **possible to subvert the communications protocols**. In one example, a member of a provider's staff had previously worked for the local Jobcentre Plus office and consequently, it was reported, would informally contact jobcentre staff with any issues and information. Similarly, some providers had operated in the local areas under the Flexible New Deal and had established relations with Jobcentre Plus offices which continued into Work Programme delivery.

There was also evidence that **Jobcentre Plus staff were seeking to increase the extent of communication**. An example was given by a manager of district staff encouraging increased communication, but the manager also noted that the work was taking place at too high a level for it to impact 'on the ground', at least for the time being. However, the aspiration to a more collaborative relationship was seen as appropriate.

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[49]   It is worth noting that since the research fieldwork reported here was undertaken, and partly in response to the kinds of concerns raised here, a new telephone hotline (Provider Direct) has been launched in October 2012 by Jobcentre Plus to support and improve communications between it and providers.

'District is keen for greater contact between Jobcentre Plus and providers to iron out any issues we've got locally and see what we can do to support them and vice versa.'

(Jobcentre Plus manager)

Participants do not understand that Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers do not share information

The **lack of communication between providers and Jobcentre Plus offices was reported to be confusing for participants** but could also offer them some opportunities. Most frequently, participants did not understand that if they notified Jobcentre Plus of a piece of information that it did not automatically transfer to their provider and vice versa. This led to participants reportedly feeling passed from pillar to post. It was apparent from the discussions with Jobcentre Plus staff, that not all participants understood that their case (other than their sign on) was handed over in full to providers.

'Claimants don't realise that we don't share information with [providers] *they assume that if the provider knows about their activity then we do too.'*

(Personal adviser)

A related issue, although one that was mentioned much less frequently by Jobcentre Plus staff, was the **opportunity for participants to exploit the communication gap that existed between Jobcentre Plus and providers**. Here, it was reported that participants could spuriously report that they were undertaking the required job-seeking activity with the provider or the jobcentre. Resolving this is problematic where direct lines of communication do not exist between the jobcentre and the provider.

A request for good news stories

A common criticism of the lack of contact was that Jobcentre Plus did not have **success stories to counteract the negative feedback** they received from disgruntled participants, nor to share with claimants who would be referred to the programme. The lack of good news stories made some advisers and other staff suspicious that outcomes were being achieved. It was apparent that some participant case studies – detailing additional support and training offered and outcomes – would help Jobcentre Plus staff gain some insight into provision.

There were differing views about why these stories were not emerging. Some thought that providers did not want to identify poor performance although most simply wanted more information.

'Providers have probably had some success but it is not publicised. It's like the secret service – if you ask anything about Work Programme performance, the answer is that they have two years to get people into work.'

(Jobcentre Plus manager)

'We could do with some more detail about what they do, what they fund and some good news cases.'

(Personal Adviser)

Local variation in experience for participants claiming ESA

The evidence suggests a **significant degree of local variation in the support of participants claiming ESA** with staff in a couple of offices reporting promising practice, whereas in others, significant concern was expressed. At best, it appeared that good communications existed between the provider and the Jobcentre Plus and there was confidence that this group of participants received excellent support:

> 'The ESA customers seem to have a gold standard service. Feedback from them has been more positive than for other customers. They want the extra support.'

> (Jobcentre Plus manager)

However, this appeared to be far from the norm and in other offices significant concern was expressed about the lack of specialised support.

It may be that increased communication between providers and Jobcentre Plus advisers who specialise in support for people with health conditions and disabilities could ease concern and increase knowledge and expertise of how best to support these groups.

Increased local collaboration would be welcomed by most

Most Jobcentre Plus staff (although not all) thought that **increased contact would be beneficial**. It would smooth the experience for participants who did not understand which organisation was taking the lead on each aspect of their case; it would also mean that Jobcentre Plus had improved insight into provision which they could use in their discussions with claimants ahead of referral to the programme.

A number of staff noted that contact and collaboration was greater under previous provision – such as Flexible New Deal and Employment Action Zones – than it is under the Work Programme. To some degree, staff attributed the lack of communication to the set-up of the Work Programme which handed the individual's case to the provider for support rather than it being a shared responsibility.

There was certainly **local variation in the degree of contact** which suggests it may not be a structural problem; rather that it results from locally established protocols. For example, an adviser who had transferred between Jobcentre Plus offices in two different regions reported significant differences in relationships with providers between the two areas. In one region, the relationships appeared tense and distrustful, in the other, communications were open and easy.

Overall, there was a view that it would be beneficial for there to be more communication between local offices and providers; in addition to increasing support for participants, easing concerns over how information was used among advisers, and increasing insights into Work Programme provision, it would re-balance the feedback that Jobcentre Plus staff receive from disgruntled participants, which may, in turn, alleviate their concerns over the provision.

9.3   Summary

From the provider viewpoint, improved dialogue with Jobcentre Plus staff would be extremely valuable to the better running of the programme, with particular benefits seen in the handover and referral processes, as well as sanctioning.

One group of providers was already working together to improve its contact with Jobcentre Plus, and could see the benefits of this. A second group had previously established channels of communication and the two organisations appeared to work well together in these cases. However, a third group of providers that had problematic relationships with their local Jobcentre Plus offices with little apparent action on either side to address this.

The wish for improved communication and contact with providers was also expressed by Jobcentre Plus for reasons which mirrored those of providers. It was apparent that increased communication might lead to better insight into the delivery of the Work Programme among Jobcentre Plus staff. This, in turn, would improve their communications with claimants ahead of referral[50], help them be more specific with advice to participants during signing-on sessions, and could alleviate concerns that participants were receiving insufficient support, by widening sources of feedback.

Once claimants were referred Jobcentre Plus support should reduce (although in some cases it had not). In respect of processes which support this reduction, newly introduced procedures, such as self-managed signing, appeared effective and freed up staff time for the jobcentre's core activity of helping claimants ahead of referral to the Work Programme. Communications between providers and Jobcentre Plus staff, and between Jobcentre Plus staff and participants were important enablers to the effective working of these new systems.

Communication between Jobcentre Plus and providers has emerged as a critical one throughout this phase of research and will be tracked in future phases of the evaluation.

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[50]   The research with participants seems to reinforce this point. Where voluntary claimants were able to choose their Work Programme providers, they often chose one attended by partners or friends (see Section 5.2.2).

10 In-work support

While the traditional focus for active labour market programmes has simply been on moving participants into employment, in recent years policy-makers have become increasingly aware of the issue of employment retention, particularly in light of the concerns about people becoming 'trapped' in low-status insecure employment with poor progression prospects, and the related problem of 'churning' between low-paid or temporary jobs and spells of unemployment[51]. The Work Programme has sought to address this by incentivising providers to support participants in work, through the use of staged and increasing outcome payments related to retention in employment (see Chapter 1).

There are some studies of other recent UK programmes which have also attempted to incorporate a focus on retention in employment. One example[52] is the in-work support offered in Employment Zones (EZs). This has mainly consisted of 'out of working hours' contact and in-work financial support. Although, initially the first line of in-work support were customers' EZ advisers (for reasons of continuity), some EZs created 'aftercare consultants' to offer dedicated in-work support during evenings and weekends while others operated free telephone helplines. The in-work support provided by EZs appeared most effective during the first few weeks of employment, when the majority of problems are likely to arise. In some cases, EZ advisers were able to prevent customers from dropping out of employment by negotiating with an employer on their behalf. The flexibility of EZ provision meant that financial support was also available to customers who had entered employment (Hasluck and Green, 2007, p.49).

The existing evidence also suggests that access to financial, as well as advisory, support is important. Kay (2008) points to the considerable financial disincentives which face those leaving benefits for low-paid work. This was particularly marked for those entering part-time work. Financial support can be particularly crucial for lone parents. A pilot of the In-Work Emergency Fund (IWEF) offered under New Deal for Lone Parents suggested that small-scale financial support to help meet the cost of emergencies and to overcome barriers to remaining in work during the first 60 days of employment could play a crucial role in sustaining lone parents during the early weeks of employment (Thomas and Jones, 2006).

This chapter explores the nature and experience of in-work support offered as part of the Work Programme. The majority of the analysis relies on the accounts of provider staff since, at this stage of the evaluation, very few new job entrants have been recruited to the participant research.

10.1   The provider perspective

The interviews with provider staff explored the nature of the in-work support offered. This covered its timing and content, the staff who were involved in delivery, and views of whether the support was effective.

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[51]   See the discussion on this in Devins *et al.* (2011).

[52]   Another was the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) demonstration programme, which was launched in autumn 2003, and which included provision of in-work support through job coaching and financial help (delivered through Jobcentre Plus). ERA was designed to test the effectiveness of a programme to improve the labour market prospects of low-paid workers and long-term unemployed people and is one of the largest randomised social policy trials ever undertaken in Britain: see Dorsett *et al.* (2007).

10.1.1   End-to-end providers had varied models for in-work support

The **delivery model for in-work support varied**. Some end-to-end providers delegated responsibility to a separate in-work support team or an external contact centre. Others shared responsibility with the in-work support team or the contact centre or placed the initial responsibility for in-work support on participants' advisers who later passed the responsibility on to the in-work support team or contact centre.

In some cases, the point at which this handover occurred was fixed but, in others, handover depended on how the participant was faring in work and the assessed risk of the participant dropping out of work.

Even after support was no longer provided by advisers, some providers noted that participants were encouraged to contact their advisers if they encountered difficulties within their jobs. In addition, some providers noted that when participants identified that they were having difficulties in work to the contact centre, this would be flagged up in the adviser's system and the adviser could often get involved and contact the individual as well. A few providers indicated that although in-work support had initially been provided by advisers, they had now invested in an in-work support team to deliver this support, in order to allow advisers to focus on their pre-employment caseload.

In some end-to-end providers, **support began before the participant started in the new job** and included better-off-in-work calculations, a stated commitment to pay for participants' travel to work for an initial period, or risk assessments (sometimes also referred to as a 'work sustainment assessment'). Risk assessments were conducted either by advisers or by a member of the in-work support team. The assessment sought to determine the likelihood of the participant dropping out of work which, in turn, determined the frequency of in-work support that would be provided to the participant and who would deliver that support. For example, if advisers thought that there was a high risk of a participant dropping out of work, they would personally contact the individual whereas, in cases assessed as lower risk of drop-out, the participant would be contacted by a member of the in-work support team. One provider referred to a transition interview which entailed participants meeting with the in-work support team. During the meeting, participants received support to help them come off benefits and prepare for work. This included ensuring that the individual was able to pay council tax and had appropriate clothes for the workplace.

Other end-to-end providers delivered **in-work support only once the participant had started work**. This entailed periodic telephone contact or contact by text or email. The purpose of contact was to find out how the participant's job was going and to identify any problems. This could identify where support to avoid drop-out from work, or in respect of other needs, was delivered. The pattern of contact with participants varied. Some providers indicated that they contacted individuals after their first day of work, while others contacted people following their first week in a job or after the first few weeks. Following initial contact, the subsequent pattern also varied. Some providers contacted participants weekly for a set period and after that contacted them on a monthly basis. Other providers maintained a set pattern of contact throughout, which frequently took the form of monthly contact.

The **frequency of contact varied** and could depend on the assessed risk of drop-out as well as the type of work they had gained. For example, a provider stated that a high risk individual was contacted weekly for four to six weeks instead of the usual two weeks. Another noted that agency workers were contacted weekly rather than fortnightly (which was more typical of the providers' in-work support model) because of the short-term and potentially sporadic nature of their work. Participants who were agency workers were contacted by a special team who sourced vacancies and tried to ensure that the participant stayed in continuous work.

A few providers indicated that they provided **in-work support beyond regular contact** with participants. This included access to workshops delivered by the provider and ongoing face-to-face appointments with an individual's personal adviser for the first six months in the job as well as access to careers guidance for participants who wanted to continue developing their skills. One provider also mentioned the existence of a freephone number that participants could use to gain access to advice and support. This provider also said that it was about to launch an on-line portal through which participants would be able to access careers guidance.

Other providers referred to **additional support for specialist needs**. For example, an end-to-end specialist provider delivering support to disabled participants described how it set in place Access to Work[53] support for eligible participants to ensure reasonable adjustments to the working environment. The provider noted that it also carried out development work with employers if needed. The aim of its in-work support was to get the participant working independently as quickly as possible, and thus most of the in-work support was provided at the point of job entry.

Providers generally thought that **in-work support was working well** but did not usually elaborate beyond this. A few providers noted specific benefits such that it provided an impartial person who could discuss work-related problems with participants. One provider gave an example of how in-work support had helped to prevent eight participants from being made redundant due to a temporary slowdown at a warehouse. The provider was made aware of the potential redundancy by a participant and stepped in to persuade the employer to reduce the participants' working hours rather than make them redundant. This saved the employer re-recruitment and training costs when business picked up. Other providers indicated that there were limitations to the impact of in-work support. For example, one noted that there was little that could be done to prevent an individual from losing their job if they went into work intoxicated one morning.

Some **specific problems with in-work support** were noted. An issue that was raised repeatedly (by staff in different providers) was that some participants do not wish to be contacted periodically by the provider once in work. Providers thought that this was because participants did not understand the purpose of the contact, did not realise that they were going to be tracked for two years and/or did not wish to be reminded of the fact that they had been unemployed.

Some providers indicated that they complied with participants' wishes of this kind and subsequently did not contact them. However, this approach could cause problems because the providers did not know if individuals remained in work. One added that it contacted the relevant Jobcentre Plus offices to ask whether affected individuals had restarted a claim for unemployment benefits but that Jobcentre Plus had not provided this information. Other providers noted that they had no choice but to contact participants at various stages in order to receive their sustainment payments.

Not all specialist and spot providers involved in delivering in-work support

Not all specialist and spot providers offered in-work support to participants. This could reflect the nature of their provision, their contracts with primes and the limited contact they have with participants. Among those that did, the type of assistance was similar to the in-work support provided by end-to-end providers and entailed **periodic contact by the adviser**. The pattern of contact could vary but was often monthly and was intended to find out how the participant's job was going and to identify any problems.

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[53]   Access to Work is a government programme aimed at helping disabled people move into and retain work, it provides the individual and the employer with advice and financial support with the extra costs associated with employment.

Regular contact continued for a period that had been pre-agreed with the prime or the referring organisation. For example, one spot provider delivering training noted that it provided in-work support until the individual had been in the job for six months and that subsequent in-work support was provided by the prime. Another spot provider noted that in-work support was provided until the participant had been in work for 13 or 26 weeks depending on the payment group the individual was in.

There were also some specialist and spot providers who delivered **in-work support linked to their area of expertise**. For example, a spot provider delivering further education noted that it had an in-work support officer who provided participants with advice and guidance about further education and how to access courses once they are in employment. For this to be delivered it was necessary for participants to agree to be contacted. If they did, they were usually contacted quarterly but could be contacted monthly if they preferred.

10.2   The participant experience

In this initial wave of fieldwork 31 Stage 3 (new job entrant) participants were interviewed. Most had not been working for long and few perceived a need for in-work support from their provider. The **experience of most had been to receive telephone calls from their adviser** to ask how they were getting on. Most described this as welcome and friendly and said that the repeated messages that they could contact the provider if they needed any sort of support were reassuring. There was a small number of people who were unsure of the purpose of regular telephone calls or did not welcome telephone calls during work hours.

Specific offers of help from a provider included help to purchase a bicycle (not take-up by the participant), liaison with Jobcentre Plus over an 'in-work credit' claim, and job-specific training (again, not taken up at the time of interview).

However, **some people had been disappointed not to receive the help they wanted**. One participant had wanted financial assistance in obtaining a specific equipment licence, another said she had not received help in looking for alternative employment to her new job, and another participant was unhappy that no advice or training to set up in self-employment was provided.

Although some people were not particularly enjoying their new job (and some of these were keen to find other work) no one in the sample reported any problems in work related to their duties, hours or workplace relations that could require the intervention of a Work Programme adviser with the employer.

The adviser analysis above includes a couple of examples of how providers attempt to respond to problems of this kind, although it is likely that more examples will emerge from the second wave of fieldwork (in autumn 2012) when a sample of people in sustained work (i.e. of over six months) will be interviewed.

10.3   Summary

At this stage of the evaluation there is little evidence on the extent and effectiveness of in-work support provided through the Work Programme. However, it seems from the participant interviews that the initial support in the early weeks of a new job (primarily telephone calls to identify problems and reassurance that help will be available if necessary) is mostly perceived as appropriate and generally well received.

Providers confirm that they make this type of support available in order to prevent individuals dropping out of work in this critical early phase. Some providers offer additional support including better-off calculations, financial assistance for participants' initial travel to work, risk assessments and ongoing access to workshops and training being delivered by the provider.

Providers generally indicated that in-work support is working well. However, several identified problems in relation to some participants not wanting to be contacted regularly by them. This causes difficulties since providers need to maintain contact with participants in order to receive their job sustainment payments[54].

Some participants are not aware of the purpose of in-work support. More detailed and earlier explanations from providers of in-work support, and the benefits that it can provide, could help to reduce the antipathy of some participants towards in-work support.

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[54]   Similar findings were observed in the evaluation of the Flexible New Deal: see Vegeris *et al.* (2011), p.127.

11 Conditionality and sanctions

In common with numerous international examples of active labour market measures, participation in the Work Programme is largely mandatory (except for some groups who can volunteer to participate[55]), and once people have joined the programme, providers can choose to mandate participants to undertake activities. This means that most participants[56] are expected to complete specified activities such as jobsearches and to attend appointments with their advisers, support or training sessions. Non-compliance can lead to withdrawal of benefit for increasing periods of time: two weeks for an initial sanction, followed by four weeks and then for 26 weeks. Work Programme providers do not make decisions about sanctioning, but refer cases to the Benefits Delivery Centres (BDCs), each of which covers a number of Jobcentre Plus offices and areas.

There are two types of non-compliance that can lead to sanctioning: failure to participate in Work Programme activity (WP08) and sanctioning for entitlement doubt, where a participant is believed to be breaching the terms of their Jobseeker's Agreement (WP10)[57].

Sanctioning referrals for non-compliance with Work Programme activity (WP08) are made to the Decision Maker in the BDC. Participants are then contacted by the Decision Maker by telephone or letter to establish 'good cause'. They are informed of the outcome of the referral by letter. If the sanction is for failure to attend the first appointment with the Work Programme provider and the Decision Maker has been unable to establish telephone contact with a participant, the letter may be the first time the participant is aware of the sanction. If a sanctioning referral takes place once an individual is engaged in the Work Programme, the personal adviser is likely to have informed the participant that a referral has been made (although there is no requirement for advisers to do this).

If a provider has doubts regarding a participant's entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) because they suspect the participant is not available for or actively seeking work, they are required to refer the case to Jobcentre Plus for a decision (using form WP10).

Decision Makers approve sanctions only where they are assured that participants were aware of the mandated activity. This means that the Work Programme provider must show the Decision Maker that the participant received dated, written information setting out the activities that the participant was expected to complete.

This chapter explores the process and experience of sanctioning within the Work Programme from three perspectives: The views of providers are first considered, and then the experiences of participants are reviewed. The chapter concludes with the perspectives of Decision Makers and Jobcentre Plus staff.

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[55] Chapter 1 provides information on different payment groups and voluntary entrants to the Work Programme.

[56] Note that some claimant groups are not subject to mandatory Work-Related Activity (e.g. Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants allocated to the Support Group).

[57] Note that WP08 and WP10 are internal Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) nomenclature referring to the official forms that Work Programme providers complete, in order to report non-compliance: see also Section 9.1).

11.1   Work Programme provider perspectives

Providers were asked about their processes for referring participants for sanctioning, the circumstances under which participants are referred, how the processes work, the rate of referrals and the proportion of sanctions which are applied. Providers were then asked about the consequences of sanctioning decisions being allowed or disallowed, and whether, from their perspective, sanctioning within the Work Programme is effective.

11.1.1   Referring participants for sanctioning: the process

Processes for referring participants for sanctioning varied between the different types of providers, as did practices. Some **larger, end-to-end providers had administrative teams or contact centres which processed sanctioning referrals**. These organisations appeared less flexible in their approach to sanctioning than did smaller, specialist and spot providers which allocated greater responsibility for the sanctioning process to personal advisers.

Provider staff reported that failure to attend initial appointments caused large volumes of sanction referrals. Staff also noted that errors in Jobcentre Plus records, including out-of-date contact details and/or incorrect telephone numbers, could lead to this type of sanctioning referral. The staff also reported that, when they inform Jobcentre Plus of changes in the personal details of participants, Jobcentre Plus can be slow to process change in circumstance (WP07) forms. This results in participants falling out of the eligibility group for the Work Programme, or no longer looking for work.

Referrals to sanctioning of engaged participants were typically made by their personal advisers, although the administrative procedures might be allocated to either a sanctioning officer or clerical staff. Advisers confirmed that the requirement to attend is reinforced by informing participants in writing of mandatory activities, including meetings with their personal adviser. Some also noted that the requirement is recorded in the participant's action plan. Personal advisers spoke of the role they play in preventing referrals for sanctioning, through clarifying with participants the attendance rules and explaining that sanctions will be applied for if they fail to attend.

Referrals of participants who have engaged with the Work Programme were described as mainly resulting from failure to attend appointments with personal advisers. While, in theory, participants can be referred for sanctioning for failing to comply with any Work Programme activity, no examples of sanctioning for other kinds of failure to comply were reported in the interviews.

There appeared to be **some confusion among providers about whether voluntary participants could be sanctioned**. Furthermore, some provider staff highlighted that information from Jobcentre Plus on whether individuals should be participating in the Work Programme was inadequate in some cases. In one example, a manager explained that participants had been referred for sanctioning because the provider had not known they had been reassigned from JSA to ESA. This led to a waste of administrative time and was distressing for the participants.

Administration of referrals to sanctioning can be time-consuming

Some managers, particularly those in organisations which did not operate electronic systems for sanctioning, described **the sanctioning referral process as quite complex**, since it necessitated manual checks to ensure staff had followed procedures correctly.

Staff in larger providers appeared less concerned about the impact of the sanctioning procedure on their workload. This was explained by the practice of allocating the process to specific sanctioning staff or teams. Staff in some prime providers noted that their organisation's call centre dealt with referrals for those failing to attend an initial appointment. One organisation had recently introduced this system in response to high rates of non-attendance at initial appointments:

'We've just introduced a team who just deal with the sanctioning and they're based in [regional centre]. *So now we go on the Internet, put our information on and they do the paper work and send it off. They deal with it, because it can be quite time-consuming.'*

(Manager)

Mandation and referral for sanctioning became more time-consuming in those situations where advisers made efforts to avoid sanctioning by exercising discretion. Some made repeated attempts to contact participants who had missed initial appointments, or deferred appointments in order to avoid having to refer participants for sanctioning.

While referral for sanctioning was regarded by many as time-consuming, most **accepted it as a necessary part of their day-to-day practice**. Exceptions to those who regarded sanctioning as part of normal practice were found among staff from the specialist and spot providers who were often not comfortable with the process.

Staff resented the time taken to refer individuals for sanctioning in those cases in which sanctions were not subsequently applied, particularly where this was for technical reasons, such as errors in dates. Provider staff also said that in some cases, feedback was not supplied by Jobcentre Plus about why a sanction was disallowed. This was a particular source of resentment among staff who already believed that they had less time than they needed to deliver services to participants (see Section 7.1).

Specialist and 'spot' providers are less involved in sanctioning

Overall, the interviews suggested that **staff in spot and specialist providers had limited experience of referring participants for sanctioning** compared with staff in end-to-end providers. Often these providers had worked only with small numbers of entrants. Consequently, some advisers in specialist and spot providers were not aware of the procedures for sanctioning because they had not used them.

There was **a greater degree of reluctance among staff in these organisations to refer participants for sanctioning**, a reluctance that was apparent in principle even among those who had yet to make referrals. Some saw the process of referral as the remit of the end-to-end provider. Others believed that the sanctioning process could get in the way of delivering provision by diverting attention to compliance rather than activities and outcomes. Some, while accepting that they had a role in sanctioning participants, reported that it remained uncomfortable for them and their teams. In addition it was clear that some specialist and spot providers were particularly focused on supporting participants with significant barriers to employment for whom they considered sanctioning to be potentially counter-productive.

Limited communication with Jobcentre Plus

Different procedures are in place for participants who breach the terms of the Work Programme and for those who are considered to be breaching the terms of their Jobseeker's Agreement, for example, by being unavailable for work. Procedurally, providers complete a WP08 form for breaches of the Work Programme and a WP10 for other non-compliance.

We found **few examples of communication between providers and jobcentres over Work Programme compliance** (WP08). Among the few exceptions, a member of staff in one end-to-end provider explained that they would sometimes telephone the individual's jobcentre to try to establish a reason for non-attendance. A manager in another end-to-end provider made a similar point.

'We have a pretty good relationship with [the local] *jobcentre .... If we are wanting to find somebody that we haven't been able to contact, they allow us to go over and sit in the jobcentre. We know what their signing-on day is ... And we've picked up a few very surprised people.'*

(Manager)

The **limited degree of communication was also found in relation to referrals for breach of the Jobseeker's Agreement** (WP10 referrals). Once again, few examples of collaborative working between providers and Jobcentre Plus local offices to verify this form of non-compliance emerged. The 'champion of sanctions' in one provider explained that these referrals were discussed with staff in the local Jobcentre Plus office fairly frequently. An adviser in another provider also noted some collaboration. Overall, this level of co-operation between was unusual.

'If you have got somebody, say, that has failed to attend four times, they may well be working. I have a really good relationship with the jobcentre and they have a team that pulls people in anyway, so they might ring us and say have they been attending, or we might ring them and say "X hasn't been attending".'

(Adviser)

Participants do not understand who makes the decision

A common complaint among provider staff concerned participants' view that the provider, rather than Jobcentre Plus, had made the decision to sanction them.

'We don't sanction anyone. We don't have the power, we can raise a doubt ... The customer doesn't attend an appointment, we enter it onto [our system] *as a 'Did Not Attend'. There is a 'reason box' underneath. It doesn't matter what we say, that will then raise a sanction doubt. We don't have the power to say yes or no.'*

(Manager)

This perspective on referrals for sanctioning was most common in large providers who had electronic systems, and central teams leading on sanctioning referrals. These processes meant that advisers felt less involved in sanctioning and, therefore, protected from criticism from participants.

'If we've tried to contact you and you haven't answered your phone, you haven't called into the office to say you can't attend the appointment, then we have to put on the system 'Did Not Attend'. Unfortunately that then goes to our Head Office who do the paperwork.'

(Adviser)

As a consequence of their lack of involvement in the sanctioning decision, many **provider staff were unhappy that participants who complained to their jobcentre about their sanction were referred back to their provider**. Staff saw this as unjust and believed it gave participants the impression that the provider was responsible for the sanctioning. They were particularly concerned about the implications for their ongoing relationship with participants.

11.1.2   Referral rates and variations in practice

Some respondents estimated that the **proportion of their caseload referred to sanctioning varied between five and 20 per cent**. A small number said they had referred much higher proportions of participants for sanctioning, up to 30 or 40 per cent of their caseload. Some respondents with a relatively small number of referrals noted, however, that the rate was increasing.

Whatever the rate of referral for sanctioning, staff reported that a large proportion of their referrals were not approved by Jobcentre Plus. Some estimated that less than a half of the cases they had referred for sanctioning had been approved[58]. Where staff knew the reasons for this (in some cases they said they did not know the reason), they reported that it was often for reasons which they regarded as technical, such as mistakes in the participants' address or insufficient notice of a meeting having been given.

Automatic or discretionary referrals for sanctioning

The greatest variation between providers in their descriptions of the referral process related to **whether referrals for sanctioning were automatic, following a failure to attend, or whether further enquiries were made** and/or appointments were rearranged or deferred. It should be noted that Work Programme requirements specify automatic referral for sanctioning, but that this was not always adhered to for reasons described below.

Purely automatic processes, in line with Work Programme requirements, were not uncommon. In the case of failure to keep an initial appointment, some end-to-end providers referred non-attendees immediately for sanctioning. **Automatic processes for referral to sanctioning appeared more common where providers used administrative teams or contact centres for sanctioning procedures**, than where the personal advisers were involved.

> *'If they're not attending their appointments it's just a simple "have they attended their appointment – yes, have they attended their appointment – no." If you press 'no' and they've got no good reason for not attending their appointment, that gets sent to* [the customer contact centre] *and they deal with all the sanction processes.'*

> (Adviser)

The sanctioning of participants who were engaged in the Work Programme was also described as more or less automatic in some providers. Advisers made **referrals for sanctioning even when a participant had given a reason for non-attendance**, for example a dental appointment, again reflecting Work Programme rules which leave it to the Decision Maker to apply an establish good cause or otherwise. Despite the requirement to refer non-attenders for sanctioning, in some providers there appeared to be incentives to do so . Advisers talked about having targets for sanctioning, included in Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) or, in the case of subcontractors, of having their sanctioning referrals monitored by their prime provider. These may have been put in place to discourage the use of discretion by personal advisers or to make more use of mandation.

Other providers allowed personal advisers some discretion, which technically they do not have the authority to do within the Work Programme. Some advisers described how they allowed a grace period of a day or so for the participant to make contact, possibly with a valid reason for not having attended. Others related how they made significant effort to find out reasons for non-attendance by telephoning and texting participants and giving them time to respond, before making a referral. Some advisers might also defer the appointment and issue a letter with a new date and time. Advisers in other providers were allowed to wait until two or three appointments were missed before referring for sanctioning.

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[58]   At the time of writing, there are no official statistics on sanctioning rates in the Work Programme. However, some data are in the public domain, following a Freedom of Information request, DWP's response to which shows that during the first seven months of the programme's operation (July 2011 to January 2012), there were 110,410 referrals for sanctioning at national level, of which only 40,490 (i.e. just over a third) had so far been approved for sanctioning. This is broadly consistent with the reports of providers in the current study. See http://www.corporatewatch.org/?lid=4371

> *'If they fail to attend an appointment, we will contact the customer via the telephone. If they answer, a letter will be sent to confirm their* [new] *appointment. If they don't answer, then a letter will be sent to tell them that they've got an appointment to attend and then on the third attempt, if they don't attend then we'll send off sanctioning paperwork. We have to provide proof that we've tried to gain contact with the customer.'*

(Manager)

Some respondents said that the approach to sanctioning following engagement was dependent on advisers, although **the degree of discretion was, in practice, limited** and advisers were expected to conform to Work Programme requirements and to refer for sanctioning. Staff who favoured the use of discretion did so for a number of reasons: to establish and maintain a good relationship with participants and to take reasonable account of personal circumstances, such as bereavements, which sometimes meant appointments were broken. Some advisers believed that it was particularly necessary in cases where participants had specific barriers to engagement, including disabilities and mental health conditions. Sanctioning of these individuals was seen as potentially counter-productive in supporting entry to work (see also Section 11.1.4).

Many, but not all, providers are moving to less flexible approaches

Some staff noted a trend, as Work Programme delivery bedded in, for **providers to allow less discretion over time over referrals for sanctioning** than was initially the case. This may be a result of greater adherence to Work Programme requirements under which referrals for non-attendance should be automatic. One adviser explained that, initially the provider had referred participants for sanctioning only when they failed to provide a valid reason for non-attendance after a missed appointment. Now, participants had to notify advisers in advance if they were unable to keep an appointment in order to avoid referral for sanctioning.

In contrast, advisers in other providers noted that they were now able to defer appointments if participants told them in advance they could not attend, and had not initially been allowed to do this. However there were fewer examples of this, probably because such discretion is not allowed.

On balance, and probably reflecting familiarisation with Work Programme rules and pressure to increase sanctioning rates, it appeared that there was less discretion rather than more, and **a new emphasis on referring participants for sanctioning when they failed to attend appointments**.

> *'I don't think they were getting enough sanctions from this particular branch and it was obviously picked up by the prime and they said "these people are not sanctioning enough. They need to start sanctioning more customers" and we were told, "you've got to sanction regardless".'*

(Adviser)

11.1.3   Sanctioning decisions – approval rates and consequences

Providers think the decision process is not responsive enough

As well as commenting on the lengthy nature of the process, many providers complained **of delays in decision-making over sanctioning**. The consequence of delays was that participants who missed an initial appointment but who subsequently engaged with the Work Programme did not find out about their sanction for some time. This had a negative impact on their attitudes towards the programme and the provider, and jeopardised the relationship that had been built up between participants and advisers in the meantime. Staff also argued that for sanctioning to be effective in bringing about a change in behaviour, it should be more or less immediate.

'Somebody doesn't attend an appointment in January but it doesn't get actioned until April and you've got a three-month gap. The customer comes in, he's very angry [asking] *"why have you sanctioned me?".'*

(Manager)

However, staff reported that lengthy delays in decision-making were now much less common than in the early days of delivery and that this resulted, in part, from 'streamlining' the process at their end. However, delays remained: for example, a manager in a large, end-to-end provider reported that their organisation had issued 10,000 sanctioning referrals since the start of the Work Programme in June 2011 and was still waiting for the decision on nearly 5,000 of these in July 2012.

Consequences for the relationship with participants

Some sanctioned participants were reported to react very strongly to the withdrawal of their benefit and could exhibit threatening behaviour towards providers. Some respondents in providers believed they were more exposed to threats of violence than staff in jobcentres which have security staff who can deal with these difficulties.

A more common consequence of sanctioning was a **reluctance to engage with the provider** which was seen by providers as counter-productive.

'They don't see it as the jobcentre stopping their money. We've stopped it. They've got nothing to live on which then creates a further barrier to them moving into employment because they won't talk to you. They won't engage with you.'

(Manager)

Staff in providers expressed a range of views on the consequences when **sanctions are disallowed**. Some noted that non-approval undermines their authority with participants. Disallowed sanction could make participants less compliant, since they may believe that future referrals for sanction would also be disallowed. It was suggested that participants in these instances feel that they can avoid Work Programme activity.

However, a view was also expressed that, even where a sanction is disallowed, referring an individual for a sanction decision shows that the provider is serious about the process and expects the participant to comply.

26-week sanctioning

A number of respondents in providers reported that **efforts were made to re-engage JSA participants who had been sanctioned for 26 weeks**. One approach was to offer participants assistance in appealing the sanction, which can result in benefits being reinstated after four weeks. At the time of our research, providers had only recently been able to offer this support to participants, since it was not part of the original Work Programme design.

Providers were willing to help in this way in recognition that some participants had genuine problems which had made it difficult for them to engage. It was also seen as a 'carrot' to encourage some participants to take part. In one provider, an adviser reported that individuals who have been sanctioned may struggle to afford the costs of transport to attend meetings with the provider. This provider gave bus vouchers to individuals in these circumstances to encourage them to attend meetings with their personal adviser and other Work Programme activity.

The staff in some providers noted that it was **often difficult to make contact with participants on 26-week sanctions**, since the reason that many had been subject to this sanction was that contact had

never been established in the first place. It was suggested that, in some cases, information supplied by Jobcentre Plus contained incorrect contact details. One adviser in a specialist provider said that its prime provider had asked the provider to make home visits to attempt to establish contact with individuals in this situation; however, staff did not have time to do this.

11.1.4   Is sanctioning effective?

Sanctioning helps to ensure co-operation

Some provider staff believed that both **the threat and application of sanctions contribute to securing engagement and co-operation**. Some argued that mandation and sanctioning help to provide a structure for participants and to clarify expectations. While some participants were seen as fairly willing to co-operate, it was also believed that participation would be lower if activity was not mandatory. Some individuals were seen as likely to respond only in an environment with clear rules and strict enforcement. A manager in one provider expressed this, stating *'there's no other way to get through to them'*. Underpinning this was a view among these respondents that benefits are not an entitlement; rather they should be conditional on a certain level of activity.

Other provider staff, while believing that the prospect of sanctioning was useful in encouraging participation, took the view that sanctions should not be used as a 'threat'. In their view sanctions should be used only to make expectations clear to participants. However, the accounts of advisers suggested that many participants do feel threatened by the prospect of a sanction, and may be fearful even to the extent, for example, that they attend meetings even when ill.

Some staff believe that **the application of sanctions is effective in making some participants realise that they need to be actively looking for work**. Through this, sanctions encourage co-operation with the programme. Staff reported that participants can be particularly shocked when their Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit is affected by the sanctions process, because they had expected these would be protected.

Sanctioning is not always necessary or effective

Some provider staff believed that sanctioning was not necessary because most participants met the requirements of the Work Programme (and these requirements could be quite limited, consisting of only one meeting a month).

The **automatic sanctioning of participants by some providers was seen by staff to be unfair** because it penalised participants who are well-intentioned but who make a mistake by, for example, getting the day of their appointment wrong.

Other staff believed that sanctioning was effective with some participants and ineffective with others, gauging this by their response when sanctioned and their subsequent behaviour on the Work Programme. It was also suggested that, although sanctioning can help ensure compliance with the minimum requirements, it does not promote active and positive engagement with the programme more generally.

Sanctioning also could be counter-productive for providers, beyond their direct relationship with participants. One adviser gave an example in which the provider had supported a participant into self-employment. However, because the participant had been sanctioned during the individual's time with the provider, the participant declined to supply the information that would allow the provider to claim the outcome payment.

Sanctioning may not be effective for some groups

Although providers believed that **many participants respond to the threat of sanctioning, they also believed that some groups did not and that these might not change behaviour once benefits were withdrawn.** This included individuals with independent sources of income, and young people living with parents who supported them. Ex-offenders were also thought to be less responsive to sanctions because they could be accustomed to deprivation.

Another view was that crisis loans cushioned individuals from the effects of sanctioning. One adviser expressed the view that it is possible to live for two weeks without benefits and that a short sanction period is, therefore, not sufficient incentive to engage.

Sanctions may not be appropriate for some groups

Some staff believed that **conditionality and sanctions are not useful or appropriate for some groups of participants**. This includes people with specific barriers to employment, such as disabilities and addiction problems. For example, disabled participants might not be able to engage in some activities because of their disability. Interviewees took the view that the sanctioning process was not appropriate or effective in moving these groups nearer to employment.

> *'We find it a little bit unpalatable in the sense that the reason for our guys not engaging are lost because of the rhetoric around conditionality and sanctioning. It's "all the scroungers who can't be pestered" and we think, "no, it's not really like that for our guys across the board".'*

> (Manager)

Although in theory, providers can choose not to mandate participants but still provide them with a service, there was evidence that, to avoid sanctioning of individuals who had difficulty engaging in activities, these participants were sometimes 'parked' (see Chapter 15). These harder to help participants would then be offered almost no appointments with their personal adviser, or other support. The prevalence of this practice is not known but it may indicate a reluctance among some providers to be flexible in their use of mandation.

11.2   The participant experience

Respondents in the Stage 1 (new entrant) and Stage 2 (engaged) participant samples were asked about their awareness and knowledge of the conditionality and sanctions regime, and how, if at all, they felt this affected their behaviour and actions.

Awareness of conditionality and sanctions is widespread

Across the 63 respondents in the two groups, there was a **widespread awareness of conditionality and sanctions**. Only two participants were unaware: one had yet to have their first meeting with a Work Programme adviser while the other, a young person, had been doing a few hours paid work each week, and had been with the provider for only one month. It is possible to conclude that all providers were including an explanation of conditionality and sanctions in their early meetings with new participants.

This is supported by evidence from the observations of adviser-participant meetings which suggested that all initial meetings involve a discussion of the 'terms and conditions' of the Work Programme. This includes participants' responsibilities in relation to attendance and jobsearch. The emphasis on sanctioning varied more between individual personal advisers than it did between the providers/areas visited, although in one observed provider conditionality and sanctioning received a heavier emphasis in early meetings than in the others.

In general, **participants appeared to understand that they were required to attend appointments arranged for them**, and that not doing so might have financial consequences. Most remembered hearing this from Jobcentre Plus or from staff at the provider's office, or both, and some mentioned that correspondence from Jobcentre Plus and the provider usually included reference to penalties for non-compliance.

Some participants recognised, and used the formal language of 'responsibilities' and 'sanctions', while others used their own language to talk about there being 'no choice', and 'your money stops'. A small number of people had experience of withdrawal of benefit either as part of the Work Programme or previous regimes, but most of these had had their benefits reinstated when they queried decisions.

It appeared from the interview data that, in one fieldwork area, the provider's approach might be not to emphasise conditionality and sanctions in the first meeting with an adviser, but to introduce this topic at the second or subsequent meetings. This did not suit everybody and had led to some feeling among participants of 'ramping up the pressure'. By comparison, in a different area, some participants said they had appreciated having a clear, polite explanation right at the beginning.

Most find conditionality acceptable but it worries some groups

The general view among participants interviewed was that **being required to attend appointments was 'fair enough'**. A view often shared was that if providers were making an effort to help them then they could be expected to turn up to the appointments. Most participants said that the penalty attached to not keeping appointments made no difference to their behaviour. These participants either described themselves as 'the type of person' who usually did as required in rules-based systems, or said they were keen to get all the help on offer to get back to work. Some people in this latter group voluntarily called in to the provider's office at times when they had no formal appointments, if they wanted to use computer facilities, or check something out. One man said that keeping the regular appointments was a good way of demonstrating to Jobcentre Plus that he was actually looking for work.

One or two participants acknowledged that **the possibility of loss of benefit probably would give them 'a bit of extra incentive' on days when they felt like not bothering**, or had a heavy load of other responsibilities; in these cases their engagement was influenced by their determination to keep their benefits. But for one person, it was the approach taken by the provider's staff and the way he was treated that made him more likely to keep appointments, not the formal rules.

There were some negative feelings attached to the idea of sanctions. The idea of **possible loss of JSA and subsequent loss of Housing Benefit was a concern** to a single parent with limited confidence in spoken and written English. A participant keen to maintain a college course said that knowing about sanctions put an extra load of responsibility on him, on top of demands for attending Jobcentre Plus and keeping up with coursework and homework. A participant who had to manage a mental health condition talked about the extra stress experienced by the idea of sanctions for non-attendance at meetings. Another said that a system in which people were subject to sanctions increased the sense of difference between 'them and us'. There were some participants who said that whatever dealings they had with official bodies about benefits, they always felt an implicit threat of possible loss of financial support.

A few participants report flexibility which helps them avoid sanctions

Three participants in the Stage 1 (new entrant) sample said they were receiving ESA and had particular health conditions. Two of these said that their adviser had recognised the need for some flexibility in requirements for keeping appointments. An observed meeting also suggested some

use of adviser discretion over conditionality in relation to participants with health conditions: in this example, a young participant (aged under 25) with a chronic health condition did not attend a meeting with his adviser because *'it was too early in the day'*. He apologised, and this was accepted by the adviser, who re-booked the appointment for a later time. Apart from these examples, there appeared to be little awareness among participants that there were different levels of requirements for people in different groups according to benefit status. Some of those who had been notified to the research team as taking part in the Work Programme on a voluntary basis seemed unaware of their nominally voluntary status.

Programmes are mostly acceptable and most are happy to comply

For most participants in the Stage 1 (new entrant) sample, suggestions and requirements made by provider staff had been mainly limited to office-based activities such as personal discussions, online assessments, basic skills tests, practical advice and support with writing CVs, self-presentation, approaching employers, and telephone manner. In one local area, people had been offered work experience on site, which had usually seemed attractive. Some people had also been subject to jobsearch requirements, but several were doing this anyway, and most were used to Jobcentre Plus requirements for evidence of jobsearch since they were previously JSA claimants.

Only a few said they had been asked to do things which they felt to be inappropriate or did not want to do. One woman had been asked to apply for a job which she knew she was not qualified to do, despite previous discussions with the adviser about her needs. She complied, to demonstrate co-operation, but was not surprised to have no response from the employer. This had lowered her confidence in how useful the programme would be. Less compliant was a man asked to apply for an external unpaid work placement with 60-hour weeks. He refused and was asked to leave the Work Programme, and got a job shortly afterwards.

There was some concern among other people about the possibility of being asked to do things in the future that would seem too hard or inappropriate. The participant trying to maintain a college course said he was managing to keep the office appointments, and was engaged on jobsearch, but it would be very hard to fit in anything else. A participant managing a mental health condition said being asked to do unpaid work experience with an employer would 'destroy him'. Interviews in the second round of this series will show what happened to these participants.

These fears in the Stage 1 (new entrant) sample were only infrequently manifested in the Stage 2 (engaged) participant sample, although there was still a widespread feeling that benefits would be cut if they did not comply with providers' requirements in the future. In this group there was evidence of participants undertaking a wider range of activities in addition to attending meetings with the provider, such as health and occupational assessments, group workshops (for example on job interviews, confidence building and jobsearching), work experience, training courses and voluntary work. However, no-one linked their participation in these activities with conditionality. They were usually seen as either constructive in helping them move towards work because they had been agreed with their adviser as appropriate for them, or at least something there was 'no harm' in trying. In contrast, discussions about conditionality were usually linked to attendance at meetings with the Work Programme.

Only one participant, **a young man, had experienced being sanctioned while on the Work Programme.** He struggled financially and borrowed from friends during the time he was not receiving benefits. At the time of the research interview he was still concerned about his ability to repay them. It is difficult to see that sanctions had led to any change in his behaviour. He was already generally compliant, keen to find work and described doing jobsearch activity outside his contact with the Work Programme.

The respondents in the Stage 3 (job entrant) sample were not asked directly about conditionality and sanctions. Nevertheless, one participant described how she felt pressured to take a job when her preference was not to work at all so that she could provide care for her 12-year-old child.

> '*I was getting pressure to find a job. They were threatening my money could get cut.*'

> (Participant)

There were a couple of examples in observed meetings between advisers and participants where the discussion focused on a sanction that had been applied. In one of these the participant claimed to have telephoned ahead of a missed appointment although this had not been recorded on the provider's systems. In another the adviser claimed the provider was unable to offer reasons for the sanction. This may reflect that the referral to sanction had been made by Jobcentre Plus or that the adviser was acting to protect the ongoing relationship with the participant. In both instances advisers reiterated to participants the terms and conditions of the Work Programme, particularly the requirement to attend activities and meetings noted in the action plan. No additional support (for example, in appealing decisions or securing alternative sources of financial help) was offered to the sanctioned participants in these cases.

11.3   Jobcentre Plus perspectives

The interviews with staff from Jobcentres Plus offices and Decision Makers in BDCs focused on their experiences of managing the sanctioning process and making decisions. The research explored situations where sanctions were refused, along with the sanctioning of voluntary participants. The impacts of sanctioning were also discussed with these staff.

11.3.1   Views about the process

Jobcentre Plus staff noted that the sanctioning process is more stringent with shorter escalation periods to severe sanctions under the Work Programme than in previous welfare-to-work programmes. The main reasons for referral and subsequent sanctioning, were failure to attend and, it was reported increasingly, failure to co-operate.

Decision Makers interviewed reported **that knowledge about the sanctioning process differs between providers and is influenced by the size of the organisation**. In their view, larger, end-to-end providers have a better grasp of the process than smaller spot providers, although general knowledge about the sanctioning process appears to have improved generally over time. This is consistent with the provider perspective presented earlier in this chapter, which suggested spot providers have had only minimal contact with the sanctioning process, whereas end-to-end providers have been more involved and some operate specialist teams which have built up considerable expertise in the sanctioning procedures.

One Decision Maker suggested that some providers aimed to exert control over the sanctioning decision by not referring people immediately for sanction following non-attendance, but allowing participants a grace period to demonstrate commitment ahead of sanctioning. This again mirrors findings from the provider research that some advisers allow participants a number of chances and deferrals ahead of referring them for sanction.

More generally, Decision Makers indicated that some providers attempt to withdraw sanction referrals, citing administrative errors. It was suggested that this was triggered by participants who subsequently complain to the provider about being referred for sanction.

Some team leaders at Jobcentre Plus offices voiced **concern over the lack of sanctioning by some of the providers**. They noted the inability of some providers to cope with the volume of referrals and the associated level of sanctioning for failures to attend. In contrast it was reported that some providers had arrangements with the local Jobcentre Plus office which supported the provider by having 'robust conversations' about their obligations with the participant when they next signed on. This point is confirmed by findings reported in the provider section earlier.

11.3.2   Targets for sanctioning

Decision Makers reported that **the number of cases referred for sanctioning has increased over time**. The numbers are higher than anticipated in many cases, and offices have been told to expect further increases due to the volume of people being referred to the Work Programme.

Generally, fluctuations in the number of referrals for sanctioning are attributed to the fluctuations in the number of people transferring to the Work Programme, although some Decision Makers were unsure why numbers of referrals differed so substantially between providers.

Decision Makers outlined that they were working towards a target of 80 per cent of approval of sanctions referrals, but that their work would be called into question if the approval rate sank below 60 per cent.

Some Decision Makers indicated that most of their sanctions were for two weeks' duration, rather than for the longer periods that could be applied. This is consistent with the providers' accounts (noted earlier) that failure to attend the initial appointment comprises a high proportion of referrals for sanctioning.

11.3.3   Sanctions not allowed if good cause is established

Decision Makers confirmed that sanctions are allowed if 'good cause' cannot be established. **Good causes include medical appointments, caring responsibilities (where short notice of the meeting has been given) and adverse weather**. Other reasons include job interviews or sick children, although in these cases it would have been reasonable to expect participants to telephone providers to notify them of their absence. Evidence for all these circumstances has to be provided before a final decision is made.

Some Decision Makers noted that staff turnover in provider organisations could cause administrative errors which could lead to a sanction being disallowed. Additionally, the lack of direct communication between Jobcentre Plus and providers is reported as leading to many sanction referrals being disallowed: the non-communication (or delays to communication), of changes to status, particularly where participants have already signed-off, was at the heart of this issue (see also Section 9.2.2). One Decision Maker indicated that as many as 40 per cent of cases fitted this profile.

11.3.4   Sanctioning of voluntary participants

It was evident **that some confusion surrounded the voluntary status of some Work Programme participants and this affected sanctioning decisions**. This sense of confusion was shared by Jobcentre Plus staff and providers. Overall, this led to significant local variation in practice.

Some Decision Makers said they did not receive information about whether a participant has joined the Work Programme voluntarily and therefore, their voluntary status does not impact on the decision-making process. However, some Decision Makers were of the opinion that those who signed up voluntarily to the Work Programme waived their right not to be sanctioned and had to comply with the same set of rules as applied to any other participant.

Other Decision Makers realised that some voluntary participants could be sanctioned only for not engaging with the provider and for failing to attend meetings once they were attached to the Work Programme. They could not be sanctioned for failing to accept a job offer or for failing to attend a job interview. Some Decision Makers reported that occasionally a voluntary participant got referred for sanction accidentally.

Some Jobcentre Plus staff said that they tried to discourage claimants who were 'half-hearted' about their decision to volunteer for the programme and/or unsure about their ability to enter work, out of concern that they would be sanctioned as a result of this.

> '*I think it would take a brave person that would volunteer knowing that they didn't have to and then become mandatory. So I think that has an impact* [on participation levels of voluntary customers].'
>
> (Jobcentre Plus Manager)

Many **Jobcentre Plus managers saw the possibility of sanctioning voluntary participants as a disincentive to join the Work Programme**; consequently, they and their staff took quite an active role in reminding claimants who could volunteer that if they participated in the programme their participation would come under similar rules to those who were obliged to participate, and that they could be sanctioned if they failed to attend. Where these claimants chose to continue with entry to the programme, their advisers would follow them up to make sure they attended their first meeting and avoided a sanction.

11.3.5   Reactions and impact

Personal advisers noted that many **Work Programme participants came to Jobcentre Plus to complain about being sanctioned by Work Programme providers**. Generally, Jobcentre Plus staff reported that participant reactions to sanctioning are mixed. While, for some, the sanctioning process triggers a change in behaviour, for others it has no impact whatsoever. Some participants, particularly those with high skill levels, were reported to simply sign off as a result of sanctioning or the threat of it.

The research suggested a general view among Jobcentre Plus respondents that there is a disincentive for Work Programme providers to sanction participants. Decision Makers reported that providers believed that they risked impairing the co-operation of the participant if they enacted the sanctioning process. This in turn would be detrimental to the ongoing provider-participant relationship and the provider's ability to help participants move into and sustain work (the latter being the ultimate source of most of the provider funding under the Work Programme). These views are reflected in the provider analysis (see earlier) and may confirm that providers are currently less experienced than Jobcentre Plus staff in dealing with the repercussions of conditionality.

11.4   Summary

Evidence from staff in provider and Jobcentre Plus offices suggests that the majority of sanctions referrals result from failure to attend initial meetings, rather than from lack of compliance with subsequent activities within the Work Programme. Most sanction referrals are made by end-to-end providers, with relatively few being generated by specialist and spot providers.

Providers report that some of these failures to attend result from poor quality information passed to them by Jobcentre Pus. There is little evidence of effective communication on this question between providers and Jobcentre Plus local offices. Where effective communication has become embedded, however, it has helped in establishing contact with individuals who had not been attending

Work Programme activities. Overall, this strand of research suggests that communication in both directions between providers and Jobcentre Plus is a critical factor affecting the effectiveness of the sanctions process, and that improved communication would lead to more responsive approaches to exchanging status changes and updates[59].

Providers report that a high proportion of referrals for sanctioning are disallowed by Decision Makers. This is confirmed by Decision Makers who highlight that due process has frequently not been followed by providers. The analysis suggests that neither side has fully understood the principles and processes involved. Providers believe that large numbers of unsuccessful referrals to sanctioning negatively affected their relationship with participants who acquire a belief that they can avoid sanctioning.

Participants have a high level of awareness that conditionality and sanctions are attached to participation in the Work Programme. However, detailed knowledge is more variable. Most understand there is a requirement to attend meetings and most understand that benefits will be stopped for not attending appointments. The requirement to participate in subsequent Work Programme activity and the associated sanctions for failure to do so, are, however, less well understood.

Overall, the evidence suggests that while conditionality and sanctioning are an accepted and acceptable part of the Work Programme there is some way to go in ensuring that the processes work effectively.

There are also indications that many staff in provider and Jobcentre Plus offices question the value and effectiveness of sanctions for some groups. Moreover, the participant interviews suggest that most are complying with the conditions of the programme and that most do so without the threat or application of sanctions. Forthcoming strands of the evaluation, particularly the participant survey, will help to provide further understanding about who are the participants for whom sanctioning is most valuable and effective, and who are those for whom it has less (or no) effect.

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[59]   It should be noted that providers can use the new telephone hotline (Provider Direct) in cases where a Work Programme participant has failed to comply with a mandated activity and there have been difficulties in contacting the participant. This is intended, by enabling the provider to establish factors such as participants' change of circumstances, in a timely manner, to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals for sanctions.

12   Aspirations and motivation

Previous research on employment programmes shows that motivation and aspiration to work can be important contributory factors in successfully moving people towards and into work (e.g. Green, 2008). Conversely, people who lack the motivation to move towards work often make little progress, even though there is evidence that it is possible for Jobcentre Plus or provider staff to 'turn people round'[60].

This chapter uses data solely from the research with participants and explores the motivations and aspirations of the participant sample, drawing on all three samples, i.e. the new entrant, engaged participant and job entrants.

At this stage of the evaluation, Work Programme providers have not been questioned specifically on these themes, although it is worth highlighting their reported concerns that conditionality and sanctioning could have a negative effect on the motivation of participants in most need of support (elaborated in Chapter 12). These issues will be explored with providers in future waves of the research.

12.1   The participant experience

The interviews revealed a sometimes complex interplay between aspirations, motivation, perceived barriers to work and action to move towards or find employment. Respondents in all three participant samples were asked about their thoughts about work at the point of handover from Jobcentre Plus to their Work Programme provider, and how these had changed during their engagement with the provider.

Most participants want to work

Almost all **participants expressed a wish to work**, either immediately or at some point in the future. In this sense they had a clear aspiration to work. For some, this aspiration was to do any work at all; for others their aspirations were in a general area of work, such as office administration, factory work or construction. For a third group there were more specific aspirations, such as being a chef or painter and decorator, some of which reflected previous work histories but for others were new departures.

The view that they would take 'any job they could' was expressed particularly by younger men who had been trying to get work for some time. Participants who were keen to have full-time work included family breadwinners and young single people who wanted to be more independent of family support. Men who had a good understanding of entry level jobs likely to be available in their local labour market often mentioned working in security, warehouses and bars while women who had this understanding more typically spoke about moving into jobs in retail, catering, care services and bars. People with experience of higher paid and professional work tended to say they hoped to find something similar again, or a job to which they could transfer their existing skills and experience.

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[60]   For an example of how the personalised support offered as part of an earlier welfare-to-work programme for disabled people (Pathways to Work), was seen to have some such effects, see the discussion in Corden and Nice (2006).

Long duration unemployment and knock-backs affect motivation

The data on participants' thoughts about work before handover to the Work Programme revealed how aspirations to work were often translated into very little action to move towards or find work, over and above the jobsearch requirements placed on them by Jobcentre Plus. This apparent passivity was often explained as being the result of many months (years in some cases) of unsuccessful jobsearching, the discouraging effect of repeated failures to find work, and the persistence of perceived barriers to work (such as poor health, age, lack of work experience, low literacy or numeracy levels, few or no formal qualifications, or a criminal record).

In addition some respondents had failed to secure funds to access training courses or obtain professional licences. The effect of these setbacks was usually a reduction in people's confidence that they would find work, rather than their giving up their aspirations altogether.

Mixed reactions to first experiences of the Work Programme

Data on first experiences of the Work Programme and their impact on aspirations and motivation are drawn principally from the Stage 1 sample of new entrants. For some people their first contact had been in a group session with other participants, while others were involved in one-to-one interviews with advisers.

Participants who said they had definitely felt **more positive and optimistic after their first contact with the programme** included men and women in all age groups. The advice and practical support they had been told about had raised confidence in the possibility of their getting a job. The positive manner of the staff, and their apparent commitment to providing appropriate help had left participants feeling 'more motivated' and 'more hopeful'. Two men currently dealing with disruptions in their personal lives talked about feeling more focused, and having been helped already to look at what were real options for them.

On the other hand, **some participants said they came out of the first meeting with the provider feeling discouraged**. Some of these said that concerns remained that they would be asked to do things they considered inappropriate. Discussion about the risk of losing benefits had left some participants feeling threatened. Participants in more than one local area had found the office environment of the provider a shock: the crowded reception areas and the level of activity in the open plan offices brought new realisation to these respondents, of just how many people needed help and were competing for the limited jobs available, which they found disheartening.

Watching the organisational process of moving people through reception and into appointments, and the apparent short time that some people spent with an adviser left one participant thinking that it was all too rushed and a bit like 'a cattle market'. This participant had felt that participants would have had a better chance of a meaningful interaction with Jobcentre Plus staff. One person had felt it had been a wasted trip, after a difficult journey in severe weather, to find a disorganised office in which he was asked to join what he described as *'a group wind-up'*.

One group of **participants said they felt no different after their first meeting with the provider**. Their views on working had not changed. In this group were participants who already felt motivated, were fairly confident and were busy looking for work in their own way, which they intended to continue doing. Also in this group were participants who said they had expected the Work Programme to be much the same as other provision/programmes they had spent time on, and nothing had happened to change their mind.

Participants say their aspirations to work do not change...

Most engaged participants had not changed their general aspirations to work during their several months' engagement with the Work Programme; most still expressed a desire to find work either immediately or at some time in the future. However, some did express an increase in confidence (or hope) that a job might be possible. This was due to a number of factors including gaining training or work experience, increases in general confidence in their own abilities, or changes to personal circumstances that were a barrier to thinking about work (such as moving into secure accommodation).

...But engagement in activities to find work increases

Levels of work-related activity generally were not high at the point of handover from Jobcentre Plus to the Work Programme. However, it was possible to compare levels of work-related activity noted by participants before they were transferred to the Work Programme, with levels some time after engagement (drawing on data from the Stage 2 (engaged participant) and the Stage 3 (job entrant) samples). A general picture emerges of **an increase in subcontracting activity over time**. For example, a woman who said she wanted to work, also described how she had become discouraged after months of fruitless job hunting and had reached a point where she was doing virtually nothing. However, her Work Programme provider gave her the 'push' she needed to resume her efforts:

> *'I needed somebody to sit down with me and just say if you want a job, go out and find a job instead of sitting about and waiting for the job to come to you basically.'*

> (Engaged participant)

A male participant said that, at the point of handover, he wanted to work but felt depressed about his chances. The Work Programme provider had helped by encouraging him to be more positive and suggesting an alternative use of his IT skills. Another man who had been unable to pursue his aspiration to work in professional kitchens was persuaded to take work initially on a building site in order to build up sufficient savings to pay for his training. He thought this would take a couple of years but did not express any problem with this.

Start positive, stay positive

Further data on how aspirations and motivation change over time emerge from the interviews with new entrants in which they were asked about their thoughts about work not only at the time of handover, but also at the time of the research interview which could be up to six to eight weeks later.

Participants who had described themselves as more positive and optimistic after their first meeting were, in the main, still feeling generally positive and more confident at the time of the research interview. For these people, relationships with their adviser were good, and they perceived that things were happening now, as a result of contact with the Work Programme.

Some described the practical help they had received with writing a CV and/or covering letter to an employer, practising interview skills, learning how to search for jobs effectively, being told about job opportunities, taking part in in-house work experience, being booked in for in-house training (e.g. for security work), or being referred to other services for intensive help with jobsearch or careers advice. There had been some success among this group in getting job interviews and the participants concerned were waiting to hear results. Continuing to feel positive, even if no closer to getting a job, was attributed to having a good relationship with an adviser, who understood their needs.

Two people who had felt more focused after their first meeting had both explored ideas about becoming self-employed with their advisers. They still felt motivated to work, and were still thinking about how best to achieve this.

Feeling discouraged did not change motivation or expectation...

The group of participants who had come out of their first meeting feeling discouraged remained motivated to get work, and all were still engaged in looking for work.

Only one participant was a bit more hopeful of any useful contribution from the adviser: this individual was waiting for a place on a training course to improve self-presentation. Among the others, experience of being promised things that did not happen (these included advice about education and training, better-off calculations and information about the minimum wage) had served to increase their sense that the adviser was unlikely to be helpful.

The fear of being asked to do inappropriate things had been realised by one participant who had been asked to apply for a job, despite not being qualified for it. Additionally, being told by an adviser that the provider's funding depended on getting people into jobs for six months tended to reinforce participants' perceptions that they would be asked to do inappropriate things.

Finally, the small group of people who said that the first meeting with their Work Programme provider had made no difference to their motivations and expectations about work, also said their motivations had not changed by the time of the interview – all these people still wanted a job.

...But perceptions of the Work Programme could change for the better

There was some evidence, however, of shifts over time in participants' perceptions that the provider had something to offer to enhance their own activities towards getting work. Younger men who had little initial expectation that the Work Programme would be any different from other employment programmes in which they had taken part, had changed their mind. They now believed that the **advisers were spending more time, taking more interest in them as individuals, and working more proactively on their behalf than had their counterparts in previous programmes**.

A man who had an interview lined up for a job he had found himself said he would value continued support from the adviser if he did not get the job. A younger woman whose initial feelings had just been relief at getting the first meeting over with, said that in later meetings she and the adviser began to think together about possible steps in a journey back to work. Lastly, those who were beginning to feel that the programme had something to offer them included people whose initial confidence had taken knocks, for example when they received no replies to any job applications.

12.2   Summary

Previous work has highlighted the importance of motivation to making progress towards and into work. People who are motivated are generally easier to help – they may need a lot of help but resistance to suggestions is generally low.

The evidence from the new entrant and engaged participant interviews confirms previous research findings that most people participating in government employment programmes want to work, and are prepared to make efforts to move towards work. However this is entirely consistent with the accounts of providers or Jobcentre Plus who note the majority of sanctions are currently applied for failure to attend initial meetings (see Chapter 11).

An initial picture is emerging from this first wave of fieldwork (although it is important not to generalise from this picture) to suggest that:

- initial meetings with the provider are important influences on participants' subsequent readiness to engage with support and advice;

- advisers' personal manner, reliability, and levels of pro-activity are positive influences on increasing people's confidence and engagement;

- being asked to do what the participant perceives as inappropriate things, and bad experiences in work experience and jobs promoted by advisers reduces people's subsequent confidence in engaging with the Work Programme, and increases negative perceptions;

- regular and continuing appointments with friendly and positive advisers can lead to some shifts over time in readiness to engage, among those people who initially had few expectations.

13 Addressing individual barriers to work

In addition to employment-related barriers to work (such as lack of, or mismatched skills, or lack of previous work experience), many out-of-work participants face additional barriers which may include caring responsibilities, health conditions, housing problems or debt management difficulties. Overcoming these constraints is often a prerequisite to any successful engagement in employment programmes. The existing evidence suggests that these barriers can be cumulative, necessitating flexible support packages and multi-agency working (Hasluck and Green, 2007).

This chapter draws on evidence from Work Programme providers and participants, to assess approaches to addressing participants' barriers to employment and experiences of the effectiveness of these approaches. Overcoming these barriers will be critical to the achievement of outcome payments under the Work Programme, and this is therefore likely to be a critical issue for providers.

13.1   Work Programme provider perspectives

This section draws out the key findings from the research with providers on the processes and actions they use to identify and address participants' barriers to work. The first wave of research included only relatively limiting questioning on these topics, and more in-depth coverage is planned for future waves of the evaluation.

Identification is effective but support is constrained

Overall, as reported in previous chapters, the staff in providers tended to think that **the individual and personalised approach adopted within the Work Programme enables advisers to effectively identify individual barriers to employment**. This was an aspect of the programme which providers saw as working well. However, having identified such barriers, advisers did not always feel able to provide adequate support to address them[61].

There were four main reasons underlying why barriers could not be addressed:

1   lack of time to work intensively with participants because of large caseloads;

2   prioritisation of the more job-ready, which meant that those participants with more complex needs were not being sufficiently supported;

3   lack of funding for training to address barriers to employment[62], particularly skills needs; and

4   the serious, complex and cumulative nature of problems presented by some participants, particularly those on Employment and Support Alllowance (ESA) or who had been unemployed for many years.

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[61]   This is somewhat at odds with policy aspirations for the Work Programme. At this stage it is unclear what is driving this view among some providers, and further waves of the research will monitor this point.

[62]   This is consistent with evidence from the participant research where only a very small number of examples were found of providers making available small amounts of funding to assist participants in overcoming immediate barriers to work such as clothes and travel; see also Section 16.2 about the lack of flexible support funding within providers.

The **size of caseloads was seen as a significant problem** when trying to deliver support to overcome specific individual barriers to work. Where caseloads were large, whether because of higher than expected claimant referrals to the Work Programme or staff shortages, this resulted in: less frequent one-to-one meetings and reduced meeting time; telephone contact instead of in-person meetings; group sessions; and the prioritisation of participants considered more job-ready. Overall, advisers reported a negative impact on the quality of support that they offered and a reduction in the quantity of support available to help participants overcome or deal with barriers.

It is also worth noting that some advisers reported that the model of the Work Programme, including conditionality and sanctioning, was not appropriate for individuals with the most significant and complex barriers to employment.

Action planning is important as are specialist referrals (in some supply chains)

Advisers reported that **the use of action plans could help in the process of identifying and addressing individuals' barriers**. However, the limited nature of some participants' action plans (Chapter 8) suggested that personal barriers may often not be adequately addressed through this process. This is a topic which will be pursued in greater depth in subsequent waves of the evaluation.

Another mechanism through which advisers may address participants' barriers is by referring them to other organisations for specialist support and training. These referrals can be built into action plans. In some cases, referrals were made to paid subcontractors in the prime's supply chain, while in others advisers referred participants to free-of-charge services provided by a range of local and national organisations. Chapter 7 explores these referrals in greater detail and many related to participants' barriers to employment. However, it is also worth noting that the extent of referral varied considerably between the different types of provider and the supply chains.

Although providers indicated that referral procedures were generally working well, it is too early to assess, from the data available, the extent to which referrals helped to reduce or remove participants' barriers to employment. Once again, future waves of the research with providers will be able to explore the outcomes of these referrals in greater detail.

13.2   The participant experience

This section reports on the data from the Stage 1 (new entrant) and Stage 2 (engaged) participant samples. Some issues from the observations of adviser-participant meetings are also included in the analysis. The experiences of the job entrant sample were sufficiently different to warrant reporting separately (at the end of the section).

Most identified something that impacted on them finding work

When asked to look back on the time they were transferred to the Work Programme, nearly everybody in these two samples identified some aspect of their personal characteristics or the external labour market that made it difficult for them to obtain work. Very few talked about 'barriers' in the sense of being something that prevented them from working completely. It should also be remembered that nearly all of the people in these two samples expressed a wish to work.

Identifying and supporting health-related barriers

Barriers to getting a job which people related to their personal characteristics included health conditions. As might be expected from the small numbers of participants in the samples who were receiving ESA, most people in the Stage 1 (new entrant) and Stage 2 (engaged) participant samples did not describe severe health problems; rather, they said their condition restricted the kind of work

they could do to some extent. They still felt well enough to look for work. Others felt less close to the labour market and said their health needed to improve before they could realistically look for work. Only one, with problematic drugs/alcohol use, had doubts about actually being able to do paid work, although this remained an aspiration.

From participants' accounts, there seemed to be two distinct responses from Work Programme providers in addressing health problems:

- the more common response was to treat people as job-ready and help them find work that could accommodate their health condition;

- the second, less frequent, response was to refer the participant to some form of health assessment (such as a physical assessment by a physiotherapist). There were no examples of participants in our sample receiving treatment of some kind through engagement with a provider.

The observations of participant-provider meetings suggested that direct questioning was used by Work Programme providers to examine barriers to work, and in one instance an adviser read from a list of potential barriers. There appeared greater dissonance between what participants and advisers regarded as barriers to work, than there was in the case of skills needs. In one example, a disabled participant had a very different view from that of her adviser of the degree to which her disability limited her work capability. In this instance the participant was more assured of her ability to work than her adviser.

Generally, where there were differing views of work capability in the observed interviews, advisers struggled to reach an immediate resolution. Follow-up interviews suggested that over time a resolution would be reached, possibly by the participant accepting that their barrier was greater than their initial perception of it.

The observations also suggested that some advisers took a 'softly, softly' approach, encouraging participants to think about their barriers and suggesting support that could overcome them. This could include referral to specialist support although take-up of this depended on the willingness of participants to recognise that they needed the help being offered. However, the approach meant that where participants did not identify a barrier that an adviser suspected that they had, there was little room for the adviser to negotiate appropriate actions. Examples included participants' known or suspected misuse of drugs or alcohol. The staged approach to action planning noted in Chapter 8 came to the fore in these cases, since advisers could drip-feed the suggestion of a referral to participants which they might eventually accept.

Approaches to overcoming human capital barriers

Some participants identified lack of skills and qualifications as a barrier to getting a job. These tended to be people who had not completed education, as well as participants who had developed skills and expertise in previous long-term jobs, but who did not have formal qualifications required in the current labour market. Some of these were hoping that the programme would help them get some qualifications; others were hoping that it would be compatible with completion of college courses they were already involved in. Several participants had been referred to literacy or numeracy classes to help with basic skills.

There was **little apparent use of skills screening tools** in the provider-participant interviews observed for the research. This appears somewhat at odds with providers' accounts, for example as set out in Chapter 6; however, it may simply reflect the nature of the small sample of providers observed. Advisers tended to use a light-touch 'eyes and ears' approach to identifying skill needs. This entailed discussing the qualifications and certificates participants held and their work history;

observing participants reading forms to check for basic skills needs; and assessing communication and interpersonal skills during meetings. This appeared particularly effective in identifying language support requirements which could be raised with participants to test whether they would like, and/or would be willing, to access support.

Other advisers were more explicit, suggesting referrals to provision to help participants with, for example, their conversational English skills. However, participants might be resistant to referral, believing that their language capability was sufficient to find work. Advisers did not mandate participants in these observed meetings, but rather noted that the issue would be revisited in future meetings. This again demonstrates the staged approach to action planning.

Outside participants' influence?

Frequently mentioned, especially by men, was that the barrier was a lack of jobs and a poor local labour market. Some people thought there might be more opportunities for them if they had a car/driving licence and could look further afield for work without being out of pocket. Women who pointed to a shortage of jobs were more likely to be looking for a particular kind of work: for example, to suit a health condition; to be financially worthwhile as a sole family breadwinner; or to be a step towards better employment prospects in their future working lives.

In a poor labour market, participants said their **chances of getting work lessened as their time without work lengthened**. Not only were employers more likely to take on people with recent experience of work but their own confidence had decreased. At the same time, jobs that they did previously had changed, so that new qualifications or experiences were required. Jobsearch procedures had also changed, and some participants did not know how to make an online or telephone application.

Some men reported that having a criminal record made it harder to get a job. One young man had been coached in how to answer questions in job interviews about his record and had been given a prepared statement setting out his circumstances that he could hand to employers rather than having to explain verbally about his past. He found this very helpful. Apart from this, there did not appear to be any other specific ways in which providers addressed the problem of participants' criminal records. One respondent with a criminal record had decided to increase his chances by training for technical qualifications but had discovered that his age – he was nearly 30 years' old – was an additional barrier in getting an apprenticeship. Other, older respondents also mentioned a perception that their age meant that they were viewed unfavourably by potential employers compared with younger applicants.

Personal circumstances and situations intervene

Lack of confidence was a barrier perceived by some participants with limited recent experience in applying for jobs, and those who felt they had limited skills, and less to offer employers than others looking for work. Lack of confidence manifested itself in a range of situations, including presenting themselves to potential employers, talking on the telephone or in interviews, and uncertainties about trying new kinds of work and new ways of looking for work. Some participants had had little experience of using email or mobile phones, which they knew were used by employers and other people looking for work. Others knew that having a CV would be helpful, but that they would not be able to prepare one themselves.

Being in a period of **major change in circumstances was perceived as a barrier to immediate employment** by a small group of participants; for example, when people were re-locating it seemed sensible to look for a job when the move to a different part of the country was achieved.

In this group, **nobody said that responsibility for care of children or adult relatives was a barrier to working, but it did put some restrictions on hours or closeness to home for some,** for example single women who were able to work during school hours. Four women said that full-time childcare for young children had been a reason for not working in the past and those who had lived with a partner during this time said that they had made choices about this. Nobody said that their need to care for children was currently a barrier to getting a job. The woman with the youngest children, who took responsibility for their care while unemployed, said that her partner would take over childcare if a job opportunity came up. It would not be possible for them both to work outside the home.

Finally, some people explained that some of their current activities were important to them. They set high priority on being able to continue these, which they believed were important in strengthening their mental health, or equipping them better for life in the future. These activities were not seen as barriers to employment, but factors to take into account while they looked for work. For example, people engaged in and enjoying part-time college courses (including degrees and NVQs at Level 2) which would eventually lead to qualifications and better employment prospects, wanted to be able to continue with their studies when they got a job. A participant who had spent the previous years with significant responsibilities for adult care had also built commitments to volunteering in the local area. Currently dealing emotionally with two family bereavements, voluntary work was providing some continuity and strength, on which it was seen as important to build rather than expecting to replace it at this stage by rushing into a job.

Little experience of referral to specialist and spot providers

The experiences of the new entrants and engaged participants samples largely **lack any evidence of help from specialist agencies in the supply chains.** This is consistent with the provider research which suggested considerable variation in the use of subcontractors (see Chapter 7, and the discussion of the provider perspective in the present chapter, above). The help given in addressing barriers to work are the largely familiar ones supplied by the end-to-end provider, training bodies or work experience partners. There have not yet been any examples of what might be considered innovative practices in this area.

Some feel they receive little help

Most people who felt they had not moved any nearer to work, or had moved further from work, believed that significant barriers to work had not been addressed and that they had (so far) received little or no help from their Work Programme provider. Some people said that their aspirations for training to improve basic or work-specific skills, or work experience opportunities, had been ignored, or denied on the grounds of cost or the provider's lack of knowledge of local provision, or not followed up by their adviser. Some people believed that the provider could not help them to find a job in the specialist sector they were interested in working in or had experience in.

Most of those who found work did not identify barriers

The experiences of people in the job entrant sample are reported separately here because they differed from the other two samples in the way they described their barriers to employment. Apart from one participant who described a moderately severe health condition, the rest of the sample either said they had had no barriers to work prior to taking up employment or had been helped in various ways to make them (more) job-ready. Some described this help as crucial in their move into work, including boosts to confidence and motivation, facilitating access to vacancies not found elsewhere, providing necessary work experience, brokering direct links to sector employers, and assisting with jobsearch. However, no specialist interventions for the job entrants could be identified.

13.3   Summary

The available evidence on how Work Programme providers are addressing barriers to employment among participants is weak and thereby somewhat at odds with policy aspirations for the programme. While advisers highlight the value of the assessments and action planning that they undertake, this is not reflected to the same extent in the views of participants.

Advisers note that their practices are effective in identifying barriers, however, they are less confident about their ability to address barriers which is somewhat at odds with policy aims for the programme. Overall, it appears that providers are more able to support participants with few and less severe barriers to employment than they are those with severe and multiple barriers who potentially require specialist support. The analysis, at this early stage of the evaluation and the Work Programme itself, suggests that many end-to-end providers seek to meet these needs using in-house provision rather than refer out to other providers. This is consistent with participants' accounts. The reported lack of funding to make referrals within supply chains or to fee-paid provision is likely to be a factor here.

The accounts of participants suggest that those with confidence and motivation-related barriers benefit from the personal adviser relationship on offer to them. Those participants in the job entrant sample notably had few if any barriers to work. Participants with multiple barriers such as health conditions reported one of two types of experience. Some they had been encouraged to consider themselves job-ready and to find work (suitable to their situation). A smaller group has had specialist support brokered for them while on the Work Programme, and the majority of referrals seen are to provision that providers do not have to fund.

The research is at too early a stage for firm conclusions to be drawn on the effectiveness of the Work Programme in addressing participants' barriers. However, it is a critical issue that will be tracked across the course of the evaluation.

14 Personalisation

One of the promises of the Work Programme was that it would provide personalised services to its participants. As the Secretary of State said in a speech in 2010 *'We will create a Work Programme which will move toward a single scheme that will offer targeted, personalised help for those who need it most, sooner rather than later'*.[63] The language of personalisation and 'tailored support' is heavily reflected in the tender documents submitted by the successful prime providers.

In the literature on personalisation, there is discussion of two aspects of the concept: substantive personalisation (in the sense of support and services tailored to the individual needs and wishes of people) and procedural personalisation (referring to the personal interaction between officials and individuals, the extent to which they are treated with sensitivity and respect).

The interviews with Work Programme participants across all three of our samples allowed us to explore these different aspects of personalisation. Our analysis of substantive personalisation explores the evidence on advisers' use of 'work first' approaches to helping participants, in contrast to a 'human capital' approach.

However, before exploring these concepts, we examine the providers' perspectives on their approaches to personalising the support they offer.

14.1   Work Programme provider perspectives on personalisation

'Personalisation' at group level

When providers talked about a tailored or personalised service, it often appeared that they were referring to **a variation between groups or types of participant, rather than (or in some cases in addition to) a tailoring to the precise needs of the individual**. Where a more individualised approach was offered, this was more commonly applied to participants with more complex needs and/or those furthest from the labour market.

Tailoring might reflect participants' choice, as well as variation in assessed needs. For example, an end-to-end provider said that provision varied considerably for participants in its 'vulnerability groups' (which covered the categories of substance misuse, teenage parents, youth offenders, looked-after children, travelling community, and special needs). Another placed all those with no IT skills on a computer course.

Many elements of support might be common across most or all participants. For example, one end-to-end provider described offering a 'universal service' (jobsearching, motivation, interview training, form-filling, computer training) to all participants (if appropriate). However, those with significant health conditions (particularly mental health, anxiety issues, tendency to violence) were offered one-to-one rather than group support by this provider which is suggestive of some degree of personalisation.

Personalisation also extended to the frequency of contact with the provider's staff. For example, in one end-to-end provider those assessed as nearest to employment had weekly meetings and jobsearch, but for those furthest away this might occur only monthly.

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[63]   Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, 27 May 2010. Accessed at http://www.dwp.gov.uk/newsroom/ministers-speeches/2010/27-05-10.shtml

For example, some end-to-end providers said that Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) participants with ongoing, unresolved health problems were met less frequently than other participants. In some cases this was reported to be because these ESA participants could not be mandated to undertake jobsearch but they could be mandated to attend the provider. A respondent noting this, also commented that some ESA participants could be particularly challenging because they could opt for telephone contact only. This is an issue that was returned to by provider staff in discussions about sanctioning (Chapter 11) and in the context of creaming and parking (Chapter 15).

> *'They agree to do it and then they don't turn up. The ESAs we can't mandate … and some of them have got so many issues it's not constructive to the rest of the group really so they usually have one-to-one appointments.'*
>
> (Adviser)

An element of personalisation was also reported in the amount of support offered to different groups, although no consistent pattern was observed. Some provider staff suggested that most assistance was given to those closest to employment, while another reported that they had more personal adviser time, but less training. Others described those 'in the mid-range' as receiving most training and the furthest from employment the most personal adviser time. These themes are returned to in Chapter 15.

Much of the personalisation is procedural rather than substantive

Staff in providers said that **the personalised nature of the approach was a positive feature** of the Work Programme and from their perspective was an aspect of delivery that was effective (see also Chapter 17). They referred specifically to the allocation of each participant to a named adviser and to one-to-one support sessions rather than group work, which had been the model in previous programmes. However, advisers regretted that they were not able to provide more opportunities for specific training to meet individual needs. Rather, the courses they could offer tended to be generic, focused on employability skills and job application techniques. In this sense it would seem that providers saw themselves as having made more progress towards procedural personalisation, than towards substantive personalisation in programme delivery.

Some advisers reported that the use of named personal advisers led to the development of trust and openness between the two parties. This meant that individuals felt comfortable talking about their personal issues and that advisers got to know individuals well and were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses. This, in turn, helped advisers to ensure that they were meeting individuals' support needs. One adviser voiced a concern that if participants had to change adviser, they might lose confidence and would no longer speak so openly to future advisers (however, it is worth noting, as reported in Section 7.1, that one model of provision, adopted by a number of providers involved participants changing advisers for different stages of the back-to-work journey).

The **use of action plans also provided an opportunity for advisers to personalise support**. However, advisers' accounts suggest that the extent to which this occurred in practice varied. As indicated earlier (see Chapter 8) some advisers reported that the use of action plan templates or the automatic generation of action plans following an initial assessment could result in actions which were inappropriate and not sufficiently tailored to the individual. More positively, other advisers noted that action plans provided a chance to help with individual needs and to work towards removing their barriers to employment as well as helping to build their employability skills.

The reported role of the participant in creating the action plan also varied considerably between providers which had implications for the extent to which the plan was specific and personalised to the individual (see Chapter 8). However, for the most part, the action planning process was very much led by the advisers. More widespread use of the former approach could help to ensure that support is adequately personalised.

14.2   Participants' perspectives

The analysis now turns to participants' experience of personalisation in the Work Programme, again using the dimensions of procedural and substantive personalisation noted in the literature.

Participants' experiences of procedural personalisation

In some local areas, **participants' first contact with the Work Programme had been a personal discussion with an individual member of staff**. It appeared, from other parts of the research interviews and from respondents' own grasp of administrative procedure, that the staff involved at this point were specifically designated to conduct introductory interviews, and were not the eventual personal advisers whom people went on to meet regularly.

Some of these introductory interviews were not well remembered. Among those who did remember what had happened were people who described fairly short meetings of up to 15 minutes, mainly taken up with information-giving. But some people described longer interactions, in which they were asked about their background, skills, and what kind of work they had done and now wanted. Site tours were sometimes included, to show people where toilets and fire exits were, and some people were introduced to the staff member who would be their personal adviser. In one research location, site tours had sometimes included visiting work experience workshops on the premises, which participants had found very interesting.

Satisfaction with these introductory personal interviews was variable. One participant who had not worked for many years had been apprehensive about the way he might be treated. Although the open plan office setting was unwelcome, his general experience was of feeling reassured, and that somebody was prepared to support him.

Elements of the service which people variously appreciated included:

• appointments that happened on time;

• clean and well-ordered offices;

• access to computer and internet facilities, including provision at the office and, reported by one person, the provider paying for a dongle for internet access at home;

• support in using computers that matched people's skills and experience – some people in the sample had never used a computer before;

• courteous and friendly advisers, who treated people with respect;

• advisers who really listened to what people said, about personal situations and work-related goals.

The **personal manner and approach of advisers, as experienced by the respondents, also contributed to positive overviews**. People appreciated advisers who were interested in them, listened to what they said and remembered it at the next appointment. Some had been surprised at the level of proactivity shown by advisers, on their behalf, and spoke positively about staff who were positive and encouraging, *'trying their best'* and *'wanting to help'* even when they were still waiting for tangible outcomes.

Participants' experiences of substantive personalisation

For the purposes of this analysis it is suggested that a substantively personalised service would comprise the following elements:

• advice and support that match the goals and aspirations of individual participants;

• advice and support that address their individual needs.

Some needs might be associated with goals and aspirations (such as professional training or purchase of licences), while others might be independent of these (such as health or financial needs).

It is not possible to state, on the basis of the experiences of Stage 1 and 2 (new and engaged) and Stage 3 (job entrants) participants, whether or not individual participants had received a wholly personalised service. Looking across the different parts of their 'journey' it is possible to identify aspects or stages that can be thought of as personalised and others that cannot. For example, it was common in some local areas for participants to attend one or more group sessions in the early stages of their engagement with a Work Programme provider, followed by individual meetings and, possibly, services and support that matched their needs and goals to varying degrees. The experiences of each respondent across the three samples varied considerably.

Some of the evidence on how providers addressed their participants' barriers (presented in Chapter 13) is relevant to a discussion of personalisation. Many people spoke positively about the help and support they received, which suggests that what they had received had been seen as appropriate and constructive. Where there is counter-evidence, i.e. when people felt their barriers had not been addressed, their needs not met or their wishes ignored, the indications are that they had not received personalised provision.

14.3   Work first and human capital approaches to provision

There is some debate about the relative effectiveness of 'work first' approaches to helping people towards work compared with 'human capital' approaches. 'Work first' is characterised by activities that promote and support immediate jobsearch to the exclusion of other forms of help. These would include help in looking for vacancies, CV writing, interview practice for example. In contrast, a 'human capital' approach emphasises increasing the individual resources and employability of people by, for example, education and training or basic skills development.

There are arguments about the relative merits of each approach, but it is not the intention here to explore these here. Indeed, the two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive; they can be pursued in parallel. What has been possible from the participant interview data, however, is to identify whether people experienced a predominantly work first or human capital approach and whether their experience was commensurate with a personalised service.

The **dominant emphasis seen in the observations of participant-provider meetings was on a 'work first' approach** rather than the provision of training or other support (human capital approaches), although the manifestation of this varied between providers. In one provider, participants without 'tickets' (CSCS cards[64], security licences, CRB checks) were encouraged to apply for jobs in the hope that employers would provide these as part of induction. In another, strong and directional advice was given to all participants to consider self-employment, irrespective of the individuals' background and barriers to work. A final example of a dominant work first approach is one provider who would offer training only in the context of a definite job offer.

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[64]   Construction Skills Certificate Scheme.

In both the engaged and job entrant interview samples the data suggested more varied experiences. There were examples of providers taking a work first approach, a mixed approach, and approach of developing human capital whilst searching for work, and one of developing human capital first.

Manifestations of **work first approaches included encouragement to be jobsearching, and assistance in looking for vacancies**. In some cases participants also accessed training to develop specific jobsearch skills such as improving interview techniques, CV writing, confidence building, and using IT to search and apply for jobs. Work first was sometimes considered a helpful approach where the participant was focused on getting work as soon as possible, did not perceive a need to develop vocational skills, and where they could not see how else the provider could help them.

A work first approach was perceived as unhelpful where the support did not include the kind of help wanted and requested by the participant, such as work experience placements, and/or work-skills training. In addition, some respondents were dissatisfied when they felt under pressure to take any job. There is little evidence in these cases of a personalised approach.

There were clear cases where **a human capital approach** could be identified. Some people reported feeling no pressure or requirement to apply for jobs while they undertook specific skills courses, self-employment training, or basic (literacy and numeracy) skills training. These participants tended to have multiple barriers to work and to have been out of the labour market for long periods. Participants were mostly satisfied with this approach as it was generally in keeping with their own immediate aspirations. These cases probably most clearly reflect the promise of a personalised service.

There were also cases which suggested a **combination of work first and human capital** approaches. For example, there were participants who were encouraged to look for work at the same time as undertaking work skills training and gaining qualifications (for example, in computer skills, food hygiene, CSCS card, first aid). Others took part in work experience placements whilst also engaging in jobsearch activity.

There were varied responses from these participants. Some considered mixing jobsearch with other activities a helpful approach for gaining the desired experience or skills needed to obtain the work they wanted. However, some thought that the jobs they were being asked to search for were irrelevant to them or that it was a pointless exercise. Some were disappointed when told that the vocational training they really wanted was too expensive.

There were **some cases that were hard to describe** as either personalised or not. For example, one man wanted to change his career path and train for work in a professional kitchen for which he had identified a training course. His adviser did not explore sources of funding but suggested he took a low-skilled manual job and save up to pay for his catering course. He had succeeded in finding a job on a building site and thought he would be able to start training in a couple of years. The advice he received was, therefore, personalised in the sense of helping him meet his aspirations eventually but he did not receive direct (personalised) support to pursue his aims immediately.

14.4   Summary

The evidence on personalisation provides a relatively consistent picture between the provider and participant experiences. Personalisation is developed through the relationship established between participants and their advisers and the subsequent assessment and action planning activities. The balance of evidence from both types of respondent suggests that an emphasis on procedural personalisation is more widespread and strongly developed than any focus on substantive personalisation, the evidence for which was much more patchy.

There is some evidence that different approaches are taken with different participants. Those who are most job-ready tend to experience work first-centred approaches, with a lower degree of substantive personalisation. Those with high or multiple barriers are more likely to experience personalised and human capital focused programmes which aim to prepare them for work in the longer term.

Mixed approaches often appear less satisfactory to participants despite the implied personalisation. It may be that an effective means to blend work first and human capital approaches has yet to be found.

Overall, while the evidence is consistent, it is also limited. Future waves and strands of the evaluation will seek to address this and provide a firmer ground for assessment of this theme.

15 Creaming and parking

This chapter brings together evidence on the extent to which some participants are selected for early and targeted assistance to help them find work ('creaming') while others are given minimal or sometimes no help but left to their own devices to move towards work (so-called 'parking'). Creaming has come to be associated with those who are most job-ready and are thought to have excellent prospects of finding work quickly. In contrast, people who are deemed to have poor prospects, be a long way from the labour market, have multiple disadvantages and barriers, and are in need of intensive and/or long-term help (which by definition is likely to be costly) are most likely to be parked.

For previous government employment programmes that have incorporated an element of payment-by-results, creaming and parking have been identified as problematic and dysfunctional. The two practices tend to reinforce 'deadweight' (i.e. providing help for people who are most likely to find work on their own) and to confound a principal policy objective of helping long term benefit recipients into work. The Work Programme funding model has sought to overcome this by offering providers higher payments for achieving sustained job outcomes with participants who are assessed as being further from the labour market and most likely to have multiple/more substantial barriers to employment.

The issues of creaming and parking were explored with providers, since it was critical to understand the extent to which payment systems led to creaming and parking or whether, as reported earlier, decisions about frequency of contact and nature of support were purely based on assessment of needs (although here it is worth noting that the models operated in the Work Programme led advisers to prioritise the job-ready for more frequent meetings). Data from Jobcentre Plus staff on this topic were less systematically collected, although many staff volunteered the views that are reported here.

The research has also looked at the experiences of people in all three of the participant samples (new entrants, engaged participants and job entrants) for evidence that they might have been the subject of either of these two practices. This has not been straightforward since it is difficult from the data on individual participant experiences alone to draw conclusions about creaming and parking but by comparing these with the evidence from provider staff it is possible to begin to identify early signs of whether or not creaming and parking has been adopted as a deliberate strategy by Work Programme provider organisations, or a strategy used by individual staff as a means of maximising the number of their participants moving into work. Survey data later in the evaluation will allow us to explore whether there are systematic differences in the experiences of different types of participant, which might indicate that some participant groups are receiving significantly different levels of help.

15.1 Work Programme provider perspectives

Some end-to-end providers explicitly prioritise the most job-ready

A major theme emerging from the analysis is **the prioritisation of the more job-ready participants over those who are less job-ready,** particularly in end-to-end providers. However, the extent to which this occurs is not entirely clear from the qualitative research.

Some end-to-end providers explicitly said that they prioritised their more job-ready participants in order to meet their monthly job outcome targets. This is reflected in the findings reported in Chapter

7 that many personal advisers have greater frequency of contact with those participants who are more job-ready. An adviser, for example, described choosing the 20 most job-ready participants from their caseload each month and prioritising them for support in order to try and get them into work.

The pressure resulting from high caseloads was also given as a reason for prioritising more job-ready participants. For example, an adviser stated that for the first six months of the programme she had treated all participants on her caseload equally but as her caseload had grown in size, she had been forced to focus on her more job-ready participants, and to start using group sessions and workshops as a creative way of seeing more participants at a time.

Other providers claim not to, but do see the most job-ready more frequently

Staff in other providers said that they did not prioritise one group of participants over another, yet in different parts of the interview indicated that they saw their job-ready participants more often than their less job-ready participants, or equally, their Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) participants more often than their Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) participants. One of these advisers acknowledged that he was sometimes able to meet his less job-ready participants only once every three months in order to focus on his more job-ready participants. While he saw this as far from ideal, he indicated that it was necessary in order to meet his targets and keep his manager from putting too much pressure on him.

However, **more frequent contact did not necessarily result in advisers spending more time with their job-ready participants in meetings**. Indeed, more than one adviser noted that although they saw their less job-ready participants (and/or ESA participants) less frequently, they actually spent more time with them during appointments because of their more complex support needs.

This was reinforced by staff in specialist and spot providers who noted that they spent more time with individuals with literacy and numeracy needs. A training provider in this group noted that they had the time to be able to help participants with specialist needs and as such felt they were treating people as individuals.

Reasons for prioritising some job-ready participants

Particular **participant groups were prioritised by some end-to-end providers because conditions were more favourable to them finding work**. Examples of this included prioritising 18-24 year-old participants because of the wage incentive available through the Youth Contract; and prioritising participants who were able to work part-time, since most of the available local jobs were part-time.

Evidence from some spot providers indicated that they had to focus on getting people into work, not because advisers had personal job outcome targets but because job outcome payments were essential to ensure the survival of the organisation.

There was some evidence that **conditionality within the Work Programme could contribute to the parking of some participants**. As noted in Chapter 11, some advisers reported that some participants are almost unable to avoid being sanctioned because they are unable to comply with programme requirements. Individuals with alcohol and substance misuse problems and mental health conditions were mentioned in this context, yet providers believed they were unable to waive sanctioning. It was noted, in some cases, that these participants were being parked and offered almost no assistance, since their failure to attend would lead to sanctioning.

There were different perspectives among different providers in the supply chains about what might constitute creaming and parking – thus, some staff in specialist providers reported that their prime provider and/or local end-to-end providers, referred only the very hardest-to-help specialist cases

(young people, ex-offenders, ESA claimants) to their services, in effect 'cherry picking' for themselves the easiest-to-place participants in these categories. While it is clear that referral of hard-to-help participants for specialist support is indeed part of the design of the Work Programme, such providers took the view that they required a broader mix of referrals within the specialist groups in order to generate adequate levels of outcome payments.

15.2   Jobcentre Plus perspectives

Among Jobcentre Plus staff interviewed there was a commonly-reported view that participants were being parked. At all levels and across offices, **Jobcentre Plus staff gave examples of participants who were seen infrequently and for whom no additional support or training was offered**. While their views are consistent with the provider accounts, there is little appreciation in the Jobcentre Plus responses of the point made by providers about the quality of support taking precedence over the quantity (i.e. frequency) of it being delivered.

> *'I think that those with the greatest needs are being given less attention because they are the hardest, most difficult to help and I'm assuming it will take a lot more investment.'*

(Adviser)

All participants are parked? Just some groups parked?

Some jobcentre staff (spread across the offices visited) reported **a view that few participants were receiving much in the way of support at all**. This served to confirm their negative prior views of the support made available through the Work Programme. It was suggested that this lack of support for all participants stemmed from the high volume of claimants being referred to the Work Programme, which providers simply lacked sufficient resources to cope with.

Some Jobcentre Plus staff reported being able to specify precisely which participants were being affected by parking and creaming, according to whether they were seen as hard or easy to help. Many respondents expressed concern about this, and suggested that it ran counter to the objectives of the Work Programme to support those most entrenched in unemployment.

In analysing the responses from Jobcentre Plus staff, it is difficult to assess how far their views about creaming and parking reflect hostility, in some respondents, to the overall approach of the Work Programme and concern about the diminishing role of Jobcentre Plus in programme delivery, and how far they reflect a balanced interpretation of the evidence. It seems likely that a consequence of the common lack of effective communication between providers and jobcentres (see Chapter 9) is that Jobcentre Plus staff do not have anything on which to base their opinions other than the feedback they receive from participants. There is no systematic flow of information about the procedures or performance of the Work Programme to provide a counterweight to the anecdotal evidence they receive.

15.3   Evidence from the participant interviews

In looking for evidence of creaming and parking it is useful to use a broad categorisation of participants based on their closeness to the labour market as the evidence suggests that each category tended to attract a different range of responses from Work Programme providers. This categorisation is one that providers themselves use in their contracts and assessments (see, for example, Chapters 3 and 6):

1   very close to the labour market; fully job-ready;

2   reasonably close to the labour market; in need of help to become more job-ready, but realistic also to be jobsearching;

3   some distance from the labour market; in need of a lot of help before becoming job-ready.

People who were **close to the labour market** were mostly very motivated to find work and were already actively engaged in jobsearch. They might still have some kind of limitation on what they might be able to do (perhaps due to a disability or health condition) but they had no barriers to looking for work. These people tended to report three kinds of response from providers, mainly consistent with a work first approach. However, it is difficult from individual participant experiences, to draw any inferences about creaming and parking.

• No help, left to own devices – this was sometimes acceptable to the participant; they felt they needed no help. Others believed that engagement with the provider was therefore a waste of time.

• Assistance with jobsearch – such as looking for vacancies, improving CVs, interview practice, confidence-building.

• Pressure to search for work and put in applications for jobs – this was usually experienced more negatively when these did not match participants' own aspirations.

People who were reasonably close to the labour market were not as job-ready as the first group. They were the most numerous among the respondents and tended to have some kind of constraint on what they could do but a constraint that was, in principle, amenable to some kind of advice or intervention. There were usually jobs they could apply for but they had scope for improving their employability further. They also reported a range of responses from their Work Programme provider:

• some were given access to training or work experience to improve their employability, sometimes simultaneously with undertaking jobsearch activities;

• some were referred for health or occupational assessments, usually as a prelude to jobsearching;

• some had not yet received support that they felt could help them.

There are some possible signs of parking particularly in the Stage 2 (engaged) sample, in the sense of apparently little help being offered or supplied to participants despite there being a recognised need (as described by the respondents). There is, of course, no matched evidence from Work Programme provider staff on individual cases that might provide explanations of why help had not been given.

People in the third group were **furthest from the labour market**. They had multiple or severe barriers (including health problems, alcohol or drug problems, or criminal records), had not worked recently or had very fragmented employment records. There were not many participants in the sample who fell into this group (possibly reflecting the small numbers of claimants being referred to the programme as a whole who were in receipt of ESA). The responses from providers (as described by the participant sample) again varied:

• some received direct support in response to identified barriers, such as health or occupational assessments, advice on presenting a criminal record (although its should be noted that most of these interventions tended to be at the low cost end of the spectrum and relatively easy to provide);

• others received very little help at all. Some said they had very few requirements placed on them to attend meetings with provider staff. Contact was usually by telephone instead.

It is from these participant interviews which suggest very little constructive response from providers to their needs that the clearest evidence of people being parked emerges.

Approaches to, and effects of, categorising participants

The approach to grading participants on their work-readiness identified above and in Chapter 3 was evidenced through systems of RAG-rating[65] participants in the observed meetings between participants and advisers. Consistent with findings from providers earlier in this chapter, the observations suggested that the most job-ready participants were booked into more regular review appointments than the least job-ready, and that the most job-ready were encouraged to rapidly take-up any support or training required, because they were seen by advisers to be easy to progress into work once minor constraints had been overcome. Those who were less job-ready appeared to be challenged by advisers less frequently and less intensively about their job-seeking activities during meetings, and were booked into programmes of lesser intensity.

Some of the observations of participant-adviser meetings suggested that not all health barriers were being explicitly picked up by advisers, and that the 'parking' could arise from an inaccurate or incomplete assessment using an 'eyes and ears' approach, of motivation to find work rather than a fuller understanding the participant's particular circumstances and limiting health conditions. However, as with the data from participant interviews, it is hard to draw firm conclusions given the small scale of this work, and the possibility that the presence of the researcher itself influenced the conduct of the participant-adviser meeting.

15.4   Summary

While creaming and parking are clear policy concerns for the Work Programme's implementation, the evaluation cannot at this stage provide firm conclusions from the qualitative work. Such conclusions must await further evidence from later stages of the work, particularly the quantitative surveys and longer-term data from the qualitative panel of participants.

Nevertheless, there is some broad consistency in the views and experiences of the different stakeholders collated and reported so far.

What can be said at this point, is that – frequently intentionally – those participants considered most job-ready are seen more frequently by many Work Programme providers. In contrast, those with high or multiple barriers are likely to experience infrequent meetings. However, further evidence about the quality (and length) of meetings is required before this can be seen as definitive evidence of creaming and parking, rather than appropriate variation of approaches to different participant groups.

What may be of concern is that less frequent meetings for those with multiple barriers may also be linked to a lack of referral to additional support and training activities, and this is also an issue which requires further tracking across the course of the evaluation.

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[65]   RAG is shorthand for red (multiple barriers), amber (some barriers) and green (work-ready).

16 Comparisons with Jobcentre Plus provision

The Work Programme has introduced a new model of support for people who have spent (in many cases) significant time unemployed or inactive and in receipt of support from Jobcentre Plus. Unsurprisingly, both Work Programme participants, and Jobcentre Plus staff interviewed for the research had views about the differences between the Work Programme and Jobcentre Plus provision.

People across all three participant samples were asked for their views on the help they had while on the Work Programme and for their prior experiences of Jobcentre Plus support as claimants. New entrants had the most immediate recent experience with Jobcentre Plus, but most people in this and the engaged group had ongoing contact through the conditionality requirements attached to Jobseeker's Allowance. It must be recognised that participants might have critical views of Jobcentre Plus purely because they were still not in employment after some months of support from that organisation.

A second perspective is provided by Jobcentre Plus staff, who frequently volunteered their views during research interviews about differences between their own provision and the offer of the Work Programme providers. However, in reporting these, it is also important to highlight the lack of knowledge many Jobcentre Plus staff professed about what Work Programme providers were delivering to participants. This in turn can be seen as a consequence of the reported lack of communication between local Jobcentre Plus offices and Work Programme providers (see Chapter 9).

16.1 The participant experience

Among the new entrant sample there was a wide range of previous experiences with Jobcentre Plus. **For some people, recent visits to Jobcentre Plus had involved little more than regular fortnightly signing-on, with occasional offers of lists of jobs available.** These meetings could take no more than ten minutes. Claimants who had been assigned to an adviser, and those who wanted more information or discussion than signing-on staff could provide, had longer appointments. Claimants who lived fairly close to Jobcentre Plus offices had sometimes called in to use jobsearch facilities, in addition to attending scheduled appointments.

Individuals who had been in touch with Jobcentre Plus over many years said the structural and administrative arrangements had changed so much, as had the services that were offered and expectations of what was required from jobseekers, that it was hard to talk about their general experiences.

Most are positive to neutral about their experiences

The **most positive views all came from participants who had experienced a supportive relationship with one particular adviser, over months or years**. Among this group were women who had long-term relationships with a Lone Parent Adviser. They spoke of the advisers' positive approach and useful suggestions, and practical help with better-off calculations and jobsearch. Claimants with no experience of paid work also valued the support and advice offered by their adviser, mentioning learning how to write a CV, and being given an opportunity to do some unpaid work experience. Similarly, claimants who had met with specialist advisers for disabled people and people with problems with drugs and alcohol use also had overall positive views of the support offered.

Factors contributing to people feeling satisfied or pleased with the Jobcentre Plus service included staff listening properly to them, paying attention to their particular circumstances, and having the appropriate time available. Respondents appreciated staff who believed what they told them, were polite, and had a friendly and consistent manner. There was praise for staff who kept a good record of what happened in their interviews, so they could refer back, took an overall view, and did not ask inappropriate questions. They appreciated discussions which boosted their self-esteem and helped them keep positive. From this kind of good relationship and staff understanding of the claimant, signposts and referrals to other services were also more likely to be perceived as helpful and appropriate.

Negative views of Jobcentre Plus are not common

Strongly negative views about Jobcentre Plus were uncommon among participants. When expressed, they were linked with experiences of administrative delays, and what were described as 'terrible muddles', such as those which arose for some people during frequent changes of circumstances or changes in address. For one claimant, the experience was of strong pressure to apply for jobs that were unsuitable, being required to attend a work scheme considered irrelevant, and then having benefits suspended for non-compliance.

Although not expressed with such strong feeling, factors reported as contributing to generally negative views of experiences with Jobcentre Plus included: meeting staff who were too hurried to provide adequate contact time; being passed on to other organisations; being treated as a number not a person; and just *nothing much happening*. Some claimants said they believed that staff tried their best, but were subject to constant restructuring and pressure of work, so there was no point expecting much. Some disliked having to go to Jobcentre Plus at all; feeling *'looked down on'* or *'like a beggar'*.

Some think the Work Programme is better

For the engaged group of respondents, experiences of working with Jobcentre Plus (as opposed to just signing-on) were more difficult to recall in detail. However, **there were some who thought that experiences with the Work Programme were better than under Jobcentre Plus provision**. The most critical respondents described how they had felt that jobcentre staff had provided little or no help to find work, had little time for them, had been insensitive towards health conditions, had failed to listen about barriers to jobsearching or work, and had not provided assistance to reduce barriers to work. A few were unhappy about being 'threatened' with sanctions for non-attendance by Jobcentre Plus.

There were comments that Work Programme providers offered a more personal service (which can be associated more with procedural than substantive personalisation – see Chapter 14), by having more pleasant and relaxed premises, by being able to see the same adviser over time, and through the less threatening way in which staff discussed possible sanctions.

Employer links are seen as a differentiating factor

Where some respondents thought that Jobcentre Plus offered more than Work Programme providers was in engagement with employers. Some people said that Jobcentre Plus was much more active in dealing directly with employers on their behalf and seemed to have access to lists of vacancies direct from employers.

However, this perception was by no means consistent across respondents, and several participants in the job entrant sample made the contrasting point that they believed that their Work Programme provider had access to more job opportunities.

Consistent with this point, some of the observed adviser-participant meetings also suggested that some providers have ongoing relationships with local employers for whom they offer recruitment services. In two of the providers observed, this appeared to be the case and participants had options for their CV to be forwarded to employers or to start work placement activity to better prepare for these employers.

16.2   Jobcentre Plus perspectives

In light of the views set out earlier in this report (see Chapters 3 and 9) it is perhaps unsurprising that the interviews suggested a consensus among Jobcentre Plus staff and across offices, that their support and provision is superior to that available through the Work Programme. Driving this is the view that their caseload is being taken over by private providers who are motivated more by profit than genuine concern about people's experience and outcomes. These views are also coloured by the feedback of participants who claim to be infrequently seen by their providers and/or receive little in the way of support.

Flexible support fund, and more sources of support and training

Jobcentre Plus respondents identified and emphasised some aspects of their service that set them apart from the Work Programme, and included provision that matched or exceeded that available through the Work Programme. Many **staff highlighted the availability of the Flexible Support Fund** which can be used to overcome an individual's barriers to work (e.g. through helping to fund suitable clothing, equipment or travel costs). It was reported by Jobcentre Plus staff that Work Programme providers did not hold a similar pot of funding.

Moreover, it was reported that Work Programme providers signposted this aspect of Jobcentre Plus support to participants. This was contentious since, once engaged with the Work Programme, participants are no longer entitled to support from Jobcentre Plus and Flexible Support Funding cannot be released to them. Some frustration was expressed that Work Programme providers did not appear to understand the conditions of taking over individuals' cases, nor provide the funding that individuals need to re-enter work.

16.3   Summary

The point of making a comparison between participants' experiences of Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme is not to make judgments about either. Rather, what emerges from the comparison is confirmation about what is valued by Work Programme participants in helping them move towards work and what is not helpful. It is also not surprising that Jobcentre Plus staff are not receptive to highlighting benefits of Work Programme provision over their own.

No clear or simple picture emerges from the analysis in this chapter. Different participants have had different experiences, both with Jobcentre Plus and with Work Programme providers, which colour their views. What is apparent is that any assessment needs to become more finely-tuned and to be underpinned by a closer examination of what actual delivery entails, since aspects of process innovation – by providers – may have been missed in these early insights.

17 What works, difference made and sustainability

To conclude the overview of thematic issues, this chapter sets out what the different actors (providers, Jobcentre Plus staff and participants) saw as effective about the Work Programme in alleviating long-term unemployment or inactivity, what difference they thought was made by the Work Programme, and whether they believed it would achieve sustainable employment for participants.

17.1   Work Programme provider perspectives

The interviews with providers explored their views on factors that were seen key to supporting movement into work and those which were effective in retaining participants in work. They also explored, more generally, the aspects of the Work Programme which are seen by providers to be working well, those which are not working well and respondents' views on changes which could improve the programme.

What is effective in getting participants into work and keeping them there?

Managers and personal advisers working for Work Programme providers identified a number of factors that they saw as crucial in determining movement into work, including the personalised nature of the support, the emphasis on motivation and building confidence. The **tailoring of support to the individual rather than a 'one size fits all' approach** was seen to be potentially most beneficial to long-term unemployed people. This approach was viewed as useful in identifying and addressing barriers to employment, particularly those arising from low confidence and poor motivation. A number of respondents expressed the view that these were, in themselves, significant barriers to employment which could be addressed through continual support by an adviser.

The personalised support was also thought to allow for barriers to be addressed through enabling access to specialist support and training. However, while providers felt that the programme was effective in identifying these needs, they were less confident that barriers could then be addressed. The principal problem was reported to be in the relatively narrow range of training courses which can be accessed as a result of funding constraints. While training is available in areas such as employability, CV writing, confidence and interview skills because it can be provided in-house or sourced cost-free, funding for other training needs was reported to be very limited. The provider and participant surveys may be instructive on this point.

Continuity of support, from a single adviser, as well as one-to-one rather than group delivery, was reported to be potentially more effective for participants than meeting with different advisers and group sessions. It was argued that this was because individuals felt valued, and that someone was interested in their situation and helping them to move forward. Support of this nature was also seen as potentially effective in helping participants to be more open to different employment possibilities and to deal with rejections which might otherwise damage their self-esteem and reduce their motivation to find work. In this context, however, it should be noted that there appeared to be a trend for some providers to move from individual to group sessions in response to growing caseloads (see Section 14.1), although this shift was also presented as a positive development by some, in the sense that group sessions were seen as an innovative and effective form of delivery.

Some managers and advisers expressed the view that movement into work is ultimately dependent on the individual participant themselves, and that an adviser is rarely able to change entrenched negative attitudes to work where these exist. It was reported that greatest success was achieved with individuals who are generally positive about their employment prospects but who lack confidence. This is a challenging finding since it suggests that some Work Programme providers perceive themselves as potentially no more able to support and change the attitudes of unmotivated participants than Jobcentre Plus has.

Finally, **links with employers are seen by providers as crucial** in determining movement into work, yet many providers felt that these were too weak. Reasons for this included a reported lack of resources to build employer contacts and, among subcontractors, a perceived lack of help from prime providers in sharing information on job vacancies. A manager of one provider commented that, despite the potentially effective approach with participants, it was not achieving outcomes, because of this lack of strong links with employers.

Many providers indicated that **finding the right job was the most important prerequisite in retaining participants in work**. Participants need to be content, or at least accepting, of the hours to be worked and the demands of the job. It was stressed that participants who are fundamentally unhappy with the job they are in are unlikely to remain in it, and would simply return to the Work Programme. At the same time, some advisers expressed the view that in-work support could help to keep an individual in work and to develop a longer-term plan for finding an alternative job. It was also thought that good preparation, including for financial aspects, and basic workplace conduct such as sickness absence procedures, can help to prevent dissatisfaction and early turnover among job entrants. A further issue raised by some advisers was the temporary nature of many current vacancies which meant that, however good in-work support might be, the individual would return to the Work Programme on termination of their contract.

Which aspects of the programme work well and which less well?

There was an emerging consensus among providers that the **support delivered to participants is effective**. Advisers frequently reported they had built good relationships with participants, that participants were building up confidence and that the programme enabled their barriers to be identified. The long-term nature of the intervention was also seen as a positive feature of the programme, allowing advisers to get to know participants and their needs.

A number of provider staff also reported that the Work Programme was **effective in identifying individuals who are not available for work**, for example because they are covertly working. These (job-ready) individuals were seen to be deterred from continuing to claim by the prospect of meetings at short-notice and by the intensive personalised approach of the programme.

The aspects that were reported to work well were somewhat fewer in number than those that were felt to not work well.

A number of managers, both in generalist and specialist end-to-end providers referred to **difficulties in managing the number of participants** referred to them. The key point here was the mismatch between expectations and outcome: some reported higher and others lower participant numbers than anticipated, and inadequate signals from Jobcentre Plus about what they might expect. This led to difficulties in determining staffing requirements and in turn to problems in delivering the required level of provision to participants.

Managers and advisers in some providers talked of excessive workloads, while other providers, offering specialist services, were disappointed with the low number of referrals. Advisers reported that large caseloads limited the amount of time they could devote to individual participants, and that those with

complex and significant needs lost out. Some providers also experienced high levels of staff turnover which led to difficulties in delivering the programme. Managers complained of excessive paperwork, rules and regulations which they felt affected the quality of service they could provide.

Funding was identified as a significant problem by providers, leading to inability to give participants the help they need, including training and more in-depth support. A lack of funding was seen to limit the work which providers could do with the hardest-to-help. The funding available for training was felt to be inadequate to meet the needs of many participants.

Instead, providers said they were mainly limited to offering short courses, for example leading to licensing for work in security (SIA card) or construction (CSCS card) although there were also indications that the accreditation associated with these courses might not be paid for until a firm job offer was in place. The shortage of funding meant that providers could not always (or ever) offer the help that individuals needed.

The commissioning strand of research is likely to be instructive on these points about funding constraints since it will explore how funding is devolved from the prime providers to providers in their supply chains. However, these early delivery findings suggest that Work Programme funding mechanisms – particularly the role of private finance within the model – are not necessarily working as anticipated in generating up-front income streams which providers can use to invest in innovative and intensive provision.

Providers frequently reported that the **relationship with Jobcentre Plus is problematic**, particularly in relation to information-sharing. Communication was largely through paperwork rather than by telephone and/or email (see Chapter 9). Providers also believe that Jobcentre Plus is not effectively preparing claimants for the Work Programme, with individuals arriving with little information about it, not knowing what to expect and sometimes starting with the expectation of it being a punitive measure (see Chapter 5).

Some staff in providers believed that the **Work Programme is not effective for some groups of participants because it is simply unable to meet their needs**. In this context, they highlighted concerns for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) participants who, although assessed as fit for work, have serious health-related barriers to employment. Some specialist subcontractors believed that prime providers were highly selective in their referrals: 'cherry picking' the most job-ready of these cases and 'parking' those with more serious and complex barriers (see Chapter 15). If confirmed more widely by subsequent evidence and other strands of the evaluation, this would be a significant finding, given the Work Programme policy design and intention.

Finally, as described in Chapter 11, many providers stated that **aspects of the sanctioning process are not working effectively**, highlighting the low approval rate of referrals for sanctioning and delays in decisions about sanctioning.

Providers' perspectives on improving the Work Programme

Providers highlighted a number of changes that could be made to the operation of the Work Programme in order to improve outcomes.

Unsurprisingly, there was **a view that more funding was needed in order that providers could adequately support harder to help participants**. More funding would also increase the number of advisers in provider organisations, reduce caseloads and increase contact time with participants. Increased funding would enable an increase in the emphasis on training which would improve the quality of the Work Programme intervention and make it more effective in achieving job outcomes. However, it is unclear from the research to date whether providers are alluding to funding devolved

by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to Work Programme prime providers or whether the problem lies in the funding that primes devolve to their supply chains. The commissioning strand of research and subsequent strands of programme research will investigate this point in greater depth.

Staff in providers argued that disappointing job **outcome rates might be improved through the development of stronger links with employers** to access information about job vacancies and to provide opportunities for work placements. The interviews indicated that they believed prime providers could do more to provide a lead to subcontractors on this.

Some respondents highlighted that Work Programme participants would benefit if they could access the Flexible Support Fund offered by Jobcentre Plus, which provides, for example, payments for clothing on starting work. Respondents held the view that this funding should be available to all jobseekers, but it was unclear why providers did not see themselves or their prime provider as responsible for offering this support if they see it as valuable

Improving communication and joint working with Jobcentre Plus is seen as critical to ensure providers have full and up-to-date information about participants, including when they have signed-off from benefit claiming. Some providers also stated that early transitions into the Work Programme would be improved if Jobcentre Plus advisers better prepared claimants for the programme and informed them of what to expect. However, analysis of interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff, suggests that many think they lack sufficient information to prepare participants in this way and that providers should make more effort to furnish them with improved information (Chapter 3). The general message that communication in both directions could be beneficially improved is, however, clear.

17.2   Jobcentre Plus perspectives

The majority of Jobcentre Plus staff interviewed expressed views that tended from **neutral to negative in respect of what was working well and what was effective in the Work Programme**. Since staff reported that they lack information about what is being delivered and the results that are being achieved, some chose not to comment, or confessed that they did not have enough information on which to make a judgement. Others were less circumspect and said that 'nothing' worked. However, some also acknowledged that Jobcentre Plus provision had failed to support participants into work and this has led to their referral to the Work Programme.

In some cases, newly introduced aspects of policy were perceived as a counterweight to the perceived superiority of Jobcentre Plus. Notable was that the wage incentive of the Youth Contract which was mentioned by some advisers had reportedly led to Work Programme providers engaging more with employers. It also meant that they had something to offer that Jobcentre Plus did not. The provider analysis does not suggest any great impact of the Youth Contract on these factors to date although it was reported to have an effect on the prioritisation of participant groups for support (see Chapter 15).

Some Jobcentre Plus staff noted that the support on offer through the Work Programme meant that claimants who were not motivated to find work looked forward to being referred to the programme. This was, in some cases, because they had heard from existing participants that they would get an 'easy ride', with fewer meetings to attend. A benefit of referring these cases onwards, for Jobcentre Plus staff, is that **unmotivated claimants are moved off their caseloads** and their effort can be focused on those who were more committed to finding employment.

However, some much stronger positive benefits of the programme were also identified by jobcentre staff and are suggestive of the local variation noted earlier (e.g. in communications protocols, noted

in Chapter 9). Some Jobcentre Plus staff noted that the **referral system is working well, as is the random allocation** procedure. A view was also expressed that participants would often benefit from starting afresh with a new adviser, particularly after a long period of unemployment and consequent loss of confidence. In addition, Work Programme providers were viewed by some Jobcentre Plus staff as 'less institutionalised' and more relaxed than their own organisation, which they noted would be beneficial for some types of participant.

These positive comments came from Jobcentre Plus staff who believed that they had a good understanding of the nature of Work Programme provision locally and had heard **positive feedback from participants**. This suggests that promoting more consistent communication between Jobcentre Plus and providers could reduce some of the relationship tensions that have been noted.

> *'I've seen a lot of people that have come to me and said "It's great! I've been to the Work Programme and I've perhaps got four weeks work experience at* [Employer]*" or something like that. They are over the moon and they haven't had that before.'*

> (Adviser)

17.3 The participant experience

The qualitative interviews with Stage 3 participants (those who had found work) allows exploration of two issues – perceptions of the difference made by Work Programme providers and views about the likely sustainability of their jobs.

The first of these topics was explored by asking respondents to reflect on the help they had received and its contribution to their successful job entry. The second topic is important because of the funding structure for Work Programme providers which makes outcome payments only for sustained work of six months and longer.

Work Programme is the main or a contributory factor to job entry

Some **participants believed that they would not be in their job now without the Work Programme**. They said, for example, that their provider had been critical in boosting their confidence and motivation, facilitating access to vacancies not found elsewhere, providing necessary work experience, brokering direct links to employers, and assisting with jobsearch.

There were also **participants who said that the provider had been influential in their move into employment, though not the only or crucial factor**. For example, some people believed they had moved into work more quickly because of training opportunities offered and/or pressure from providers. Others described how their job opportunity had arisen through other channels but support from the provider (such as improvements to their CV, advice about interview techniques, boosts to confidence) contributed to the success of their application. A final group of respondents talked about getting valuable advice from a training provider (accessed via their provider) to become self-employed, but that they secured financial help from other sources, such as family and friends to be able to start working.

Work Programme had limited or no influence on job entry

There were also participants who claimed that they got their job without any input from their Work Programme provider. These said that they had been motivated, knowledgeable and capable enough to find work themselves, and had found out about job opportunities without help. In this context, analysis earlier in this report (see Chapter 13) suggests that many in this group could be considered as job-ready and may not have needed any support to find work. However, it is notable that they

had been unemployed for some months prior to referral to the Work Programme. It may be the case that something about their Work Programme experience triggered an increased emphasis on, or confidence in, finding work.

Finally there were a few people who offered a more nuanced view. They thought that their provider would most likely have helped them find a job at some stage if they had not been successful with the job they found for themselves.

Sustainability where aspirations are aligned to work

Some participants said their jobs closely matched their aspirations. Positive experiences included being happy with their hours, finding the work enjoyable and/or free from stress, being satisfied with levels of pay, having a local job, and perceiving opportunities for progression or training. These people had no thoughts of not continuing with their employment. These views are consistent with those of providers, reported earlier, about what ensures work outcomes are sustained (particularly good preparation, and good matching of the job to participants' skills, characteristics and aspirations).

Temporary and variable contracts may undermine sustainability

There were doubts among some of the job entrant sample that the work they had taken on would be sustained. These included people who had taken up jobs that did not match their aspirations, such as agency work, variable or zero-hour contracts, temporary work or commission-only jobs. Others were experiencing unwelcome aspects of their employment that raised doubts about sustainability, including having lengthy commutes, needing to travel a lot with the job (including staying away from home), low hours and/or low pay, and adverse effects on personal health.

It is important to feel better off

Other participants in work did not speculate about whether their job was likely to be long-term but had some concerns. Although some felt better off financially in work (but some only marginally) they continued to be supported financially by family, for example by living at home. Some were unclear if they were better off and some were sure they were not. However, people generally preferred to be in work rather than on benefits and felt better in themselves for being in work, with an improved sense of self-worth, despite jobs not being ideal or fitting with aspirations, or not making them better off financially (yet).

The employment of a number of participants had lasted only a few weeks for a variety of reasons, including an employer's financial problems, or their own ill health. Some left voluntarily, for example because the conditions of employment were different from what had been expected. In contrast, one person had their employment terminated for not meeting work targets.

17.4   Summary

Work Programme providers typically characterised the personalised service they offered, through the initial assessment, regular one-to-one adviser meetings and action planning as key to the effectiveness of their services. It was seen as helping them to meet the needs of participants and helping them to increase their confidence, and improve their job-seeking skills. However, staff in providers had concerns that funding was insufficient for them to ensure that hard-to-help participants received the support required, as well as being able to fund some additional costs of work-entry (such as clothing for job interviews). The findings suggest some tension between the claims of a high degree of personalisation and individualisation critical to effective delivery, and the

apparently relatively low level of provision of specialist in-depth support such as training or specialist help with specific barriers, especially where this would require commissioning help from another provider. Once again this is consistent with the thrust of personalisation, to date, being more procedural than substantive (see also the discussion in Chapter 15).

A key factor in achieving success was believed to be the strength and effectiveness of providers' relationships with employers, but many believed that these had yet to be fully developed.

Providers' views about achieving sustainable employment were broadly consistent with those among participants who had entered work. Those who found jobs which were aligned to their aspirations and expectations of hours and pay were most likely to sustain them. These preliminary findings are consistent with the hypothesis that key to achieving sustainable employment is good initial job matching (supported by good preparation work with the participant) and that this may carry more weight than subsequent in-work support.

Some concern was raised, by both parties, that the relationship and communication between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers was an important enabling factor in programme performance. Many Jobcentre Plus staff reported a belief that their offer was superior to the Work Programme. It was difficult to assess how far these beliefs were objective and how far they were coloured by concerns about potential longer-term threats to Jobcentre Plus, or ideological views about private provision of public services. There was, however, some evidence that local Work Programme provision and positive feedback from participants during their signing-on visits to Jobcentre Plus offices, led Jobcentre Plus staff to take a more positive view of aspects of the Work Programme, including the opportunity for participants to start afresh with new advisers, and a less institutionalised approach to delivery in providers. On the other side of the fence, key concerns raised by providers included the unpredictable level of referrals, and poor communication on this topic from Jobcentre Plus, which generated difficulties in planning resources and provision. A general finding from the interviews is that communication in both directions between Jobcentre Plus and providers needs to be stronger and more frequent on a range of topics.

18 Conclusions and implications

This final chapter briefly highlights some tentative and selective conclusions and possible implications from this initial, delivery-focused phase of the evaluation – tentative, because of the preliminary, qualitative nature of the research to date, and selective because it aims to draw out themes that are most salient to understanding the Work Programme through the research completed so far. The data presented in the report cover a period during which the evaluation and the Work Programme itself were in their early stages, and it is only through subsequent stages of the evaluation that it will become clear whether some of the apparent findings and issues raised in this report do indeed characterise the ongoing operation of the programme as it settles down. Further, some of the qualitative findings require confirmation or reinforcement from quantitative data to generate an understanding of how widespread and significant they might be in the delivery of the programme. Lastly, this research looks only at aspects of programme delivery, and a fuller understanding of what is happening in the Work Programme requires a linkage between these findings and the findings of forthcoming research on the commissioning process, which is a key aspect of the programme's design.

18.1   Sanctioning

Both providers and Jobcentre Plus highlight that the sanctioning process is not working effectively. The process, from referral of a sanction (by providers) to the decision about whether the sanction will be applied (by Jobcentre Plus Decision Makers) and then the sanction being applied (to participant cases), is reported to be too slow, and weakens impact. Each party attributes at least part of this to failures in the performance of the other, highlighting incorrect or insufficient information/guidance being supplied by the other. It appears that neither side has fully understood the principles and processes involved. More frequent and more effective communication between the two (a common theme which emerges on several topics in the research) might improve this situation. It is important to note, however, that both parties report that most Work Programme participants do not require sanctioning, which may reflect the effectiveness of the 'threat' implicit in the sanctions regime, or a relatively high degree of compliance among Work Programme participants.

18.2   Personalisation

The evidence in this report is consistent with the view that the Work Programme is at least partly achieving its objective of a personalised service. Evidence from providers and participants suggests, however, that this personalisation is largely procedural in nature, with an emphasis on building up a personal and mutually respectful relationship between adviser and participant, and making use of tools such as assessment and action planning, which contain a degree of individualisation in their implementation. The evidence is much weaker, however, when it comes to extending this into substantive personalisation, under which individual participants might experience substantially different and individualised, perhaps specialised, services highly tailored to their needs and designed to address their personal barriers to work. There is some evidence, however, that providers' ability to make use of the latter types of approach within the programme is somewhat cost-constrained.

18.3   What works: work first, human capital and other interventions

It is also clear from the evidence that 'work first' type approaches predominate (with support heavily skewed towards immediate jobsearch, and related activities: CV preparation, job applications, interview training, etc.). This is unsurprising, given the strong tradition of these approaches in recent welfare-to-work measures in the UK, and the large volume of UK and international evidence[66] of the effectiveness (and cost-effectiveness) of these approaches for large numbers of participants.

Nevertheless, it is notable that other approaches are markedly less common in the evidence considered here, including human capital-based approaches (with relatively few providers referring participants to training provision) and approaches to address the full range of other barriers to work which participants, particularly the hardest-to-help, may exhibit (with relatively few providers and participants reporting referrals to specialist provision for these purposes).

Again there is some evidence that resource constraints play a role here, and in so far as referral to other providers for non-work first-type provision does take place, it is notable that much of it is to providers offering these services at no cost to the referring provider. While providers take a positive view of their performance in assessing barriers and preparing action plans, and stress that these are a critical dimension of 'what works', they raise concerns about their own ability either to refer harder-to-help participants to specialist support to address barriers, or to adequately address them in-house. While participants do not use the same language, many recognise that they face constraints in finding and entering work. There is a suggestion in some of their interviews that providers' support has focused on getting them initially into (any) work and encouraging them to subsequently consider funding their own further training or the support they need.

These findings are, however, small scale and qualitative, and it will be necessary to wait for further quantitative evidence on these topics as the Work Programme beds in, to assess whether and to what extent specialist support required to address skill gaps or a variety of barriers to work is being under-provided, and if so, how far the reason for this is cost.

Finally, within the broad work first approach, the perspective of providers is that good and effective links between employers and providers are a critical determinant of successful outcomes. However, there is some evidence from providers that, in many, cases there is some way to go in developing these relationships.

18.4   Aspiration and motivation

Analysis of the views and responses of participants overwhelmingly confirms that the majority contacted for this research want to work. That said, it is also clear that long spells of unemployment, and repeated knock-backs in a tough labour market environment, inevitably feed through to weaken individuals' motivation and confidence. This suggests strongly that efforts by providers to rebuild confidence and motivation are worthwhile, and there is feedback from participants in this wave of interviews to suggest that this is happening, with some positive effects on the individuals concerned. Despite initial cynicism about whether the Work Programme will make any difference to them, if motivation is enhanced in this way by the intervention, it is likely that participants will become more positive over time about the support available.

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[66]   For example, Card, Kluve and Weber (2010) and De Koning (2005).

Running counter to this are the reports from a number of Work Programme providers in this research that they often struggle to change attitudes among unmotivated people, particularly as they encounter them at a relatively late stage in their unemployment spell. Alongside this is a view among some Jobcentre Plus staff that they are happy to pass this group on to providers, in order that they can focus on more motivated, easier-to-help individuals.

18.5   Creaming and parking

Definitive conclusions on this and other topics will await fuller information from the quantitative strands of the evaluation. However, the available evidence to date suggests that providers are engaging in creaming and parking, despite the differential payment regime. Providers routinely classify participants according to their assessed distance from work, and provide more intensive support (at least as measured by the frequency of contact with advisers, for example) to those who are the most 'job-ready'. Those assessed as hardest-to-help are in many cases left with infrequent routine contact with advisers, and often with little or no likelihood of referral to specialist (and possibly costly) support, which might help address their specific barriers to work. Alongside this, it is worth noting that some providers at least, took the view (perhaps surprisingly, given the design and remit of the Work Programme) that it was inappropriate for the hardest-to-help to be referred to their services at all.

While suggestions of creaming and parking came through quite strongly in this preliminary stage of research, it is worth adding some caveats to this interpretation: First, it is unclear how far this is driven less by some explicit strategy and more by a 'needs must' response to the unexpectedly high number of referrals received by many providers in the more job-ready categories (e.g. the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) payment groups). Second, there is a possibility that 'less does not mean worse' and that some of the harder-to-help, despite the less frequent contact with advisers, were, nevertheless, receiving more substantial support (with longer meetings with advisers, for example) on those occasions when they did have contact with providers.

18.6   Sustainability of employment

At this early stage of the Work Programme and our research, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the extent to which the programme is helping participants to achieve sustainable employment. It is also not yet possible to identify the factors and approaches that might be most effective in contributing to sustainability.

It is interesting to note, however, that the views of providers and participants on this question emphasise the importance of a good initial match between the participant and the job; both sides see it as crucial that aspirations and expectations are closely aligned with work. Having said this, it is also notable that the evidence from the participant sample suggested that, at least among this group, there was some movement into temporary and agency work, and zero-hours contracts, which raises some questions about how far sustainable work matching participant aspirations was, in fact, a priority for providers. It is of course possible, that providers take the view that they are aiming at sustainability within employment, rather than sustainability in a single job, in which case the two perspectives are not inconsistent. The extent to which sustainability is secured through multiple jobs is an issue that can be monitored in subsequent strands of the evaluation (e.g. the quantitative survey with participants, and the longitudinal participant interviews).

Much less emphasis was given to the provision of in-work support as a means to secure sustained employment, although, again, this may reflect the early stage of programme implementation at which the research was conducted, with providers focusing, for the most part, on identifying suitable jobs and getting participants into them. It is possible that the emphasis on 'after-care' will grow over time as more of their caseloads move into work. The extent to which this occurs can be examined in subsequent stages of the evaluation.

18.7 Communication between Jobcentre Plus and providers

The UK has moved over time in its welfare-to-work regime from a monolithic approach in which most or all provision was led and delivered by the public employment service (Jobcentre Plus in its latest incarnation), to a mixed model, with a greater involvement of private and voluntary sector providers. The current approach underlying the Work Programme, is by far the most organisationally complex to date. Provision is initially led (for most unemployed people) by the public employment service, but after a year (earlier in some cases) provision for the longer-term unemployed is handed over to Work Programme providers, in a structure which can itself be quite complex (with prime providers, working with supply chains which may consist of several tiers of subcontract providers).

It is immediately obvious that the effective functioning of such a complex, multi-tiered system, under which the individual claimant or Work Programme participant, could move between a significant number of provider organisations during the different phases of their unemployment spell, will be crucially dependent on the quality of communication between the different organisations and agencies involved. Other forthcoming aspects of the evaluation, particularly the commissioning strand, will examine in some detail the communication between the different Work Programme providers within the supply chains. However, a persistent theme in much of the initial programme research reported here is that poor or inadequate communication (in both directions) between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers is potentially a major bottleneck which appears already to be generating problems in performance. In particular, it affects the effectiveness of the sanctions process (as noted in Chapter 11), and it impairs the ability of Work Programme providers to plan their resources and caseloads; better knowledge in advance of how many and what types of referrals they would receive would clearly help overcome some of these difficulties.

18.8 Concluding remarks and next steps

This report has presented early and preliminary findings from the first year of the Work Programme's implementation. The evaluation continues over the next two years and the qualitative research drawn together here will be supported and reinforced by surveys of participants and providers, further interviews with Jobcentre Plus, and qualitative research tracking a panel of participants. In combination, these elements will provide the basis for a fuller, more robust assessment of the programme's operation.

The current research, however, provides a valuable 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. Future stages will further explore the nature of delivery and what it is participants experience – how their barriers are addressed and what personalisation means to them in practice;

- there are also indications in this early research of deficiencies in communication and information flow (in both directions) between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers. Future stages will look in more detail at how communication and collaboration develops and the impact of this on the preparation of claimants ahead of joining the programme, and on factors such as the effectiveness of the sanctioning process;

- the initial qualitative research suggests that many providers are prioritising more 'job-ready' participants for support. Future stages will look more systematically at the quality and intensity of support available to different groups of participants, in order to understand the prevalence and impact of any creaming and parking behaviour by providers.
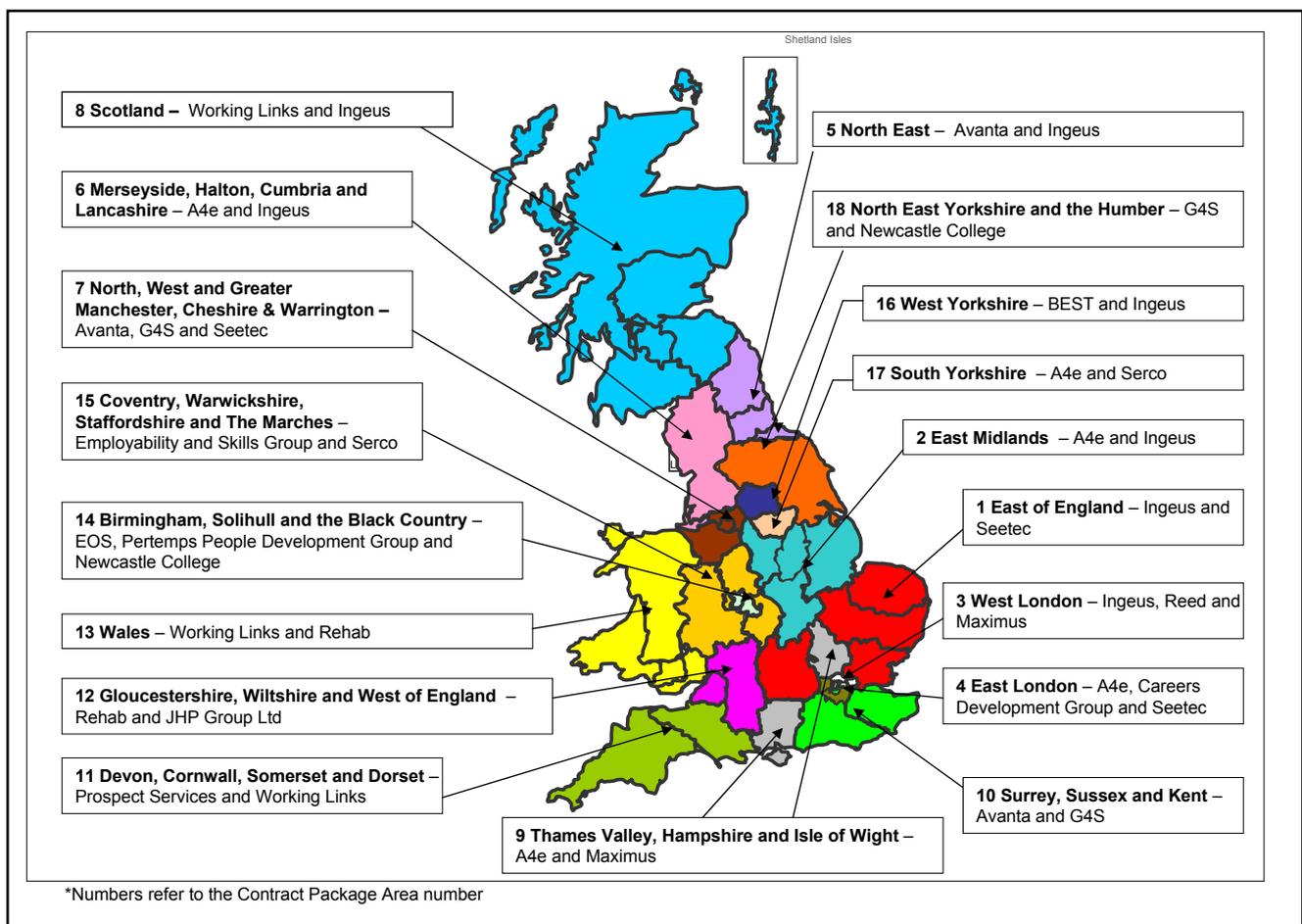
The next report in the evaluation series will focus on design and impact of the approach to commissioning the programme adopted by DWP, and will be published in early 2013.

Appendix A
List and map of all CPAs and providers

http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/cpa-preferred-bidders.pdf

Figure A.1   Work Programme – Contract Package Area and prime provider

8 Scotland – Working Links and Ingeus

6 Merseyside, Halton, Cumbria and Lancashire – A4e and Ingeus

7 North, West and Greater Manchester, Cheshire & Warrington – Avanta, G4S and Seetec

15 Coventry, Warwickshire, Staffordshire and The Marches – Employability and Skills Group and Serco

14 Birmingham, Solihull and the Black Country – EOS, Pertemps People Development Group and Newcastle College

13 Wales – Working Links and Rehab

12 Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and West of England – Rehab and JHP Group Ltd

11 Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset – Prospect Services and Working Links

9 Thames Valley, Hampshire and Isle of Wight – A4e and Maximus

Shetland Isles

5 North East – Avanta and Ingeus

18 North East Yorkshire and the Humber – G4S and Newcastle College

16 West Yorkshire – BEST and Ingeus

17 South Yorkshire – A4e and Serco

2 East Midlands – A4e and Ingeus

1 East of England – Ingeus and Seetec

3 West London – Ingeus, Reed and Maximus

4 East London – A4e, Careers Development Group and Seetec

10 Surrey, Sussex and Kent – Avanta and G4S

*Numbers refer to the Contract Package Area number

Appendix B
Voluntary payment groups in the Work Programme

Table A.1 briefly sets out the voluntary and mandatory Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) payment groups. More detailed information on all payment groups can be found here: http://www. dwp.gov.uk/docs/wp-pg-chapter-2.pdf

Table B.1   ESA payment groups

Work Programme referral group	Can be Mandated to information session using WRA?	Participation once on the Work Programme
ESA (IR) WRAG with 12-month+ prognosis	Yes – subject to WRA considerations	Mandatory
ESA (c) WRAG	Yes – subject to WRA considerations	Mandatory
ESA (IR) WRAG (with youngest child under 5 **or** full-time carer) with 3- or 6-month prognosis	No – not subject to WRA. But can be encouraged to attend	Voluntary
ESA (IR) Ex-IB WRAG (with youngest child under 5 **or** full-time carer) with 3- or 6-month prognosis	No – not subject to WRA. But can be encouraged to attend	Voluntary
ESA (IR) WRAG (with youngest child under 5 **or** full-time carer) with 12 Month +	No – not subject to WRA. But can be encouraged to attend	Voluntary
ESA (c) WRAG (with youngest child under 5 **or** full-time carer)	No – not subject to WRA. But can be encouraged to attend	Voluntary
ESA (IR) support group	No – not subject to WRA. But can be encouraged to attend	Voluntary
ESA (IR) Ex-IB support group	No – not subject to WRA. But can be encouraged to attend	Voluntary
ESA (c) support group	No – not subject to WRA. But can be encouraged to attend	Voluntary
ESA (c) Ex-IB support group	No – not subject to WRA. But can be encouraged to attend	Voluntary
ESA credit only	No – not subject to WRA. But can be encouraged to attend	Voluntary

Appendix C
Minimum service delivery standards

An overview of the agreed minimum service delivery standards for each of the Work Programme prime providers can be found via this link:

http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/provider-minimum-service-delivery.pdf

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This report presents qualitative research findings from the first phase of an evaluation of the Work Programme, which was introduced across England, Scotland and Wales in June 2011.

The fieldwork, conducted between February and June 2012, included qualitative in-depth interviews with participants, Jobcentre Plus and provider staff and observations of provider-participant meetings. The qualitative evaluation focuses on 12 local authority areas across 6 contract package areas involving 11 different prime Work Programme providers and their subcontractors.

This is the first in a series of evaluation reports aiming to understand experiences of the Work Programme from the point of view of claimants, Jobcentre Plus staff and provider staff, and to establish the extent to which the Work Programme leads to additional employment outcomes. This research is part of a comprehensive evaluation of the Work Programme, commissioned in 2011 to provide an independent assessment of delivery and claimants' experiences and outcomes. The evaluation also focuses on how the Department's commissioning approach impacts on the provider market and influences service delivery and claimant outcomes.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please email:
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