

Support for Newly Unemployed and Six Month Offer evaluations: A report on qualitative research findings

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This report presents qualitative process study findings on Support for Newly Unemployed (SNU) and the Six Month Offer (6MO), extra help to claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) during the economic recession. Some evidence was gathered in Jobcentre Plus offices throughout the first year of implementation. Separate studies were undertaken with service providers and brokers, employers and customers participating in SNU and 6MO support.

The additional support under SNU and 6MO is delivered jointly by Jobcentre Plus and specialist partner agencies. Both support packages are available to customers at the adviser's discretion, and take-up by the customer is voluntary.

SNU provides supplementary job preparation and job search services from day one of a JSA claim. The package of support is designed for people who have recently become unemployed and have little or no experience of modern job search techniques. Support delivered by Jobcentre Plus can either take the form of a group session or one-to-one job search coaching. Separate contracted providers supply job search support for non-professionals and professional/executive customers.

Eligibility for the 6MO package of support generally starts from 26 weeks of a claim and continues to 52 weeks. There are four voluntary strands to the 6MO, which are supplemented by extra advisory support. A recruitment subsidy to the value of £1,000 is paid to employers in exchange for hiring an applicant who has been claiming JSA continuously for six months. Work Focused Training offers college-based courses to customers who would benefit from upskilling or reskilling to expand their

employment opportunities. Volunteer placements arranged through third sector brokers can provide work-related experience. Finally, self-employment support is available from specialist providers and a Self-Employment Credit offers financial assistance for those customers who become self-employed.

Findings

General implementation findings

Generally staff found the period between the January 2009 announcement and the April 2009 roll out of the SNU and 6MO initiatives to be a challenging timescale to meet. The tight schedule contributed to many of the issues related to difficulties over the first few months of roll out, e.g. evolving systems and limited resources (time, staffing and space). These were exacerbated by the high volumes of JSA customers who were seeking work during an economic recession. Early implementation problems abated and were mostly resolved by the end of 2009, as office premises were adapted and staff became familiar with the new services, Knight *et al.* (2010). Staff welcomed the introduction of the additional voluntary services available to customers and felt they expanded the opportunities available to jobseekers during a weak labour market economy.

Support for Newly Unemployed

SNU services were introduced at different rates across the country and, at the end of the first year of implementation, variations remained at district and office level in what was being offered to

newly unemployed customers. In some locations, Jobcentre Plus-delivered SNU group and one-to-one sessions were restricted or were not being offered at all. The introduction of the Support Contract and the Provider Referral and Payment (PRaP) system in December 2009 caused disruption in SNU support for non-professionals, due to technical problems with the referral system and some confusion among advisers about the new modular format of support. In contrast, support for professionals/executives was being offered in all the study offices. Advisers tended to base their decision for an SNU referral on the information collected during the New Jobseeker Interview and generally felt confident about matching customers to appropriate services, despite the lack of guidance on how to do so. Many offices encouraged staff to remind customers about the SNU services later in a claim, in the belief that newly unemployed customers were sometimes unreceptive to extra help.

Jobcentre Plus-delivered SNU services

SNU group sessions tended to follow a national script. Observations revealed that the quality of presentations was uneven but, overall, had improved over the fieldwork period. Separate sessions tended to be run for different age groups and there was wide variation between offices in the frequency of the sessions. However, attendance rates were disappointing and staff in some offices felt that the content was too basic for most customers. A principal finding from the research suggests that SNU one-to-one sessions served different purposes across the offices. In some offices they were marketed as a 'short job-search coaching session' as per the policy intent. But in other offices the sessions were considered useful for providing additional advisory time, as an extension of the New Jobseeker Interview or to arrange a referral. In addition, one-to-one sessions were offered primarily to customers who had attended an SNU group session.

Most customers understood that the support was voluntary and that their benefits would not be affected if they did not take it up. Customers who had attended an SNU group session reported that they most appreciated the information that was

given about Jobcentre Plus services, but the job search advice was said by some to be too simplistic.

Contracted SNU services

Among the contracted SNU services, reports were generally more positive about the support for professionals/executives compared to the support for non-professionals. Jobcentre Plus staff and customers expressed mixed views about SNU support for non-professionals in the first months of its operation, while it was being delivered by Programme Centre providers. This varied by the accessibility of the provider or the perceived quality of a local provider. Customers in the study who had attended one of these sessions were mainly positive about the standard of support they received but criticised the content of the sessions as being too basic. The evaluation cannot comment on the SNU services for non-professionals delivered through the new Support Contract as much of the evidence predates its roll out in December 2009.

SNU support for professionals/executives was popular among staff and customers. Take up was reported to be far higher than anticipated during the first year. Customers described the presenters and advisers as knowledgeable and professional, and some indicated that the support they received had a direct influence on their job search technique. Jobcentre Plus staff tended to work with a select group of providers as a way of managing the vast array of local and national suppliers. Questions were raised about the usefulness of the supplier database and the direct marketing strategies of the providers. There was also evidence to suggest that the services may not have been targeted appropriately as customers from a range of occupational backgrounds and work histories were referred for the support. Providers were enthusiastic about their products, and the degree to which they were able to attract Jobcentre Plus customers largely related to the level of marketing they had carried out.

The Six Month Offer

Throughout the first year of implementation, systemic factors had restricted the availability of

the full range of 6MO options in some areas of Great Britain. Work-focused training and volunteering had been particularly affected. The introduction of the options to customers was also influenced by the degree of experience an adviser had with the advisory process, their familiarity with providers and knowledge of provision, as well as adviser personal preferences and strategies.

Procedures mainly reflected the policy design. The general practice was for all six-month customers to receive information about the recruitment subsidy, while the remaining options were offered at the adviser's discretion. In areas where there were appropriate courses available, work-focused training was the next popular offer among advisers. Volunteering tended to be associated with customers who were more proactive in community activities, or it was considered appropriate for people who needed work experience and upskilling. Finally, advisers tended to selectively offer self-employment to customers with saleable skills and the confidence to market them.

Recruitment subsidy

The widespread view among all those involved with the recruitment subsidy was that it was a valuable initiative. Jobcentre Plus staff were very positive about the subsidy overall but had mixed views about its success in getting people back to work. Staff reported low interest among certain groups of customers stating that professionals and higher earners did not view the voucher to be worthwhile. Customer views were largely favourable. They had promoted the subsidy to varying degrees during the job search, reflecting their level of comfort with marketing their skills alongside a cash incentive.

Overall, employers were attracted by the extra financial support; they found the value of subsidy worthwhile and the payments efficiently administered. Employers in smaller businesses were the most enthusiastic and used the extra funding primarily to cover wages and the start-up costs of recruitment. Most employers stated they were not influenced by the subsidy when hiring staff; they stressed the importance of choosing the best

person for the job. There was some evidence to suggest the subsidy played a role in job sustainability among small businesses that had used the money to increase working hours or to extend the lengths and types of contracts. Several employers also recognised that the subsidy could 'tip the balance' when choosing between two equally qualified candidates and some customers in the sample believed the subsidy had played an important role in their hiring decision.

Work focused training

Over a protracted implementation period, work focused training was operational in most of the study districts by the time of the March 2010 fieldwork. Slower to be introduced in Wales, funding for the option was more recently released by the Welsh Government. In Scotland, existing provision has been re-branded as work focused training and is being offered from 13 weeks of a claim, or earlier in some special cases.

Despite the implementation challenges, work focused training was a popular option among staff and customers. Training customers reported mixed reviews based on their experience. Those who found the training to be helpful intended to put it to use: noting it on a CV, applying for related jobs or using the training to pursue self-employment. Negative feedback related to course start delays and the perception that course content was too basic for higher-skilled individuals. As a consequence, some advisers had resorted to referring customers to training offered by non-contracted local providers and local authority-led services.

In study districts where providers were offering a range of training options, Jobcentre Plus staff generally felt the option was useful for a large part of the caseload and noted that most customers were receptive to the offer. The location of learning providers, particularly in rural areas, and transport costs were cited as key barriers to accessing training.

Volunteering

Overall, Jobcentre Plus staff and brokers felt that, after initial teething problems, the provision and

processes of the volunteering option had bedded in. Jobcentre Plus staff were generally positive about the benefits of volunteering and considered the option as an excellent tool to help customers improve their employability, particularly for those who lacked recent work experience. The volunteering experiences of customers in the study varied greatly, with some indicating gains in self-confidence and skills, while others reported few tangible benefits from the experience. Some customers reported feeling pressured or compelled into volunteering under the threat of losing their benefits, counter to policy. People with substantial barriers to work and those from a professional background were less satisfied with their placements, citing that their needs or interests were not catered for. These experiences reflected negatively in their views about the usefulness of the 6MO option for enhancing their employability.

The study revealed a mismatch of understanding between the volunteering brokers and Jobcentre Plus advisers about the purpose and scope of volunteering. Customers whom brokers regarded as unsuitable for volunteering (those with low or no skills, those with multiple barriers to work, and those lacking motivation) were viewed by Jobcentre Plus staff as a prime target group for the volunteering

option. A concern among broker organisations was the resource invested in setting up placements for inappropriate referrals.

Self-employment support

The nature of self-employment support varied by prime contractors in England, Scotland and Wales and customer experiences reflected the diversity of services that tailored for different needs. The policy intent was mostly confirmed by the study although a key issue identified by providers and customers was the limited awareness among Jobcentre Plus advisers about the provider services. As a consequence, providers viewed a substantial proportion of the 6MO client referrals as inappropriate.

Self-Employment Credit was regarded by customers, providers and Jobcentre Plus staff as a beneficial support during the transition from JSA to self employment, particularly given that it can take some time to establish a business and become profitable. Customers did not view the extra money as an incentive to become self-employed, but some said it helped them to remain in work (and off benefit) when business was slow.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 838 6. Research Report 691. October 2010).

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

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