

Research report

The Youth Contract: Findings from research with Jobcentre Plus staff in five case study districts

by Lizzie Jordan and Andrew Thomas

Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations and glossary of terms

BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CRB	Criminal Records Bureau
CSOM	Customer Service Operations Manager
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DfE	Department for Education
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
Flexible Support Fund (FSF)	Jobcentre Plus funding devolved to the district level, and used to work with partner organisations to support customers move closer to the jobs market or directly into jobs.
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
MP	Member of Parliament
NCS	National Careers Service
NEET	Not in employment, education or training
Sector-based work academy (sbwa)	Sbwa placements last up to six weeks and include pre-employment training, a sector-based work experience placement with an employer and a guaranteed interview for a job (including an apprenticeship) or other support to help participants through the employer's application process.
Work experience	Placements last up to eight week. Employers are expected to offer some form of mentoring or training and provide a reference at the end of the placement;
Wage Incentives	Over three years from April 2012, the Youth Contract will offer wage incentive payments of up to £2,275 to employers when they recruit an 18 to 24-year-old from the Work Programme. Availability was expanded in July 2012 to include 18 to 24-year-olds in Jobcentre Plus 'youth unemployment hotspots' with claim durations of six months or longer. This eligibility was extended to all Jobcentre Plus offices from 17 December 2012. 160,000 wage incentives have been funded over this three-year period.

Work Programme

The Work Programme is a major payment-for-results welfare-to-work programme that was launched throughout Great Britain in June 2011. The Work Programme is being delivered by a range of private, public and voluntary sector organisations which are supporting benefit claimants who are at risk of becoming long-term unemployed to find work.

Youth Contract

The Youth Contract was implemented from April 2012, to provide a range of help for unemployed young people to better prepare them for work, and to offer greater opportunities to find and take up sustained employment.

Summary

Background

The Youth Contract, which was launched in April 2012, provides support for unemployed young people between the ages of 18 and 24. Under the Youth Contract, young people have increased support from Jobcentre Plus and meet regularly with an adviser. There is additional funding for up to 250,000 work experience placements and sector-based work academies (sbwas), thereby extending the Get Britain Working measures, which are a part of the Jobcentre Plus Offer. Under the Youth Contract, employers can also apply for a wage incentive of up to £2,275 when they recruit a young person who has been claiming for over six months¹. This report presents the findings from research with Jobcentre Plus staff within five case study districts and examines the implementation and delivery of the Youth Contract, with a focus on the elements described above.

Implementation of the Youth Contract

The Youth Contract, like the Jobcentre Plus Offer, reflects a shift from mandated processes determined at a national level, to greater flexibility at a local level. Jobcentre Plus staff largely acknowledged that the Youth Contract was inherently flexible. Only weekly contact with claimants was mandated under the Youth Contract, although the form this took was initially at the adviser's discretion. Advisers could adopt a light touch approach, contacting claimants who were able to search for work independently by email or text message, thereby freeing up time to meet face-to-face with claimants who required more support.

Larger offices tended to create dedicated Youth Contract teams that were assigned smaller caseloads. These advisers developed a better knowledge of the provision for that age group and could share this experience with one another. However, it was not always practical in smaller offices (between five and ten advisers) as specialist teams would be too small to meet demand and/or cover sickness. Some staff also questioned whether it was fair to adopt separate youth and 25+ teams (for claimants 25 years and older). This was because the standard of service may not be as high for 25+ claimants and advisers may be less able to meet off-flow targets, although this issue was not raised in offices which had adopted the two-team approach.

In most districts, managerial staff involved staff at all levels when deciding how to implement the Youth Contract. Whilst this bottom-up approach ensured staff buy-in and that the design of the Youth Contract would be achievable, it also meant that there was a delay in delivering practical information to advisers. As a result, some advisers said they felt ill-prepared when the Youth Contract launched.

¹ At the time of fieldwork, the wage incentive was being administrated primarily by Work Programme providers for claimants on the Work Programme. Only Jobcentre Plus offices which serviced hotspot areas (areas with high unemployment) were dealing with the wage incentive and had only been doing so for three months. Since this research was carried out, the wage incentive has been rolled out to all Jobcentre Plus districts (since 17 December 2012).

Specialist adviser roles were created (including digital champions, sbwa advisers and work experience advisers) to support adviser teams. Whilst larger offices created a range of roles within a dedicated Youth Contract team, in a small office with mixed caseloads, only one adviser was responsible for updating the team on all elements of the Youth Contract. Specialist advisers ensured that the rest of the team were well informed about the provision available for young people, although, small offices may lack the resources to create these roles.

Feedback between employer engagement staff and advisers ensured that placements could be targeted to claimant needs. Larger offices had trialled embedding employer engagement staff in dedicated Youth Contract teams. However, it was too early at the time of this research for staff to comment on how successful this had been.

Additional adviser support

Under the Youth Contract, claimants in the five case study districts were assigned a named adviser. Jobcentre Plus staff discussed a range of associated benefits including: increased confidence amongst claimants; openness about personal issues, such as substance abuse, which could act as a barrier to employment; and more appropriate referrals to training and support. Advisers developed a working relationship with claimants and witnessed their progression and ultimate success; staff said this improved morale and commitment to this age group.

When the Youth Contract was first launched, advisers in some Youth Contract teams were not immediately able to manage their diaries effectively. Advisers in busier offices had limited experience of managing their own diaries, having been required to conduct a set number of interviews per day. To address this, managerial staff suggested that training in time management would help some advisers to maximise the amount of contact time they had with claimants.

After a claimant has received Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) for five months, it becomes mandatory for weekly contact to be conducted face-to-face. There was little support for this amongst Jobcentre Plus staff as they believed that advisers were best placed to decide on the appropriate level of contact with individual claimants. However, advisers in most cases were already exceeding this requirement, seeing high need claimants face-to-face on a more regular basis and at an earlier stage in their claim. In offices struggling to deliver weekly contact, there was a preference for concentrating on claimants at an earlier stage in their claim because it was believed that identifying needs early could help claimants be referred to the full range of appropriate support options.

Group information sessions are an optional element of the Youth Contract. Advisers can refer claimants to a group information session in lieu of weekly contact. They were used across the case study districts to deliver generic information, thereby freeing up more space in advisers diaries.

One office mandated claimants to attend three group information sessions in the first few weeks of a new JSA claim. There was little support for mandatory sessions for all claimants amongst advisers because advisers felt that attending group information sessions first could prevent claimants from accessing services that would enable them to enter work, such as vocational training or work experience, until they had completed the set number of group information sessions.

Experience of using the National Careers Service was mixed. Advice was considered generic or better suited to claimants seeking professional employment or further education. However, advisers did refer claimants if there were tangible benefits, such as links to training opportunities.

Sector-based work academies

There are three stages of an sbwa placement for claimants. Placements last up to six weeks and include pre-employment training, a sector-based work experience placement with an employer and a guaranteed interview for a job (including an apprenticeship) or other support to help participants through the employer's application process.

Setting up an sbwa was time-consuming for the case study districts and, therefore, was only considered worthwhile if there was a ratio of one vacancy to every two claimants taking part (usually between 15 and 20 claimants). As a result, only large employers were approached, which restricted both the areas where sbwas were appropriate and the types of sectors involved, usually retail, customer service and hospitality.

There was strong support for sbwas, in towns and cities where employer engagement advisers were able to engage with large employers with multiple vacancies. However, Jobcentre Plus staff, in offices servicing small towns, said there were few large employers and very few vacancies in the local area. Therefore, it was difficult to find enough vacancies for an sbwa to be considered worthwhile.

There was, nonetheless, considerable demand for sbwas, because they provided both training and work experience and there was usually a job opportunity at the end. However, advisers said that claimants were disappointed by the lack of choice and demand often outstripped supply.

Sbwas were presented to employers as an alternative recruitment process, therefore, employers expected claimants to be ready for the workplace. As a result, sbwas were not appropriate for all claimants. Advisers would only refer claimants who were confident and motivated, to avoid jeopardising relationships with employers and demoralising claimants who may not perform well in the workplace and interview environment.

The three stage approach was not viable for all employers, particularly those recruiting within a shorter time-frame. Employer engagement staff, therefore, used sbwas flexibly, reducing the period of work experience or training, or removing one of these elements altogether to suit employers' needs. However, not all offices understood this was possible and consequently, these offices experienced difficulties finding employers willing to participate.

The social care industry was a large employer in all the Jobcentre Plus case study districts and were said to struggle to find appropriate staff. Despite the clear need for training and experience in social care, there was limited provision for sbwas in the care industry. There were two main barriers:

- it was difficult to engage employers as they tended to use specialist recruitment agencies; and
- claimants required a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. Employers were not willing to pay for these and advisers were unsure whether they could use the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) to pay for them².

² Although not legally required to do so, employers have primary responsibility for paying for the Disclosure and Barring Service and Protecting Vulnerable Groups checks. However where this is not possible the use of the FSF for the re-imbursment of these checks is subject to guidance, which sets out a 'framework' that Jobcentre Plus must follow without exception, with the exceptional circumstances which re-imbursment can be made being strictly controlled within the Department.

Work experience

Work experience was considered suitable for claimants who were not yet workplace ready. Unlike sbwas, employers were aware that claimants required additional supervision. Work experience enabled claimants to try out a sector and get into a working routine. Claimants gained experience and a reference to enhance their Curriculum Vitae (CV) and there was usually an application process which provided an insight into the real-world experience of recruitment. There were also several examples advisers cited of claimants being offered employment following a work experience placement.

However, there was concern amongst Jobcentre Plus staff that placements could occasionally be created ‘for the wrong reasons’, for example, to fill temporary resource needs. To address this, when approaching potential employers, employer engagement staff presented work experience as an opportunity to ‘give something back’ through training and mentoring, rather than as a cheap form of labour.

In some cases, claimants were not willing to engage in work experience; advisers thought there needed to be additional levers to encourage these claimants to participate in the labour market.

Wage incentive

Generally, the wage incentive was only available to claimants who had been recruited through the Work Programme and, at the time this research was conducted, to claimants being supported through Jobcentre Plus living in ‘hotspot areas’ (geographical areas with particular problems with high youth unemployment) from six months of their claim. When discussing the wage incentive with employers, employer engagement staff said it was difficult to explain why some claimants were eligible and others were not without highlighting that eligible claimants had been unemployed for a long time. These staff were concerned that explaining these conditions may have an adverse effect, by discouraging employers from recruiting these longer-term young unemployed people, though the policy aim is to incentivise the employment of those who might be overlooked because of a lack of experience or skills. Employer engagement staff also believed that employers were more concerned with finding the right candidate and that wage incentive had little impact on this.³

Conclusions

In offices that created dedicated Youth Contract teams, advisers were able to spend more time with claimants and spend more time identifying appropriate support provision. Staff believed that this was having a positive impact on off-flow, although it was too early to be definitive. Jobcentre Plus staff in these offices also recognised more benefits of the Youth Contract than staff working in offices that were unable to split their advisers in this way.

In large towns and cities, there is a wide variety of support options available for young people, in comparison to smaller towns and rural areas. However, the range of options available can make it difficult and time consuming for advisers to identify appropriate support options, particularly where advisers felt that local databases were out of date and with poor search functions.

³ A full report on early findings on the wage incentive, from the Youth Contract evaluation, is available here: http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_828.asp

Work experience opportunities were considered easier to set up than sbwas, particularly in areas with few large employers. In addition, work experience was thought to have a positive impact on off-flow targets – either by directly leading to a job or giving claimants the experience they needed to find employment in that sector. As a consequence, some offices focused on work experience at the expense of sbwas.

At the time of the research, there was limited support for the wage incentive because employer engagement staff thought that the initiative was difficult to explain. However, the offices which took part in this research had only been offering the incentive for three months and it was only available in 20 hotspot areas around the UK. Further research is required to determine whether employer engagement staff are implementing the wage incentive more successfully since it has had time to bed in and since the scheme has been extended to all 18 to 24-year-olds from six months of their claim.⁴

Recommendations

Dedicated 18 to 24-year-team should be encouraged where possible and, where this is not, offices should share best practice for managing mixed caseloads.

Jobcentre staff should be reassured that flexibility is possible when setting up sbwas in order to engage with employers who are put off by the three stage approach.

There were certain barriers to employment that advisers were unable to address via the Youth Contract, including paying for CRB checks, certain training courses or qualifications and licences required in certain industries. There was a lack of consistency across offices in how the FSF was being used and consequently, challenges that advisers faced in one office were being addressed in another through the use of the FSF. Therefore, there needs to be greater clarity about when and how the FSF can be used within districts

⁴ Further research on wage incentives will be carried out as part of the evaluation of the Youth Contract.

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings from research with five case study Jobcentre Plus districts on the implementation and delivery of the Youth Contract, as part of a wider evaluation being carried out by TNS BMRB.

1.1 Background

The Youth Contract was launched in April 2012, to provide a range of help for unemployed 18 to 24-year-olds to better prepare them for work and to offer greater opportunities to find and take up sustained employment. It is a cross-Whitehall initiative involving the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Department for Education (DfE), as well as executive agencies. It builds on the support already available by providing additional flexible adviser support and extra provision for work experience and training for young people. This evaluation focuses on specific elements of the Youth Contract:

- **Additional Jobcentre Plus support** – involves contact with the Jobcentre on a weekly basis from day one of claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) and access to an adviser who can refer them to support services. All claimants can also be referred to a National Careers Centre Adviser if the adviser considers this appropriate;
- The Youth Contract has also provided funding for an additional 250,000 **work experience and sector-based work academy** (sbwa) places. These initiatives were already in place under the Government’s Get Britain Working initiative. The Youth Contract is building on these schemes to target extra support to young people.
 - **Work experience** – up to eight-week work experience placements. Employers are expected to offer some form of mentoring or training and provide a reference at the end of the placement;
 - **Sbwa** – set up with a local employer, claimants receive pre-employment training, a sector-based work experience placement with an employer and a guaranteed interview for a job (including an apprenticeship) or other support to help participants through the employer’s application process;
- **Wage incentive** – For young people recruited from the Work Programme and for those within youth unemployment ‘hotspot areas’ after six months of their claim, claimants become eligible for an incentive of £2,275, which is payable to their employer should they find sustained work. Employers can claim the incentive after 26 weeks, although small employers can claim a part payment after eight weeks. At the time of this research the wage incentive was largely handled by Work Programme providers, although in 20 designated hotspot areas, Jobcentre Plus offices were also issuing claims forms to employers. Therefore, in most Jobcentre Plus offices employers were referred to local Work Programme providers to deal with queries about the wage incentive. Since this research, however, the wage incentive has been rolled out to all 18 to 24-year-olds from six months of their claim and so all Jobcentre Plus offices will now have some involvement with the scheme⁵.

⁵ Since 17 December 2012, eligibility has been extended to all 18 to 24-year-old claimants from six months of their claim.

The Youth Contract builds on much of the support already available to young unemployed people, particularly through the Government's apprenticeships offer and the back-to-work support provided by Jobcentre Plus, the Get Britain Working measures and the Government flagship employment programme, the Work Programme. Jobcentre Plus District Managers and advisers have the flexibility to judge which interventions will help claimants at the most appropriate point in their job seeking journey, tailoring this to individual need. Additional adviser support⁶ must be provided to young people from day one of their claim and contact with claimants must be at least weekly. Advisers can choose between a variety of channels, including telephone, text message, email, group information sessions or weekly Jobsearch Reviews, to suit their claimant's needs and reduce the time they spend making contact with young people who require minimal support. From month five of a claim, weekly contact must be provided face-to-face, either through regular Jobsearch Review meetings or Intensive Jobsearch Interventions.

The critical success factors for the policy are to:

- Increase benefit off flow rates for 18 to 24-year-olds and increase the proportion that are off-flows into employment;
- Reduce the number of 16 to 24-year-old NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training – by helping more people into employment, education or training);
- Decrease average time on benefit (getting claimants into work sooner); and
- Increase average time in employment (promoting sustained jobs).

1.2 Youth Contract evaluation

DWP commissioned TNS BMRB to conduct an evaluation of the Youth Contract. The evaluation focuses specifically on the DWP delivered elements of the Youth Contract policy not subject to existing evaluation, specifically: the wage incentive; work experience, including sbwas; and additional Jobcentre Plus delivered support. The aim of the evaluation is to explore the delivery, experience and outcomes of the Youth Contract policy elements.

The research conducted by TNS BMRB will be complemented by impact assessments, carried out in-house by DWP, to measure the impact on benefit and employment outcomes of the elements making up the Youth Contract.

1.3 Research with Jobcentre Plus staff

This part of the evaluation focuses on how the Youth Contract has been implemented and delivered in Jobcentre Plus districts, including how offices have engaged with employers and the views of Jobcentre Plus staff on how successful the Youth Contract has been. A case study approach has been used.

⁶ Advisers can use their discretion to waive the offer of Additional Adviser Support for claimants who are actively moving closer to work, for example those who have a job offer, or who are actively participating in training, provision or work experience. These claimants must still attend fortnightly face-to-face Jobsearch Reviews.

The objectives of the case studies were to explore:

- How the Youth Contract is being implemented and delivered on the ground and the effectiveness of different elements of the Youth Contract:
 - Additional adviser support
 - Sector-based work academies
 - Work experience placements
 - Wage incentives
- Employer engagement with work experience, sbwas and the wage incentive.

1.4 Methodology and sample

Five case studies were conducted, comprising of **two Jobcentre Plus offices per district**. In each district, two group discussions were held with advisers and up to seven depth interviews with managerial staff. Following the case study visits an additional six telephone depth interviews were conducted with employer engagement staff in other locations around the UK. Fieldwork took place between 5 and 30 November 2012.

A named contact at each Jobcentre Plus office selected the most appropriate staff to participate in the research, although they were given an indication of the roles required. The table shows the sample for each location, followed by a description of each district:

	Case study 1	Case study 2	Case study 3	Case study 4	Case study 5
Advisers	2 mini-groups	2 mini-groups	2 mini-groups	2 mini-groups	2 mini-groups
Adviser Team Manager	2 depths	2 depth	1 depth	2 depths	3 depths
Office managers	1 depth	2 depth	2 depths	1 depths	2 depths
District Managers	1 depth	1 depth	1 depth	1 depth	1 depth
Employer Engagement Staff	3 depths	1 depth	1 depth	0 depth	2 depths
		6 tele-depths (in other locations)			
Third Party Partnership Managers	0 depths	1 depth	1 depth	1 depth	1 depth

Case study 1

A rural location with poor transport links throughout. Consequently, claimants had limited access to training opportunities and provision through partner organisations. Only one of the offices participating in the case study had created a dedicated Youth Contract adviser team, the other was too small to do so.

Case study 2

A large district covering a range of very different communities, including an affluent city centre, satellite towns with high unemployment and rural communities. The two offices which participated in the case study were very different. One was a large inner city office with good job opportunities, linked to one strong industry prevalent in the area, and access to a range of provision for young people. The second was a small office in a suburban town where youth unemployment was high. Whilst the large office had created a dedicated Youth Contract team, in the small office the advisers had mixed caseloads.

Case study 3

This district comprised a number of former industrial towns where unemployment had become very high. The district contained a hotspot area. Both offices were of a similar size, located in small town centres and had dedicated Youth Contract teams. One office was located close to a more affluent city and consequently claimants had access to a greater number of job and training opportunities both within the town itself and via a short commute.

Case study 4

Similar to Case study 3, this district contained a number of post- industrial towns with high unemployment and contained a hot spot area. There were also some more isolated rural towns within this district. One smaller office in this case study had continued to operate with mixed caseloads, whilst the second larger office had created a dedicated Youth Contract team.

Case Study 5

Two urban towns in the south of England. Both towns had a wide range of training options for young people. The towns had different levels of youth unemployment – one high, one lower. Both offices had adopted dedicated Youth Contract teams.

Depth interviews with managerial staff lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The group discussions with advisers lasted for 90 minutes. A topic guide was used during the discussions to provide structure and ensure that the key issues were discussed. The topic guide covered the following broad themes:

- Approach to implementing the wage incentive and any challenges.
- Views about different elements of the Youth Contract:
 - Additional adviser support.
 - Sector-based work academies.
 - Work experience.
 - Wage incentive.
- Views on the effectiveness of the Youth Contract.

Interviews and group discussions were recorded, transcribed and subjected to a rigorous content and thematic analysis.

2 Implementation of the Youth Contract

This section examines how the Youth Contract was implemented in the five Jobcentre Plus case study districts including: how managerial staff ensured that advisers were able to deliver the Youth Contract given the existing pressures on their time; how they developed a plan for delivering the Youth Contract in their area; and how staff were informed about the changes.

The Youth Contract builds on support already on offer by Jobcentre Plus, such as work experience, training and careers advice, although additional funding allows Jobcentre Plus offices to develop extra provision specifically for young people. Under the Youth Contract, very little is mandated, allowing advisers to pick and choose elements according to the needs of their claimants, and to utilise these alongside other provision available within their district (see Chapter 1 for an overview of the provision available through the Youth Contract).

Under the Youth Contract, there is a requirement for additional adviser support to be provided to young people on a weekly basis from day one of their claim, and this can be delivered through a variety of channels. This contact must be delivered face-to-face to claimants from month five of their claim, either through regular Jobsearch Review meetings or Intensive Jobsearch Interventions.

Prior to the launch of the Youth Contract, there was considerable variation between offices in terms of the regularity of contact with claimants, although none were in weekly contact, and advisers in large busy offices said they may not see an individual for up to two months (outside of regular Jobsearch Reviews). Therefore, the requirement for weekly contact posed a challenge across all five districts as adviser caseloads did not allow for this frequency. In order to deal with these challenges, many offices created dedicated Youth Contract teams. Of the ten offices which participated in this study, seven had chosen to create dedicated teams, although in each district, District and Office Managers were aware of smaller offices that had continued to operate with mixed caseloads. Larger offices tended to be selected for the case studies, as these had both the adviser capacity and office space to host discussion groups with advisers. This may be why few of the offices involved in this research operated with mixed caseloads, despite District Managers indicating that these practices were common in smaller offices with fewer than ten advisers.

There were a number of perceived benefits to creating dedicated Youth Contract teams. There was some distinction between the benefits recognised by managerial staff (at the district and office level) and advisers and their team managers. Amongst District Managers, creating dedicated teams ensured that advisers had manageable caseloads which allowed for weekly contact with 18 to 24-years-old claimants. They also believed that there was a risk that, in offices with mixed caseloads, contact with claimants aged 25 and over would suffer because advisers may devote more time to 18 to 24-year-olds in order to meet the requirement for weekly contact.

‘We needed to make sure we were actively supporting the 18–24 age group in a particular team, so in many of our larger sites, we went down the route of moving from a whole-age all customers group to an 18–24 and a 25 plus [team]’.

(District Manager, both mixed and dedicated Youth Contract teams)

‘Young people are case-loaded into groups. There was a danger of getting drawn into an over-emphasis on 18–24s. We hopefully quickly identified the risk of that and what we’ve tried to do is segment our customer base, so there are designated advisers looking after 18 to 24-year-olds and there are other advisers looking at 25 plus. We try progressively to look at programmes with a thematic approach, with different programmes for different age groups and levels of unemployment and stuff like that’.

(District Manager, both mixed and dedicated Youth Contract teams)

Where dedicated Youth Contract teams had been introduced, there was broad consensus amongst advisers and their managers that this had been a welcome innovation – both because advisers developed a better knowledge of the provision available to that age group and also because they could share their experience of the issues facing that age group.

‘There’s a lot more work we can do for our customers. I prefer working this way. There’s too much to know about if you’re dealing with 18–24 and 25 plus. This way we can concentrate on each group and give them more attention. [You] can’t know everything about everything, so [we] prefer specialising’.

(Adviser group, dedicated Youth Contract team)

‘[The] majority of advisers and adviser managers felt that in order to allow individual members of staff to focus fully and get their head round everything that was there and understand it all. It was easier to focus on one age group, rather than jump backwards and forwards and think twice about what they said to each customer, based on their age and that kind of thing’.

(CSOM, dedicated Youth Contract team)

However, not all offices decided to split their teams in this way, due to some practical barriers and concerns about fairness. There were real practical constraints which prevented this system from being introduced throughout districts. Firstly, logistical issues came into play, with the size of individual Jobcentres being a key factor. Therefore, while separate 18–24 and 25 plus teams could be formed in the larger Jobcentres, with large numbers of advisers, this could not be replicated in smaller Jobcentres, where the number of advisers was in single figures. In these it was more appropriate to allocate each adviser a mixed caseload.

‘From my offices where we don’t have advisers dedicated to certain age groups we have to be careful that we don’t have people specialising too much because if they’re off ill there’s no one that can take up their responsibilities.’

(Office Manager, mixed caseloads)

In offices with mixed caseloads, Office and Adviser Managers questioned whether it was fair to split advisers. They were concerned that this would disadvantage claimants aged 25 and over as it would be necessary for advisers to take on a higher number of claimants in order to reduce the caseloads for Youth Contract advisers. It was also considered unfair to staff who would have increased caseloads and may, therefore, be less able to meet their off-flow targets. However, these issues were not raised by advisers in offices with dedicated Youth Contract teams, although interviews were not carried out with advisers dealing with claimants aged 25 and over.

2.1 Informing staff about the Youth Contract

The Youth Contract was described by managerial staff as an ‘ethos’ rather than a set of requirements, which brought a greater focus on 18 to 2-year-old claimants both through additional funding and a greater emphasis on off-flow targets. District and Office Managers said that the information they received from Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) about the Youth Contract, prior to the launch, was fairly generic. There was little they were required to do or change, with the exception of mandatory weekly contact, which in itself is flexible, as advisers were able to use a range of channels.

This flexibility was considered vital to the success of the initiative as each district and office faced different challenges in terms of the labour market, claimant base and resourcing. Consequently, it was considered appropriate for districts and offices to develop their own strategy for taking the Youth Contract forward. District Managers said that in many cases offices had aimed to exceed the minimum requirements of the initiative, such as introducing weekly face-to-face contact at an earlier stage for claimants who required more support to become job ready. This was supported by managers, within larger offices, who said that meeting the minimum requirement for weekly contact was not particularly onerous once they had developed dedicated Youth Contract teams.

In one district, however, this flexibility was considered a drawback of the Youth Contract. This was perhaps because the Youth Contract was not believed to be well suited to this rural district and, therefore, there was little perceived value in developing a strategy for implementation. This district incorporated several isolated small towns, with very few employers in the area to provide work experience and poor access to training opportunities. As such, the additional funding for work experience and sector-based work academies (sbwas) was of limited value. There was a perception amongst advisers that implementing the Youth Contract required considerable support from customer-facing staff – described as ‘grassroots input’ – in order to develop a programme that was suitable in their area. This attitude was mirrored by managerial staff who were also concerned that there had been little consultation by the DWP at the district level before the Youth Contract was launched.

‘We were told this is the Youth Contract, this is your menu of options, and off you go’.

(CSOM, dedicated Youth Contract team)

Each district developed its own plan for delivering the Youth Contract and produced some practical guidance documents to inform advisers about how they would operate under the Youth Contract. These included a claimant journey describing the mandatory actions and timescales; summaries of the provision available via the Youth Contract; and information about funding opportunities. Across the districts managerial staff indicated that they had adopted a bottom-up approach when developing these materials, collecting suggestions from all levels of staff on how the Youth Contract should be implemented in order to suit the needs of claimants, whilst also being practical.

In one office, it was evident that the requirement for weekly contact was considered too prescriptive. In this district, work experience and sbwas were being implemented with little deviation from the guidance, suggesting that communications about the Youth Contract did not sufficiently emphasise the ways in which Jobcentre Plus districts could implement the initiative more flexibly.

‘If I had any influence over the process there would be some element of local design – because everywhere has got different challenges, and one solution designed centrally for everyone tends to be inflexible, and the real buzzword in government and DWP is flexibility of service – so people can tailor the service to suit the demands being placed on you.’

(District Manager)

There were a range of practical decisions to be made about how advisers would implement the Youth Contract. For example, deciding how frequently face-to-face contact should occur and how Group Information Sessions⁷ and digital channels could be used to reduce the pressure on advisers' diaries. Staff views were collected during management meetings, teleconferences with office managers and workshops with advisers. This provided an opportunity to consider what the needs of the claimant groups were, the size of the claimant base and what the labour market could offer in terms of work experience opportunities and sbwas.

'We've given them freedom, so there isn't a set plan [...] I felt it was important to get peoples enthusiasm and buy-in [...] even the minimum standard was built with the focus group, that was based on what people told us was good rather than any one of the senior team saying we want this, this and this.'

(District Manager)

'If you have to stick to the journey to the letter of the law [...] then it can [...] get in the way "cause you might be making referrals for referrals" sake.'

(Adviser, dedicated Youth Contract team)

Designing the approach from the bottom up within each district resulted in a delay in releasing guidance to advisers about how to deliver the Youth Contract. The launch information from DWP was sent out first of all, followed by updates on the launch and the different elements. Advisers received practical information on the day of launch or a little afterwards. Whilst managerial staff said this ensured staff were kept up-to-date and were well prepared for launch, it gave advisers the impression that information was being drip fed through. Their preference was for a single package of practical guidance information when they needed it, such as shortly before the launch.

2.2 Impact on team structures

To support teams in delivering the Youth Contract provision, there was evidence that some new roles had been created, across each of the districts, although this differed between offices. One large office for example had assigned a digital champion to the Youth Contract team and created specialist advisers who were expert in different elements of the Youth Contract, including sbwas and work experience, whereas, in a small office with mixed caseloads one adviser had responsibility for updating the team on all elements of the Youth Contract.

Digital champions were embedded in dedicated Youth Contract teams because there was a recognition that a range of digital channels, such as text message, email and social media, would be well suited to this age group. This was particularly so because, according to advisers, a high proportion owned a smart phone and were heavy users of social media and text messaging to communicate with friends. In many large offices, digital champions were already in existence. However, after the Youth Contract launched their efforts were focused to a larger extent on young claimants.

⁷ These sessions covered the most common themes and issues that advisers discussed with their claimants. Several claimants were addressed at once, which was more efficient than using one-to-one time with advisers.

14 Implementation of the Youth Contract

Advisers that specialised in the Youth Contract, or specific elements of the Youth Contract, were created because there was often a large selection of training and work experience opportunities, particularly in offices within, or close to, a large town or city. This is because advisers said it was otherwise difficult to identify suitable opportunities or to know of all the provision available through partners, charities and the local authority in the area.

In offices that had dedicated Youth Contract teams, office managers had created links between employer engagement staff and advisers. This allowed advisers to feed back information on claimant interests and the sectors in which they would like work experience placements and sbwas. One large inner city office, with a team of employer engagement staff, had taken this a step further by embedding an Employer Engagement Officer within the Youth Contract team. There were a number of benefits of facilitating regular communication between the advisers and employer engagement teams, which were:

- employer engagement staff were aware of the sectors where there was claimant interest and could target these;
- negative feedback from claimants on placements or training could be fed back to employer engagement staff to investigate and review with the employer if necessary; and
- advisers developed a better understanding of employers' needs and expectations and could refer claimants who met their requirements.

2.3 How the Youth Contract interacted with other initiatives/ support provision

In recent years, the focus on youth unemployment has increased. Consequently, when the Youth Contract launched, there was already considerable provision available to young people. Therefore, the provision available through the Youth Contract was used as part of a variety of tools advisers could access to move claimants closer to the world of work. However, outside of small rural communities, advisers said that there was so much provision it could be difficult to remember it all.

Under the Youth Contract, the provision for additional adviser support was considered instrumental, by advisers and their team managers, in enabling them to take better advantage of the support available. In offices with dedicated teams, advisers had more time to get to know their claimants and to learn about the opportunities available to their age group. They, therefore, said they were able to more effectively refer claimants to development opportunities. In the three small offices that had not created dedicated teams, the local area had limited opportunities for young people in any case and, therefore, this issue was not raised.

3 Elements of the Youth Contract

In this section, attitudes of Jobcentre Plus staff to different elements of the Youth Contract are discussed, including their views about the impact of different elements on claimants and how claimants and employers responded to each of the elements. The elements discussed are: additional adviser support; sector-based work academies (sbwas); work experience; and the wage incentive.

3.1 Additional adviser support

Across all offices in this study, claimants were assigned a named adviser as part of the Youth Contract. Feedback from advisers indicated this was more effective in offices with dedicated Youth Contract teams as named advisers were able to spend more time with their claimants.

In offices with dedicated Youth Contract teams, advisers adopted a light touch approach when dealing with claimants who were already close to the job market, such as those who were motivated and carrying out independent job searches, either maintaining contact by telephone, email or text message. This freed up more time for more intense face-to-face contact for those claimants with greater support needs. The flexibility of approach to delivering additional adviser support was welcomed by adviser managers, both because claimants received a level of service which suited their needs and because advisers experienced enhanced job satisfaction:

‘Additional resource has given the advisers a lot more freedom in terms of how often and how long they spend with individual claimants – so, although we say we have a weekly intervention minimum, there’s occasions [when] the adviser might get that individual in two or three times [...] to prepare them for an interview or whatever [...] it’s more like being a caseworker than an old style adviser. They really do build a relationship with the claimant, and get a lot of pleasure out of seeing that individual get a start’.

(Adviser Team Manager, dedicated Youth Contract team)

‘[Before the Youth Contract] diaries were solid and it was one after the other [...] and my feeling is they are feeling happier in their roles because they’ve got control, they know what they need to achieve, they’ve got clear targets.’

(District Manager)

Having a named adviser for each claimant, who had space within their diaries to deliver targeted support, was considered crucial to the success of the Youth Contract for several reasons:

- Advisers developed a better understanding of the individual’s support needs and could refer them to appropriate training;
- Advisers built a relationship with claimants. They said that irrespective of whether the claimant found employment, advisers believed that this helped to motivate claimants to look for work and build their confidence;
- Claimants trusted their adviser and would admit to personal problems such as substance abuse or housing issues which may act as barriers to employment; advisers were then able to refer them to the appropriate support services;

- There was also a strong impact on staff morale. Advisers said that they felt their work was much more worthwhile because they were able to follow a claimant's journey through to employment. In one office, managerial staff noted a marked drop in staff absenteeism since the Youth Contract was launched and attributed this to increased morale within the team.

'When they know you they don't take it personally [when you ask about drug use] ... they get on the defensive if strangers say it.'

(Adviser, dedicated Youth Contract team)

'Seeing them weekly makes a massive difference because you're reaching the customer. If you only see them every six to eight weeks they can come in and tell you anything. You as an adviser are not going to know any better, and by the time you've seen them again two months down the line, you've forgotten who they are – so you're not building a relationship and you're not moving them forward. Because we see them weekly, we need to see if they're making progress each time'.

(Adviser, dedicated Youth Contract team)

Delivering contact on a weekly basis was resource intensive and it was only possible to deliver this level of support because advisers were able to operate flexibly and adjust the level of support to meet the needs of the claimant. There were two factors which determined how well different offices were able to deliver weekly support:

- whether dedicated 18 to 24-year-old teams were created; and
- how well advisers were able to manage their own diaries.

Offices that had created dedicated 18 to 24-year-old teams were able to deliver additional support much more effectively. This was because they generally had smaller caseloads and greater autonomy over their diaries. Advisers with mixed caseloads on the other hand found that it was difficult to deliver targeted weekly support to 18 to 24-year-olds because they were also required to see a set number of 25+ claimants each day. Due to this increased pressure on their time, advisers with a mixed caseload said that they struggled to deliver face-to-face contact even to claimants with more intense support needs. However, this problem was mitigated somewhat by the fact that additional adviser support can be waived for claimants who are on training, provision or work experience.

Managerial staff also suggested that some advisers required better training on how to manage their time. There were some teething problems when the Youth Contract was first launched as advisers learnt to manage their own diaries, particularly leaving sufficient space for email and telephone contact with claimants who did not require regular face-to-face contact.

3.2 Targeting additional adviser support to meet claimants needs

Conducting a diagnostic interview was usually the first step in the provision of additional support. In order to meet the requirement for weekly contact, it was necessary for offices to conduct the diagnostic interview within the first two weeks of a Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claim. Consistent with their approach to other claimants, advisers used a traffic light system or 'high, medium, low' markers to indicate the level of need. When dealing with young people, however, this approach

was used to determine an appropriate regime of contact, including the frequency of face-to-face contact and how other channels could be used. Claimants were also given an induction to the Youth Contract, described as ‘selling’ the Youth Contract, which provided an opportunity for advisers to gauge claimants’ level of willingness and motivation. Managerial staff, across the five districts, expressed confidence in advisers’ capacity to target support appropriately and use their one-to-one time with claimants to the greatest effect.

Jobcentre Plus staff believed that attending face-to-face advisory meetings and other provision, such as training courses, on a regular basis taught self-discipline and routine to claimants with limited work experience or recent school leavers. In addition, some claimants who were reluctant to attend work experience were referred to other mandatory provision or required to meet more frequently with advisers, including on a daily basis. One outcome of this was that some of the disengaged claimants were thought to stop claiming JSA.

Alternatively, under the Youth Contract, weekly contact can be waived for claimants who are actively moving closer to work – for example those who have a job offer, as well as for those who are actively participating in training, provision or work experience. This was largely supported by advisers and their team managers who said it was vital that adviser support did not interrupt training, provision or work experience opportunities. This was also thought to help advisers to manage their workloads, where claimants did not need the additional adviser support during these times.

However, in one district, where advisers were struggling to manage mixed caseloads, there were occasional instances of claimants being referred to work placements or training courses simply to reduce the numbers of claimants requiring weekly contact. Although this was recognised as bad practice, the adviser team manager indicated that the behaviour was necessary to meet the additional contact requirements under the Youth Contract, whilst also delivering an acceptable service to other claimants. It should be noted, however, that advisers in these offices did not raise this as an issue, indicating that this may not happen regularly. Nonetheless, it highlights the challenges that advisers with mixed teams face in delivering additional adviser support to young people without disadvantaging others.

‘I have seen advisers that have put [claimants] on provision because that means they won’t have to see them for four weeks.’

(Adviser Team Manager, Mixed Caseloads)

After five months claiming JSA, it is a requirement of the Youth Contract that weekly contact takes place face-to-face. In large offices, claimants were generally already receiving additional intensive support on a weekly, or even daily, basis at this stage. One office was conducting daily face-to-face contact with claimants who lacked motivation, at any stage in their claim, whilst another was considering reducing the period before weekly contact became mandatory to 13 weeks. However, there was little support amongst staff for a set policy on how often claimants should be seen. They argued that advisers were best placed to decide how additional adviser support should be delivered to claimants. Nonetheless, they usually exceeded the weekly requirement in any case.

There was a perception amongst some advisers that if claimants reached the five month point of a claim the Jobcentre Plus approach ‘had failed’ as advisers would have already exhausted all appropriate support opportunities. Consequently, in one office, advisers said they preferred to focus intensive support on claimants who were at an earlier stage in their claim. This office had a dedicated Youth Contract team, referring claimants to a range of support services.

3.2.1 Group information sessions

Group information sessions were an optional element of the Youth Contract, which were set up by all the case study districts. Advisers could refer claimants to a group information session as part of their weekly contact, in place of one-to-one contact. This freed up adviser time to meet with other claimants who required one-to-one support such as assisted job search. During a group information session, several claimants attended a talk or presentation on some of the most common topics or issues which advisers addressed during one-to-ones, such as conditionality for receiving JSA, the local labour market, Curriculum Vitae (CV) design and confidence in interviews.

There was considerable support for group information sessions from managerial staff who considered it a more efficient way to cover common topics. Advisers' views were more mixed: whilst on the one hand they recognised that face-to-face meetings could be shorter and more focused on claimants' needs as a result, on the other hand, advisers said that providing more generic information and advice on a one-to-one basis at the start of a claim helped them to get to know the claimant and understand their needs better.

'Customers are all seen weekly – we did group sessions round about work experience, but have moved away from that because we've heard that advisers get to know these people quite well as individuals'

(CSOM, dedicated Youth Contract team)

One district mandated the use of group information sessions, although this was not a requirement of the Youth Contract. All claimants were required to attend three group information sessions, during the first few weeks of a new claim. In these offices, managers had decided that claimants were not able to access other elements of the Youth Contract until they had attended the sessions. Therefore, advisers tried to book the group information sessions within the first few weeks of their claim. Advisers responded negatively to this as they said that, in some cases, claimants required very little support, other than to get experience in a specific sector and so did not need a referral to a group information session. Advisers felt that any mandatory activity which did not directly move them towards the employment market was frustrating for the claimant and meant they spent more time than necessary on JSA.

3.2.2 Case conferences

During a case conference, advisers discussed difficult cases with other advisers who could share their experience and suggest training opportunities or other available services. Team meetings, where specific difficult cases were discussed amongst adviser teams, were common practice across the five case study districts. In large offices, with dedicated Youth Contract teams, these case conferences happened more frequently (in one case on a daily basis) and were in part shaped by off-flow targets, with the team focusing on claimants who were nearing off-flow target milestones (13, 26 and 39 weeks).

Learning about suitable provision for particular individuals was a key benefit of the case conferences. Advisers also learnt more about each other's cases; this allowed teams to cover illness or holiday absence more effectively. Advisers accessed information about the different provision available to claimants through a database on their PCs. However, some advisers said that the search function was limited, making it difficult to identify training and work experience opportunities.

'But if they get into the 26th week we say whatever you tried didn't work, we take it into the team meeting talk through the background of the [claimants] and then we share ideas – that really helps advisers to consider new avenues'

(Adviser Team Manager, dedicated Youth Contract team)

3.2.3 National Careers Service

Under the Youth Contract, all 18 to 24-year-olds have the opportunity to meet with a National Careers Service (NCS) adviser in the first three months of their claim. It is at the adviser's discretion to refer claimants who they think would benefit from this support.

The extent to which offices were using the NCS varied considerably. Where referrals to the NCS were limited, Jobcentre advisers said that the advice offered by NCS was generic and that the quality of information sessions the NCS offered (usually on the local labour market or preparing a CV) could be variable. Long waiting times of up to four weeks, were also off-putting as advisers wanted claimants to receive basic training on CV development as soon as possible, to assist with their job search. Jobcentre Plus advisers considered that other local providers offered a faster and better quality service. They also suggested that the NCS should have a greater presence in schools to ensure that new leavers had a better understanding of the local job market.

In offices that were using NCS regularly, there was a perception that the service offered tangible benefits for claimants, for example, where NCS advisers had a good knowledge of local provision for young people and were able to advise or refer claimants to training or work experience opportunities. For claimants who wanted information on further education or professional careers the NCS was considered beneficial for in-depth advice, but for claimants wanting low skilled work it was not thought to be necessary.

'A lot of claimants, who are umming and aring 'do I want to dig a hole or work in a warehouse' don't really need careers services [...] Not for that sort of claimant base.'

(Adviser)

3.2.4 Effect of additional adviser support

In offices with dedicated Youth Contract teams, one-to-one support from a named contact was believed to have a positive impact on outcomes for claimants. Whilst it was not possible for offices to separate out the impact of additional adviser support from other elements of the Youth Contract when monitoring off-flow figures, anecdotal evidence from advisers indicated that additional adviser support built confidence and trust amongst individuals and ensured that advisers understood claimants' needs. As a result, staff morale increased, advisers were more motivated, they actively followed up interview outcomes outside of the weekly contact cycle and said they were more engaged with the claimants' experience.

Whilst additional adviser support was beneficial in building claimants' confidence and staff morale, some managerial staff suggested that advisers could do more to engage with employers to ensure that job opportunities were realised, for example by calling employers before or shortly after an interview to 'sell' individual claimants. Managerial staff believed that advisers saw all employer contact as the responsibility of employer engagement staff, when in fact the employer engagement staff role was to create relationships with employers, but the advisers also had a role in maintaining and servicing that relationship with employers.

Managers explained that job brokering had been part of the adviser role in the past and advisers were now being encouraged to contact employers about individual claimants. However, whilst more experienced advisers were doing this, advisers and their managers said that in many cases advisers lacked the confidence to contact employers themselves. At a managerial level, Jobcentre Plus staff recognised there was a need for more training in job brokering skills.

'Not all our advisers are yet great at selling skills [...] a lot of them are not that confident at picking the phone up and doing the sales pitch.'

(District Manager)

In offices where caseloads were mixed, the impact of the Youth Contract was much less pronounced. This was apparent both from the experience of staff in those offices and comments made by District and Office Managers who were aware more broadly of the performance in other offices. This was primarily because advisers did not have time to build close relationships with claimants. In fact, the Youth Contract may have increased their workload, making it more difficult for them to dedicate one-to-one time with claimants. Consequently, weekly support tended to tail off or became cursory, such as a brief telephone or text message in some offices.

3.3 Work experience

Work experience placements were considered suitable for claimants who were not yet ready for employment and were targeted at claimants with little or no work experience. Claimants were often far from being employment ready and required additional support and supervision. Consequently, employer engagement officers were careful to manage employers' expectations to ensure they were prepared to deliver training and support throughout the placement.

There was a greater variety of sectors available for work experience placements than sbwas as employers of all sizes were more willing to participate. Employer Engagement Officers said that employers wanted to 'give something back' to the community, by helping young people become employment ready, but they were reluctant to commit to an sbwa. They also believed that sbwas appeared to employers to be more formal than work experience, due to the three stage process and, therefore, employers believed that sbwas required a greater commitment on their part, in particular, the commitment to have a job vacancy available at the end of the placement.

The demand for work experience placements was high, both because opportunities were available in a broad range of sectors and claimants could apply with little or no experience. Advisers were very supportive of work experience, citing several benefits for claimants:

- Gaining experience of the working environment, sometimes for the first time;
- Obtaining experience to add to their CV and where possible a reference;
- Providing an opportunity to try out a particular sector; and
- Getting into the routine of working;

'For some people getting out of bed before midday is a major achievement, work experience introduces them to a routine that fits into the world around them.'

(Adviser Team Manager)

'Because we're dealing with 18-year-olds kids that've probably never done a job [...] at 18 the first thing you want them to do is get some idea of what it's like in a work environment [...] so work experience for them should be sooner than later.'

(Adviser)

Work experience placements were also known to have resulted in employment. Advisers were often aware of examples of claimants being offered a job after a work experience placement.

Demand for work experience meant that some placements were competitive. Claimants initially attended an information session hosted by the employer or by the Jobcentre office. Candidates who were interested then submitted a CV or application form and were interviewed either by the employer or employer engagement staff to ensure they were suitable for the position. This

process mirrored real-life recruitment processes, giving claimants some experience of entering the employment market. However, for claimants who were not offered a work experience placement, this process could be de-motivating, because even finding unpaid work experience, which was a key stepping stone to paid work, was challenging.

In some offices, take up of the additional work experience placements for young people was slow to get started because advisers were not aware of the opportunities that were available. Office Managers, with input from Adviser Team Managers, attempted to address this issue by embedding an Employer Engagement Officer within Youth Contract adviser teams. In offices that had implemented this set up, this had helped to accelerate the take up of work experience as advisers were kept well informed about the work experience opportunities which were available.

3.3.1 Claimants' response to work experience

In most cases, advisers said that feedback from claimants had been positive. They had gained confidence and knowledge which they could use in interviews and, in some cases, it provided both experience and a reference at the end.

However, staff at all levels said that work experience was sometimes misused by employers as free labour to cover peak periods, although they said that claimants were made fully aware that work experience was voluntary and they were not required to participate. During such placements, advisers said that claimants reported that they learnt very little and after a short period of training they were left to do basic tasks for the remaining period of their placements.

Advisers worked closely with Employer Engagement Officers to feed back any issues in order to improve the quality of work experience placements. Any negative feedback was communicated to employers and employer engagement staff said that if they believed that the employer would not improve the quality of the placement, they would stop using that employer. In the past this was thought to have been a particular problem during the Christmas period. When fieldwork was conducted, in October, Christmas was only two months away. Advisers were, therefore, concerned about the potential glut of retail work experience opportunities at this time, followed in the New Year by a dip in employment in the retail sector, which could be extremely de-motivating for claimants.

3.3.2 Engaging with employers about work experience

Work experience was sold to employers as a way to help young people in their local community. Whilst this was not working in all cases, employer engagement staff largely believed that employers were primarily motivated by the desire to provide support to young people in the local area, described as 'giving something back' to the community. It was considered important for employers to be aware that they had a responsibility to train and up-skill claimants and provide feedback or a reference at the end of the placement. Despite these conditions, employer engagement staff said it was not difficult to find employers willing to offer placements. Overall, work experience was considered to be very flexible for employers and as such some appeared to treat work experience as a work trial.

'If they like the person they can take them on straight away, if they don't like the person they can break off that relationship quite easily'

(District Manager)

Additional funding via the Youth Contract and the focus on young people following the launch was an opportunity for employer engagement staff to reach out to local employers. In one office, for example, the Jobcentre office hosted a launch event for the Youth Contract with a particular focus on work experience opportunities which was attended by the Member of Parliament (MP) for that area.

3.3.3 Challenges of implementing work experience

Employer engagement staff blamed negative coverage in the press about work experience for discouraging many large employers from engaging in the scheme.⁸ It also made some claimants worry, believing the scheme to be exploitative and this could be reinforced where placements were created ‘for the wrong reasons’, for example to fill a temporary resource need.

Some claimants were reluctant to accept work experience placements. Some advisers suggested that there should be levers to force these claimants to accept work experience placements. However, this risked alienating employers by sending claimants who were not engaged.

There were very few part-time placements. Consequently it was difficult to refer lone parents who had childcare responsibilities.

While the small employers that were offering work experience represented a wide range of different sectors, advisers in some offices argued that work experience was still dominated by three particular sectors (retail, hospitality and administration).

3.3.4 Staff views of work experience

Work experience was highly valued by Jobcentre Plus staff because it was relatively easy to engage employers and claimants gained experience and a reference, which were considered the first essential step to be considered for employment.

3.4 Sector-based work academies

Sbw as incorporate both training and work experience, and a guaranteed interview for a job⁹ or other support to help participants through the employer’s application process. There is some flexibility within this. For example, the training or experience elements can be reduced in length. In districts with a good level of training provision and a selection of local, large and medium-sized employers, there was strong support for sbwas amongst Jobcentre Plus staff. However, in two districts, comprising of rural offices and offices based in small towns, there was limited utilisation of sbwas because it was difficult to engage small businesses – which made up the local labour market and access to training was poor. These challenges are discussed further in this section.

Where offices were able to offer a good selection of sbwas, there was considerable support for these amongst advisers. This was because sbwas were engaging for claimants and claimants often found work as a result, either with the employer (or employers) linked to the sbwa or with another employer in the sector.

⁸ Earlier that year, there had been criticism of other mandatory work experience schemes. Although these were not part of the Youth Contract, and the work experience placements described here were entirely voluntary, the coverage was still influencing employers and young people’s views.

⁹ Including an apprenticeship.

There are three main elements of an sbwa. These include:

- **Pre-employment training** – Training was either being delivered by the employer or via a local training provider. In the case study areas, local providers usually delivered sector-specific training (such as retail, customer services and hospitality) as many employers did not have the resources necessary to deliver training themselves. However, in some instances employers opted to manage the training element themselves, either because there were specialist skills involved (i.e. using specialist equipment) or they were keen for new staff to understand the specific working practices employed by that business. This was only viable, however, for very large employers;
- **Work experience** – A period of work experience followed the training and was considered a good opportunity for both the employer and claimant to decide whether they were a suitable match for the role. However, across the districts, employer engagement staff said that employers were sometimes reluctant to commit to a period of work experience. This was often in sectors with high staff turnover, such as hospitality or customer services as well as areas where the local labour market was dominated by small businesses;
- **Guaranteed job interview** – the interview and possibility of a job was considered a key benefit of sbwas, particularly in engaging claimants. Gaining job interview experience was considered sufficiently beneficial by advisers, regardless of whether candidates were employed as a result, to participate in an sbwa. In some cases, employer engagement staff and Office Managers decided that sbwas were not worthwhile unless there was a high ratio of vacancies to candidates. This restricted the range of sbwas they could offer, as discussed below.

Claimants were usually required to complete an application process, after attending an information session on the particular academy. This included submitting their CV and attending an interview with the employer or an Employer Engagement Officer. This process was not in place in all offices; in some cases advisers simply referred the claimant to an sbwa without having to apply. In offices, which were using an application process, advisers indicated there were two key benefits. Firstly, the screening process itself, which ensured claimants were engaged with the idea of work, and secondly replicating a job application process, which further prepared claimants for the experience of real-life job seeking.

When making a referral, advisers were careful to ensure that candidates were suitable. Unlike work experience, which was suitable for claimants who were not yet ready for employment, sbwas were sold to employers as an alternative recruitment process. As such, employers expected candidates to be job ready. Advisers were cautious about jeopardizing relationships with employers as these opportunities were considered of great value. In addition, claimants who were not ready for employment would not have a good experience in an sbwa as they may not perform well in the interview or the workplace and this may knock their confidence rather than motivate them.

‘When there’s an employer involved at the end of it with jobs, we’re all aware that we’ve got to send them people who are committed [and] who are really going to go for it [...] you don’t want to let the employer down and you don’t want to let the claimant down and if you sent somebody that wasn’t ready [...] you don’t want to set them up for rejection.’

(Adviser)

The sectors where sbwas were set up were generally dictated by skills gaps within the local labour market, for example, where an office had a high number of vacancies, but few candidates with the necessary skills to fill these vacancies. If there was sufficient demand from claimants for up-skilling in a particular sector, employer engagement staff would look to develop an sbwa. However, this would very much be dependent on the types of employers in that area.

3.4.1 Claimant responses to sbwas

Advisers reported that the response to sbwas from many claimants had been extremely positive, although advisers did raise the issue that some claimants were not interested in any provision which involved unpaid work experience (as discussed in the Section 4.3 on work experience). There was considerable interest in sbwas because there were job opportunities attached. However, this did mean that demand often outstripped supply; advisers also said that claimants were occasionally disappointed that the variety of sectors could be quite limited.

Advisers indicated that claimants who had attended an sbwa often fed back that they had enjoyed their time and gained valuable experience. By attending an sbwa claimants gained confidence, interview experience and could include the experience and training attained on their CV. Claimants with little or no work experience often received no response to their job applications and, therefore, being selected to take part in an sbwa gave claimants a confidence boost and meant they were better prepared for interviews in the future.

However, with ratios of one or two jobs for 20 claimants in some of the five case study districts there was inevitably disappointment for some. Advisers said they often spent considerable time consoling those who did not get a job; on occasion advisers thought that this experience could totally disengage a young person from looking for work.

3.4.2 Engaging employers with sbwas

Sbwas were marketed to employers as an alternative, free recruitment process. Employer engagement staff believed this may help to attract large employers who tended to pay employment agencies to find suitable candidates.

Before setting up sbwas, employer engagement staff said they wanted to confirm between five and ten vacancies to ensure that there was a ratio of one vacancy to every two claimants. This was a message that was reaffirmed by Office Managers and District Managers who believed that claimants expected a job at the end, although advisers and Adviser Team Managers said that claimants were made very clear that job opportunities were not guaranteed.

In order to secure multiple vacancies, employer engagement staff tended to target large employers, new businesses and employers that had recently posted several vacancies via a local Jobcentre.

Setting up sbwas with multiple smaller employers could be difficult and time consuming because employer engagement staff believed that many employers were not convinced that Jobcentre Plus could provide job candidates of suitable motivation and quality.

The three stage sbwa process was not considered suitable for all employers and employer engagement staff said this could be off-putting. The training and experience elements could last for up to six weeks, which employer engagement staff said acted as a barrier when engaging with employers who were recruiting within tight timeframes. In addition, employers did not always want to participate in all the elements. For example, they may want training and the interview or experience and the interview, but not all three.

Most offices adopted a more flexible approach in order to meet the needs of employers, either by reducing the length of the training, experience or both to one or two days, or by removing elements altogether that were not suitable for employer needs. Employer engagement staff and advisers in offices that were operating sbwas in a flexible way said that ultimately it was more important for claimants to gain experience of a job interview process and for employers to have a good experience of working with the Jobcentre, than to deliver an sbwa as specified.

However, some employer engagement staff were not aware that this was possible and consequently they said they struggled to set up many sbwas because they believed the initiative was too prescriptive. As a result, in that district, there were few sbwas in place and there was a perception amongst staff at all levels that the initiative was not particularly successful.

3.4.3 Engaging with training providers

When setting up an sbwa, identifying a provider to deliver the training element could present a challenge for Jobcentre Plus staff. Training for sbwas could only be procured from an approved training provider, which at times posed difficulties if the required course was not available.

In larger towns and districts with good partnerships with charities, local authorities and other registered training providers, finding appropriate training opportunities was usually straightforward. However, a glut in training opportunities sometimes meant that finding out whether a training course was on offer in the area could prove challenging. For example, in one office Jobcentre Plus staff spent time setting up a new training course for an sbwa only to discover that a local provider was already offering the course.

In order for the sbwas to be considered worthwhile by both training providers and managerial staff, at least seven job opportunities were generally required. Whilst there was no shortage of claimants willing to participate, this excluded smaller employers, potentially limiting the range of sectors available.

In one district which served remote rural areas, transport links were considered to be extremely poor, making it difficult for claimants to travel to training, even when their transport costs were covered. There was only one local provider in this district, which offered training in basic skills, i.e. literacy, numeracy and IT, but no vocational courses. There were other training providers in the area, but these were not registered with the Jobcentre and, therefore, advisers were not able to procure training from them. As a result of these practical barriers, the two offices in this district had chosen to focus on the work experience element of the Youth Contract at an early stage, effectively discouraging them from addressing some of these barriers.

'We are very limited with our opportunities and provision, that's always been an issue ...'

(Adviser Team Manager)

'Again, there's the rural issue, we are always the bottom of the pile for contractors, and we're always added on as an appendage for other bigger contracts!'

(Adviser)

3.4.4 Challenges to delivering sector-based work academies

Overall, the variety of sectors involved in sbwas was not considered to be sufficient. There were no care sector sbwas in the five districts that participated in this research, despite being a major employer struggling to recruit in all the districts. There were two main barriers: first, employer engagement staff said they struggled to engage with care providers as they tended to use specialist recruitment agencies; and second, a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check was required in order for claimants to get experience. Employers were not willing to fund this because they were not necessarily going to employ the claimant, claimants could not afford to self-fund and advisers in some districts believed they could not pay for CRB checks using the Flexible Support Fund (FSF)¹⁰.

There was a lack of clarity about how the FSF could be used. Jobcentre Plus staff wanted to be able to use the FSF to purchase training from non-Jobcentre Plus contracted providers where existing providers could not make suitable provision available, as well as to fund certification and qualifications required for particular sectors. There were inconsistencies between and with districts regarding the use of the FSF. As a result, some offices were experiencing barriers, for example, being unable to fund CRB checks, which were being overcome in other offices, using the FSF.

Another issue arose when advisers were sometimes asked to refer several claimants to an sbwa at short notice, in order to fill spaces, and consequently claimants were not necessarily suitable.

Across all districts, demand for sbwa placements could not be met and yet employer engagement staff were said to be reluctant to create sbwas unless there were several job opportunities available.

Sbwas could only be contracted to existing providers. In some locations advisers found that existing providers were unable to provide training in all the sectors required.

As discussed above, it was easier to identify work experience opportunities than set up sbwas, because employers of all sizes were willing to participate in work experience and because there was no need to procure training. In addition, work experience led to positive outcomes, with claimants either being employed at the end or gaining the necessary reference to move into other employment. In small towns or rural areas, where the potential for sbwas was quite limited, Jobcentre Plus staff were channelling their efforts more towards creating work experience opportunities than sbwas.

3.4.5 Wage incentive

At the time this research was conducted, the wage incentive was available via Jobcentre Plus in 20 youth unemployment 'hotspot areas' to 18 to 24-year-old claimants from six months of their claim. Jobcentre Plus offices covering these hotspot areas had only started offering the wage incentive from July 2012. With the research fieldwork being conducted in November 2012, the initiative had very little time to bed-in within the two hotspot areas that participated in this research.¹¹

¹⁰ Although not legally required to do so, employers have primary responsibility for paying for the Disclosure and Barring Service and Protecting Vulnerable Groups checks. However where this is not possible the use of the FSF for the re-imbursment of these checks is subject to guidance, which sets out a 'framework' that Jobcentre Plus must follow without exception, with the exceptional circumstances which re-imbursment can be made being strictly controlled within the Department.

¹¹ A full report on early findings on the wage incentive, from the Youth Contract evaluation, is available here: http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_828.asp. Further research on the wage incentive will be carried out as part of the evaluation.

Only the two hotspot districts that took part in this research were promoting the wage incentive in any way. Non-hotspot areas could promote the wage incentive if they wished, but there was little motivation to do so, as they would have to refer employers to a Work Programme provider, who were operating the scheme more generally for young people recruited from the Work Programme.

3.4.6 Views on the wage incentive

In the view of employer engagement staff, the wage incentive in itself was not enough for an employer to take on a candidate who did not have the skills they required, or if a better candidate had applied for the role.

“Ultimately it’s about the right person first and if they come with a wage incentive then that’s a bonus.”

(Non-hotspot, employer engagement staff)

One District Manager, in a district that contained a hotspot area, questioned whether the wage incentive was worthwhile. There was a degree of scepticism as to whether the wage incentive convinced employers to employ candidates they would not otherwise have considered.

‘What I’d want demonstrated, OK you’re using the wage incentive, but have you ultimately improved performance? Or are you just paying for performance you were already getting [...] People will take money won’t they, but did you need to spend it?’

(Hotspot area, District Manager)

Where candidates were identical in skills and experience the wage incentive could give one young person a slight edge over another, but advisers were uncomfortable about this, particularly as they may be giving one of their claimants an advantage over another.

3.4.7 Challenges of the wage incentive

There had been limited take up of the wage incentive in the hotspot areas covered within this research, for which there were a number of reasons:

- Employer engagement staff said there was limited interest from employers – they were more concerned with finding the best candidate;

“Thought people would jump at it, but there was not much response, despite emails etc. Employers want the employee they want, irrespective of the incentive.”

(Office Manager, hotspot area)

- Claimants only became eligible for the wage incentive after six months on benefit. Employer engagement staff found it difficult to communicate this to employers without flagging up that the claimant had struggled to find work up until this point;
- Advisers were uncomfortable that some of their claimants were eligible for the wage incentive and others were not. On occasions, claimants learnt about the wage incentive from other claimants and questioned why they were not eligible;

- The wage incentive was only available in particular locations across the district. Consequently, it could be seen like a 'postcode lottery' and it was difficult to communicate to employers, as only a minority of candidates lived in the right area and had been unemployed for the right length of time;

'It's difficult to get the message across until it becomes universal.'

(District Manager, hotspot area)

- Staff faced challenges in producing professional looking marketing material. Employer engagement staff did not have the budget for printing and some offices could not print in colour.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

All offices were managing to deliver weekly contact and this was broadly considered to have a positive impact on customer and staff morale, although the quality of service that young people received varied considerably, dependant on whether a dedicated Youth Contract team had been created.

In offices with a dedicated Youth Contract team, caseloads were reduced, allowing advisers to deliver intensive support and build working relationships with claimants. Although it was too early to draw meaningful data on off-flow in these cases, the Youth Contract was perceived to be having a positive effect in several ways:

- claimants were more engaged and received the right support at an earlier stage, thereby becoming better prepared to find employment;
- staff morale increased and advisers were more committed because they developed good relationships with claimants and were able to follow their progress;
- employer engagement staff could work with dedicated Youth Contract teams to improve the quality of work experience and sbwa placements for claimants;
- more frequent attendance, including daily meetings, meant some disengaged young people stopped claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

However, in smaller offices, where creating a dedicated Youth Contract team was not possible, flexibility of contact was sometimes used to minimise the time spent with young people in order to cope with large caseloads. In offices with mixed caseloads, some Jobcentre Plus staff expressed concerns about the negative effect that creating a dedicated team would have on claimants aged 25 and over.

With the exception of rural locations, there was often a very broad variety of provision for young people. By selecting the most appropriate courses or opportunities for their claimants, either via the Youth Contract or partner organisations, advisers were able to provide a tailored package of support. However, the wide choice, from a range of providers, made it somewhat difficult for advisers to keep up to speed and to communicate the full range of options available. As a consequence, provision was not always used to the greatest effect, claimants missed out on appropriate courses because advisers were not aware they existed and other claimants were inappropriately referred.

Work experience was thought to have a positive impact on off-flow targets – either by directly leading to a job or giving claimants the experience they needed to find employment in that sector. Sector-based work academies (sbwas) were also considered beneficial, as claimants gained experience and training. In districts where there was a wide selection of sbwas, demand was high because placements were linked to job opportunities, which was popular with claimants. However, sbwas may only be suitable in towns and cities with a range of large employers, unless employer engagement staff are able to engage more successfully with small businesses in order to create multi-employer sbwas. They were only considered worthwhile when there was a high ratio of vacancies to candidates and worked best when used flexibly to suit employers' needs.

When staff considered the effort required to set up a placement against the likelihood of claimants finding employment as a result, work experience was sometimes considered more cost-effective than sbwas, particularly outside of larger towns, for two reasons:

- Employer engagement staff struggled to create multi-employer sbwas, which were necessary in labour markets that were dominated by small businesses;
- Access to training can be limited, particularly as offices are restricted to using approved suppliers.

Consequently, Jobcentre Plus staff said they would like employment engagement officers to focus even more on securing work experience opportunities.

There was limited support for the wage incentive in the hotspot areas as employer engagement staff found the initiative difficult to explain, without highlighting that eligible claimants had been unemployed for over six months. The initiative had only been on offer for three months and was not universally available through Jobcentre Plus. Further research is required to understand how the wage incentive is being used once it has had more time to bed-in and since it has been rolled out nationally to all 18 to 24-year-olds from six months of their claim.

4.1 Recommendations

Overall, the Youth Contract appeared to be more successful in offices that had created separate 18 to 24-year-old teams. Where possible, offices should be encouraged to adopt this model.

Measures are required to ensure the division of resources is fair to all claimants and advisers. There is a need to develop strategies for handling mixed caseloads and best practice should be shared between offices.

The inherent flexibility of the Youth Contract should be further emphasised to Jobcentre Plus staff. For example, it may be helpful for Jobcentre Plus managerial staff and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to re-communicate to Jobcentre Plus staff the guidance around what is required in setting up an sbwa and the flexibility on offer within the three stage model.

Further clarity is required regarding the use of the Flexible Support Fund. Some offices were using this to pay for Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks¹², training courses or qualifications and licences required in certain industries, but its use was not consistent within districts. Advisers may require further guidance on how this funding can be used, within their district, in order to address young people's needs more effectively.

¹² Although not legally required to do so, employers have primary responsibility for paying for the Disclosure and Barring Service and Protecting Vulnerable Groups checks. However where this is not possible the use of the FSF for the re-imburement of these checks is subject to guidance, which sets out a 'framework' that Jobcentre Plus must follow without exception, with the exceptional circumstances which re-imburement can be made being strictly controlled within the Department.

The Youth Contract was launched in April 2012 in order to improve the employability prospects of young claimants under 25. It includes:

- more intensive support from Jobcentre Plus advisers;
- funding for additional work experience and sector-based work academy placements;
- a wage incentive for employers recruiting a young person who has been claiming for over six months or is attached to the Work Programme.

This report provides feedback on the implementation and delivery of the Youth Contract based on interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff in five case study districts. The research forms part of a wider two-year, mixed methods evaluation of the Youth Contract, involving Jobcentre Plus staff, claimants, employers and Work Programme providers.

The evaluation is being carried out for the Department by TNS BMRB.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please email:
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