



Evaluation of day one mandation of prison leavers to the Work Programme

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The Work Programme is an active labour market programme launched in Great Britain in June 2011.

Since 1 March 2012 prison leavers claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) have been mandated to join the Work Programme immediately on release from custody. This was based on the recognition that prison leavers' extensive barriers to employment suggest a greater need for employment assistance.

A key feature of the policy is the facility for prisoners to make an advance JSA claim from up to five weeks pre-release.

The evaluation examined the policy implementation and programme delivery of day one mandation.

Key findings

Advance JSA claims were seen as beneficial by payment group 9 (PG9) claimants and Employment and Benefit Advisers (EBAs)¹. They made the process easier and quicker, as well as helping to prevent financial hardship.

The introduction of PG9 did not result in substantial changes to providers' models. Providers reported lower than expected referral numbers and hence financial constraints to providing dedicated PG9 support. However, some changes did occur including: some pre-release work (though this was not extensive); the training or increased use of ex-offender specialist advisers and/or subcontractors; and greater provision of in-work support for the group (as PG9 claimants, in general, were seen to be more in need of this than other claimants).

¹ Jobcentre Plus (the public employment service) staff members based in prisons providing advice to prisoners on employment and benefit issues.

Results from the survey of claimants did not suggest intensive support for the group. Survey findings of note include the low proportion of respondents who stated having had a skills assessment (43 per cent) or drawing up an action plan (49 per cent).

Respondents found seeing the same adviser all or most of the time to be helpful in order to build a trusting relationship.

Additionally, prison leavers are a heterogeneous group, some of whom have extensive barriers to employment, making it difficult for them to find work in the two years of the programme.

Methodology

Fieldwork was undertaken from January 2013 to May 2014. Evidence for the evaluation was obtained from:

- qualitative interviews with 21 senior stakeholders from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Ministry of Justice, the National Offender Management Service, the Scottish Prison Service and Work Programme prime providers;
- qualitative interviews with 19 EBAs and 29 resettlement staff² in prisons;
- qualitative interviews with 57 prisoners;
- two waves of qualitative interviews with strategic managers from prime providers, and provider operational managers and employment advisers (65 interviews in wave 1 and 35 in wave 2);
- a telephone survey of 1,013 PG9 claimants;
- qualitative interviews with 61 PG9 claimants and observations of 29 customer/adviser sessions.

The qualitative research was conducted in six Contract Package Areas (CPAs).³ The qualitative interviews with providers and claimants were based around two prime provider supply chains per CPA.

Findings

The following approaches were perceived to be most successful:

- Advance, pre-release benefit claims were easier and less time consuming for claimants, and earlier receipt of benefit payments helped avoid financial hardship.
- Support from specialist ex-offender advisers tended to result in support that addressed wider barriers.
- Good, trusting relationships with advisers were important in maintaining engagement and supporting claimants to talk to employers about their offending history.
- Important specific types of support were: housing-related to maintain a focus on job search, as being in unstable and unsuitable accommodation made it difficult to focus on looking for work; computer training; and computer access to enable job search.
- Providers' closer working with probation services helped to improve engagement and information sharing.
- Providers' work with employers to provide access to vacancies for PG9 claimants (and others with a criminal record).
- In-work support, as PG9 claimants were seen to require this more, on average, than other Work Programme participants.

² Resettlement staff interviewed included resettlement governors, staff from housing, education, CARAT (Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare) teams, National Careers Service and various prison services.

³ The geographical areas for which Work Programme prime providers have been contracted by DWP to deliver support. There are 18 in total across Great Britain.

There was scope for improvement in relation to the following factors:

Pre-release

- Not all prisoners who claim JSA post-release had attended a meeting with an EBA in prison, and some may have claimed pre-release if they had. Additionally, some prisoners missed scheduled appointments.
- Limited co-ordination and information sharing between resettlement staff, Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers prohibited Work Programme promotion.
- Limited pre-release work by providers which impacted on the level of information available to EBAs and prisoners.
- The prison setting was problematic for pre-release activities due to practical aspects (insufficient facilities in terms of phone lines, broadband and space) and the working environment (independent from outside agencies and regimented) being less flexible to external needs.
- Day one mandation of all prison leavers to the Work Programme may not be appropriate. Not all are ready to participate soon after release due to other demands such as housing needs, and many have chronic problems (e.g. mental health issues, substance misuse, and illiteracy and innumeracy) which means they are far from employment.

Pre-work support

- Claimants who move out of the area in which their provider is based and who have not been transferred to a local provider tended to receive more limited support.
- Some advisers lacked adequate knowledge of offenders, or the skills or confidence to talk about criminal records and offending, and provide PG9 claimants with support to deal with their criminal record.
- Many PG9 claimants experience an unstable housing situation on release which hinders engagement with the programme.
- Providers reported a lack of funding for vocational training; this was particularly acute for those needing higher level, longer courses, but affected all levels. It also resulted in ex-prisoners being unable to complete courses they had started in prison.
- The multiple provider model (where the claimant works with a number of main providers across the course of the programme) may be problematic for PG9 claimants, as it impacts on the important adviser/claimant relationship. A similar issue arises for in-work support, where this is handed to an in-work specialist.
- Though many PG9 claimants were aware of sanctioning for non-compliance, a substantial minority of PG9 claimants were not.

Performance management and funding

- The use of performance targets for some Work Programme payment groups, but not PG9, may reduce support to prison leavers.
- Providers reported that the level of funding was problematic, given the higher support needs of this group and their lower success rates. Outcome-related funding per se was not the issue, although the length of time for sustained job outcome payments (26 weeks) was thought to be too long by providers, given the difficulties for this group. This was exacerbated by greater difficulty keeping in touch with PG9 claimants, particularly identifying and tracking PG9 claimants if they returned to prison.

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