



# Evaluating the In-Work Progression Advice Trial

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## Background to the trial

In June 2014, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) ran a trial<sup>1</sup> to inform Tax Credit claimants about the support available from the National Careers Service. The trial was undertaken to test ways in which Tax Credit claimants could be prompted to consider and take steps towards in-work progression. It was also intended to gather insights into what package of support this 'in-work' group will need to help them progress in the labour market, and to contribute more broadly to the evidence base on in-work progression.

The trial involved sending letters to 75,000 people in receipt of Tax Credits. A sub-set of these also received a follow-on text message. The letters and text messages explained that the National Careers Service provides advice and support to help people 'get on in work', and gave the telephone number for the National Careers Service helpline.

Five different communication formats were used in the trial. There were three different letter types: short; self-efficacy (which included a line noting that 'Everyone has the ability to develop and grow in their lives and careers but sometimes things can hold us back'); and case-study version citing three people who had used the service. In addition, short text messages

were sent to sub-sets of those who received the self-efficacy and the case-studies letters.

## The research

The aim of the research reported here was to assess whether and how the trial had a perceived impact on people who received the communications and to highlight lessons about how to design the future offer for in-work claimants.

The research was qualitative in nature, although the report also makes reference to the Management Information gathered on the trial by the National Careers Service and the DWP. The research involved in-depth interviews, predominantly conducted by telephone, with 35 people who had received the communications. Of these, 19 had taken up the offer of advice and support (these participants are referred to as Takers) and 16 declined it (Non-Takers).

Interviews covered participants' recall of the communications and how they responded to them. Participants also read the communications afresh and described their thoughts as they engaged with them. In addition, participants were asked about their personal and employment situations as well as their attitudes to and options for in-work progression. Takers were asked about their use of the National Careers Service and lastly all participants were asked about what support, if any, they felt would help them to progress in work in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> The trial was structured using random allocation of recipients into five groups, but it was not delivered as a random controlled trial per se.

Interviews were also held with 12 National Careers Service staff, 10 advisers who had taken calls as part of the trial and two strategic staff who had overseen the trial across the two staff sites. These interviews focused on whether and how trial participants differed from business as usual, and what the trial indicated about how careers advice could best be formulated for working people on low incomes.

## **Why did receiving the information prompt Takers to use the service?**

Takers (those who took up the offer of advice) were already considering moving on in their work, or interested to do so in the future, the letters and texts were therefore seen as fitting with or catalysing existing interest. Takers identified themselves as positively oriented towards progressing in work, with an existing interest in earning more whether by increasing their hours, moving to a better-paid job or training for a better-paid job or career. They saw obstacles to in-work progression, such as childcare responsibilities or already working two jobs, but viewed these as constraints which would ease over time or which could be addressed. Receiving the letters and texts may have served to 'nudge' Takers to action, but it should be noted that these recipients were predisposed to moving on in work.

In some cases, participants had tried to use the service but had not been able to get beyond registering an interest in having a call-back. This highlights the importance of having multiple ways to connect to the service and ensuring that any engagement is picked up and sustained.

## **Why did receiving the information not prompt Non-Takers to use the service?**

Non-Takers (those who did not take up the offer of advice) did not take it up for four main reasons. Firstly, not understanding what was

being offered. Second, not seeing the offer as relevant to them. Thirdly, not being interested in careers advice or progressing in work at the time they were contacted. Fourthly, not being interested in progressing in work at all, typically because they were content with their work situation or considered themselves 'too old' to progress.

Non-Takers included participants who were positively oriented towards in-work progression, but some did not view the National Careers Service as appropriate for them (for example, perceiving it as providing only basic advice). Others did not see themselves as able to progress at this time, and so were not interested in the advice. In addition, there were Non-Takers who were not interested in progressing in work at all; they saw themselves as well-placed in their current role, or could not see a chance (or reason) to progress before they retired.

Overall, the research indicated that Takers and Non-Takers were broadly similar in their socio-demographic profile, their employment situation and history, and in the constraints they identified in relation to progressing in work. The differences were more prominent in terms of their attitudes to in-work progression and the extent to which they saw the difficulties as surmountable.

## **Did different communication forms have an influence on take-up of the offer?**

The Management Information (MI) provided strong evidence that the response rates were higher when a follow-up text had been sent. A perception among staff was that text message recipients could be more likely to call, but also that these calls could be to clarify the meaning of the letter, rather than to use the service. Staff considered that these calls were more often from text message recipients because it was quick to call straight from a text, and it may also have appeared that the text was following up on a lack of response to the letter.

Overall, however, staff noted that many, perhaps the majority, of those calling on the trial helpline, had rung to clarify what the communication was about and concluded the call once they were told – specifically when reassured that it was not to do with Tax Credits or welfare benefits.

There were no statistical differences in the response rate to the different forms of the letter. This finding is in line with the qualitative research indicating no strong preference for any particular form of the letter, though the case studies version in some cases appeared to clarify the meaning of the letter.

There were clear indications that interpretation of the letters and texts influenced whether or not recipients took up the offer, with confusion about meaning or intended audience deterring uptake. The phrase ‘get on in work’ in particular was mistakenly read as ‘get in to work’. This interpretation was compounded by the assumption that communication from DWP must be for unemployed people, so again some recipients dismissed them as irrelevant.

## **Did using the service have an impact on Takers’ attitudes or actions?**

Takers of the National Careers Service support commented positively about staff knowledge around navigating information systems for training and funding, and staff encouragement in relation to making work-related changes. There were indications of lower satisfaction with the service’s ability to provide for specialist information on specific areas of work and a sense that the service may be more useful to people who are earlier on in their career, or looking to change career, rather than for those who are well-established and looking to advance further.

Participants reported being encouraged to continue planning for in-work progression even if they had not yet acted on the advice provided

by the National Careers Service. There were also those who had taken actions towards progression after using the service.

## **How should advice and support on in-work progression be communicated in future?**

Letters and text messages were considered appropriate ways to inform people about careers advice and support. Concerns were raised about the potential for emails to be mistaken for ‘spam’, and participants commented that not everyone feels confident in using the internet and email. Email was felt to have a role once people had started to use the service, but less so in letting people know about it.

Key findings on future letters and texts included using simple and clear language to make it more obvious what they are about and exactly what support is on offer. More detail was wanted on exactly how the service could help, whilst keeping the letter brief, perhaps through a separate leaflet. Participants suggested that both letters and text messages should be more clearly identifiable with the National Careers Service so the core purpose is clear to the reader.

## **What form should advice and support take in future?**

The core provision of the National Careers Service is in line with the future support participants expressed interest in, though there were variations in the form, level, type and mode of advice people wanted. The main additional components were interest in more directive advice, in the form of encouragement to keep on track with progression plans, which is perhaps more akin to the Jobcentre Plus Work Coach role. There was also interest in more specialist information, to help people assess how their skills could best be deployed or to provide advanced insights into particular areas of work.

The idea of mentoring was raised by National Careers Service staff as a complement to mainstream provision, but participants were less interested in this as a general form of support. Online engagement with the service was considered a good idea, but participants were clear that any future service should provide multiple ways in which people can engage with it, and make it clear that several routes exist.

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You can download the full report free from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions/about/research#research-publications>

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