



Views of claimants – Qualitative findings of the Dame Carol Black Review

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This report presents the findings from a project looking at the views of claimants who have experienced drug addiction and alcohol dependence both in and out of work, as well as key stakeholders, in order to augment Dame Carol Black's review. It was undertaken by NatCen Social Research. The fieldwork was carried over four months, from December 2015 until March 2016.

The objectives of this research study were to:

- explore the employment history of the claimant and the perceived impact of both the condition (obesity, drug and alcohol issues) and receiving benefits on their employment status;
- ascertain how and when those experiencing the conditions access medical help and specialist employment support, and how well these services interact;
- find out if the medical/specialist employment services are effective in helping claimants look for and find sustainable work;
- explore what circumstances have led to different pathways of employment, and different employment outcomes;
- identify what some of the barriers are to access effective healthcare or specialist employment support, and how this may be overcome;
- identify what factors would help claimants find, enter, return to and remain in work.

Background

The Government asked Dame Carol Black to undertake an independent review into how best to support benefit claimants with the following conditions; obesity or addictions to drugs or alcohol, back into work.

The review also sought to understand the perspective of people who have experienced these conditions, and their journeys through the health and benefits systems. In support of this, NatCen Social Research was commissioned to find out the views of claimants and stakeholders.

Several methods were used to gather information for the review. The review team consulted widely and took evidence from health and local authority service providers, academic bodies and specialists in the field, benefits agencies, voluntary and charitable bodies, the devolved administrations and employers.

Research methods

The research methods for this study comprised of face-to-face and telephone in-depth interviews with claimants (both current and previous benefit claimants) and stakeholders.

We conducted a total of 26 in-depth interviews:

- 21 in-depth interviews with claimants and previous claimants comprising 19 participants with a history of substance use, and two participants with obesity issues.

- Five stakeholder interviews with addiction treatment staff.

This qualitative fieldwork was carried out with individuals living in England and Scotland.

Several attempts were made to recruit participants with obesity issues, as well as professionals working for organisations aiming to support them. Despite these efforts, it was only possible to interview two individuals with obesity. We have not included these views to ensure anonymity. It is difficult to know exactly why it proved so challenging to recruit those with obesity issues to the study. However, comments received during interviews and also during the contact with support organisations suggested that those with obesity issues did not think their experiences were analogous to those with alcohol or drug issues, and were therefore more reluctant to participate in the research.

Key findings

The main findings from the research study are:

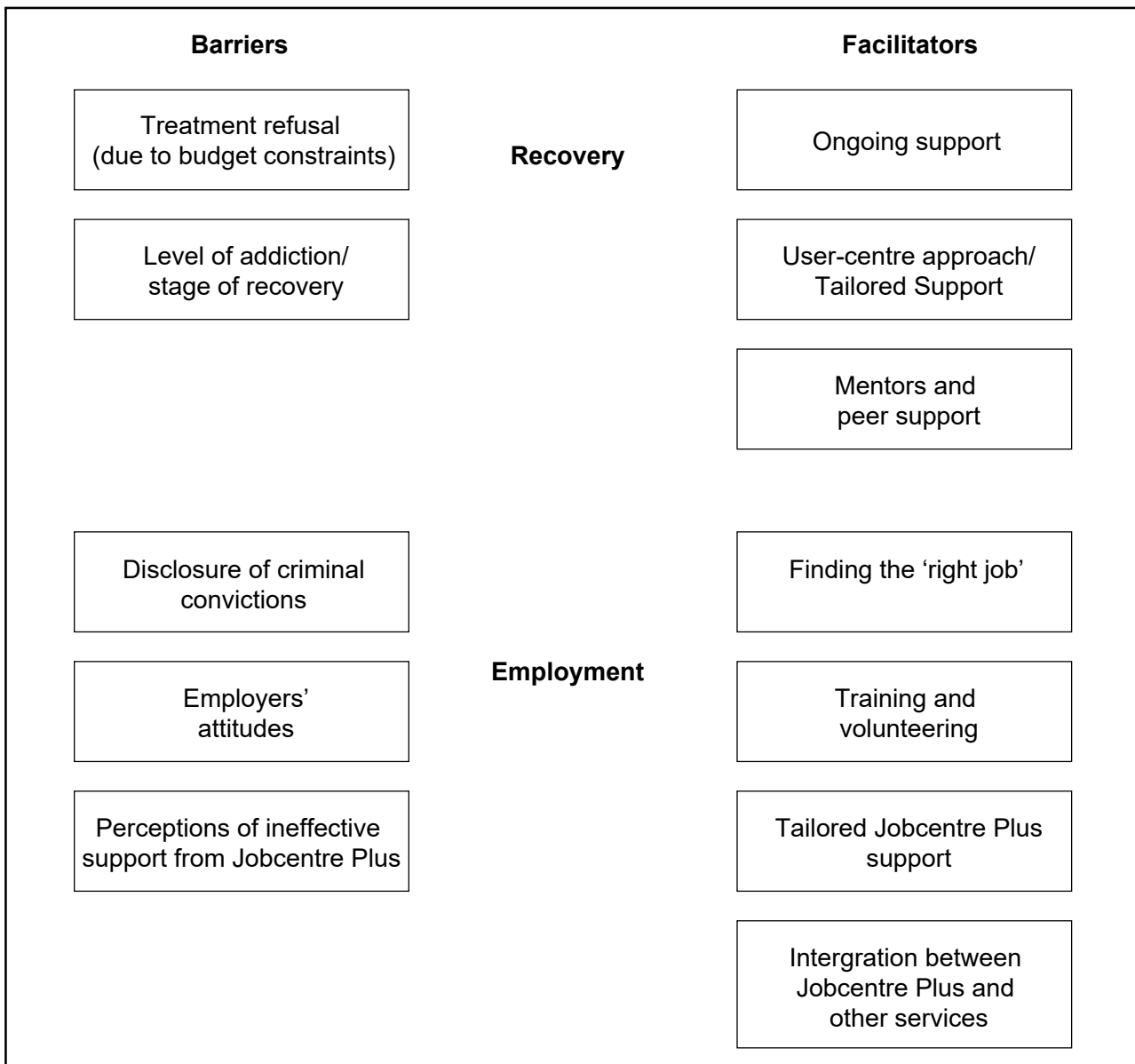
- There was a widespread consensus among participants and stakeholders that fulfilling and sustainable employment could play a key role in supporting long-lasting recovery from drug or alcohol misuse.
- Finding secure and meaningful employment was a major priority for participants. However, it was stressed that individuals had to be at the appropriate stage in their own recovery, as those with alcohol and drug issues risked relapse if they took up stressful employment before they were ready.
- Claimants and previous claimants were not averse to pursuing certain types of employment and did not think that claiming benefits impaired their motivation to find suitable work. However, they were keen to stress that, depending on their stage of recovery, working full-time or in a demanding job had the potential to lead to relapse. Therefore the benefits system could play an important role in supporting people when they were in and out of employment.
- Voluntary work was viewed as an invaluable stepping stone into finding employment, and it was argued that the benefits system should not penalise those who adopted such work, or undertook training programmes, as these could lead on to paid employment.
- Claiming benefits gave participants more confidence and made them feel more in control of their own finances. They believed this to be positive on their employability but also in terms of their mental and physical health.
- Participants and stakeholders identified a number of barriers and facilitators to recovery and employment. These are summarised in Figure 1.
- Delivery of drug and alcohol treatment services provided and whereby Jobcentre Plus staff could provide tailored one-to-one support, augmented through the use of peer mentors, was perceived as key to recovery and proposed as the most likely way to yield future success.
- Ongoing support from drug and alcohol treatment, and support services, using a user-centred approach, was viewed as a key component of achieving a sustainable recovery. Again, the central role played by key workers and by peer support/mentors was also stressed by both the participants and the stakeholders.
- Participants and stakeholders identified disclosure of criminal convictions as a major barrier to employment for people with drug and alcohol misuse issues.
- Participants reported generally negative experiences of dealing with Jobcentre Plus. For example, they felt that:
 - Jobcentre Plus staff did not recognise the needs of those with alcohol or drug use issues.
 - Jobcentre Plus staff did not provide the support, advice or skills that participants needed to find and retain sustainable employment.

- Overly strict conditionality requirements and sanctions being applied to those with drug and alcohol issues are counterproductive in terms of recovery and finding employment.
- Jobcentre Plus is overly bureaucratic.
- The negative factors cited in relation to Jobcentre Plus meant that people might be unwilling to disclose their substance misuse and/or mental health issues to their advisers and communication is difficult in an open office environment.
- Participants and stakeholders believed that Jobcentre Plus staff needed to provide more tailored and individually-focused advice. For example, they thought that:
 - Jobcentre Plus staff need to be trained appropriately to provide more useful support and advice.
 - If those with drug and alcohol issues were allocated to, and/or were able to build up a relationship with a Jobcentre Plus staff member, it was thought that this would encourage disclosure.
 - More integration between Jobcentre Plus and housing associations, social care and treatment services including mental health services, may lead to providing better and more consistent care for service users, with more qualified staff able to deal with service users' complex health needs.

sustaining recovery, and making it more likely that the person in recovery would have the capacity to return to meaningful and enjoyable employment over a sustained period in the future.

In conclusion, participants who gave their views in this qualitative study were clearly not averse to work, although many acknowledged that they were not able to sustain a stable employment pattern until they had entered a more established period of recovery. Indeed, when they were in recovery, they argued that work was vital, had a positive impact on self-esteem, and could help maintain the recovery if it was appropriate for the individual. This work, though, could be voluntary, part-time and flexible to the person's needs in order not to risk a relapse, particularly if the person was in the early stages of recovery. Therefore, the consensus was that benefits could be helpful in terms of achieving and

Figure 1 Barriers and facilitators to improving/increasing the recovery and employment outcomes of people with drug and alcohol dependency



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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 911003 60 1. Research Report 937. April 2017).

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